



# The Relevance of Alexander Sutherland Neil's Humanistic Education to the Merdeka Curriculum in Promoting Student Autonomy

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## Abstract

Education that places student freedom and autonomy at the core of the learning process is becoming increasingly relevant in efforts to shape education that humanizes humanity. This article examines the relevance of Neill's educational thinking to the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. This research is a literature review using a comparative qualitative approach, aiming to analyze Alexander S. Neill's thoughts on humanistic education and compare them with the Merdeka Curriculum principles, particularly in developing student autonomy. Data was collected through documentation techniques, namely by searching and selecting literature such as books and scientific articles published in relevant national and international journals using keywords such as "A.S. Neill," "humanistic education," "Summerhill School," "Merdeka Curriculum," and "student autonomy" in various scientific databases such as Google Scholar and Scopus over the past 10 years. The core concept of Neill's educational approach is student freedom. He believed that excessive pressure and control from teachers and the curriculum fostered anti-learning attitudes, dishonesty, and emotional damage in children. At Summerhill, students are not required to attend specific classes and can choose activities based on their interests and readiness. Some principles of the Merdeka Curriculum that support student freedom include emphasizing differentiated learning, the principle of freedom realized through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), and student-centered learning. Both place students as active subjects in the educational process, emphasize freedom's importance and encourage teachers to act as facilitators in a supportive learning environment. This relevance can be understood through the framework of humanistic education theory, particularly Abraham Maslow's view on self-actualization, Carl Rogers' perspective on student-centered learning, and the Self-Determination Theory of Motivation, which emphasizes the importance of autonomy, competence, and relationships in fostering intrinsic motivation.

**Keywords:** Humanistic Education; Merdeka Curriculum; Student Centered Learning.

## Introduction

Education that is free, non-coercive, and encourages student autonomy is a hallmark of the independent curriculum implemented in Indonesia. This is based on a new paradigm that every student has unique potential that needs to be developed through learning tailored to their interests, talents, and learning speeds (Sianturi et al., 2025). This curriculum was created in response to the need for a more flexible, adaptive, and student-centered education system. The Merdeka Curriculum allows students to choose subjects or projects relevant to their lives through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) program and the implementation of differentiated learning that accommodates individual student needs (Kusumawati & Umam, 2025). Additionally, the philosophy of "merdeka belajar" (independent learning) promoted by the Ministry of Education and Culture emphasizes the importance of independent learning not constrained by pressure from standardized grades or a uniform curriculum (Munaf et al., 2025). Teachers also play a greater role as facilitators than dominant instructors, enabling students to develop independently and autonomously (Tapung, 2025). Thus, the Merdeka Curriculum reflects the government's concrete efforts to realize an educational system that liberates students and recognizes their potential through the freedom of learning and optimal development of their capabilities.

Alexander S. Neill's educational philosophy is similar to the independent curriculum, emphasizing the importance of freedom in learning and respect for students' wishes. Neill believed that ideal education should not emphasize obedience and control but rather provide space for children to grow according to their nature and inner desires (Vertel, 2023). In practice at Summerhill School, Neill gave students complete freedom to choose whether they wanted to attend classes (Humes, 2015). He believed that motivation for learning that arises from self-awareness is far more effective than systemic pressure. This perspective also positions the role of the teacher not as an authority figure who controls but as a companion in the process of children's growth and development (Anuik, 2018). Neill's ideas reflect an educational approach emphasizing individual freedom in learning and recognizing children's natural potential.

The idea of freedom of learning and student autonomy has become a focus of many educational researchers, both internationally and nationally (Sitorus et al., 2025). This shows that the concept of education that emphasizes freedom, intrinsic motivation, and student interest in learning is no longer just an idealistic idea but has become a serious object of scientific study. Research by Gray and Chanoff (Gray & Chanoff, 1986) on the Summerhill educational model shows that students who learn voluntarily tend to have a higher sense of responsibility and satisfaction with learning. Meanwhile, a study by Reviandy (Ramdhani et al., 2024) on implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools shows that this policy provides more space for developing students' character and interests, primarily through projects that strengthen the Pancasila student profile. On the other hand, research by Rosanawati (Rosanawati et al., 2025) notes that teachers who understand the philosophy of "merdeka belajar" can better accommodate learner-centered learning. Although many studies have discussed learning freedom, intrinsic motivation, and the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, no study has specifically linked A.S. Neill's educational philosophy with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia. Therefore, this article aims to fill this gap by examining the relevance of both in the context of contemporary education.

In the context of the paradigm shift in education in Indonesia, the Merdeka Curriculum has been introduced to free students from the pressure of a uniform and rigid curriculum (Rohimajaya et al., 2025). This curriculum emphasizes flexible, differentiated, and student-centered learning. On the other hand, Alexander S. Neill's educational philosophy, as exemplified by his experiments at Summerhill School, places freedom, autonomy, and student happiness at the core of the educational process (Fortunato & Porto, 2023). Therefore, this article aims to examine the relevance of Neill's educational philosophy to the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. The urgency of this research lies in the importance of reviving humanistic values in education, especially in the face of challenges in implementing a curriculum that tends to be technocratic and achievement-oriented. Through this study, a deeper understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum's philosophical foundations will emerge while enriching the literature on progressive education in Indonesia.

## Methods

This study uses a library research approach with a comparative qualitative research design. Library research was chosen because this study aims to examine and analyze the thoughts of educational figures, namely Alexander Sutherland Neill, and compare them with the principles contained in Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum policy, particularly in developing student autonomy.

This research is qualitative in nature and uses a comparative-analytical approach. Its main focus is to compare Neill's key ideas in humanistic education, particularly those related to student autonomy, with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum currently being implemented in Indonesia. This research does not involve field data collection but rather relies on analysis of relevant literature sources.

The data sources in this study consist of Secondary sources: national and international journal articles, books that examine A.S. Neill's thoughts, and policy documents on the Merdeka Curriculum from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia. The limitation in obtaining primary sources (A.S. Neill's original works) was addressed by referring to scientific works that discuss and interpret Neill's ideas in depth.

Data was collected through documentation techniques, namely by searching and selecting literature such as books and scientific articles published in relevant national and international journals using keywords such as "A.S. Neill," "humanistic education," "Summerhill School," "Merdeka Curriculum," and "student autonomy" in various scientific databases such as Google Scholar and Scopus over the last 10 years.

The data was analyzed using comparative content analysis techniques. The steps involved Identifying key concepts in A.S. Neill's thinking on education and student autonomy and exploring the main principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly those related to learning autonomy, differentiated instruction, and the role of teachers as facilitators. A comparative analysis will identify commonalities and differences between the two educational approaches. A thematic synthesis will generate new insights into Neill's ideas' relevance to Indonesia's current educational context.

Researchers used source triangulation techniques to maintain data validity, comparing findings from several literature sources and discussing the same aspects from different sources. Critical reading and theoretical reflection on the social and cultural contexts underlying each education system also strengthened data validity.

## Result

### **Alexander S. Neill's Educational Concept in Encouraging Student Autonomy**

Alexander Sutherland Neill was a Scottish progressive educator who founded Summerhill School in 1921 (Efandi, 2023). The school became a concrete representation of his view that education should free children from the constraints of authoritarian pressure. Neill believed that children naturally tend to grow into good people if allowed to develop freely in a supportive environment. Therefore, according to Neill, education is not a process of imposing adult will on children but rather providing space for children to learn voluntarily and independently (Fortunato & Porto, 2023).

The core concept of Neill's educational approach is student freedom. He believed that excessive pressure and control from teachers and the curriculum lead to anti-learning attitudes, dishonesty, and emotional damage in children (Fielding, 2022). At Summerhill, students are not required to attend specific classes and can choose activities according to their interests and readiness. For Neill, meaningful education can only occur when students voluntarily choose to learn, not because of external pressure (Charkin, 2022).

Applying this freedom principle does not mean that Neill disregards the values of discipline or responsibility. Summerhill still has a social structure that is maintained through a school democracy system, where teachers and students have equal voting rights in weekly meetings to make rules (Haynes & Suissa, 2022). In this practice, students learn about social responsibility, responsible freedom, and the importance of respecting the rights of others. Freedom is not interpreted as unlimited but rather as the right to choose within the framework of shared responsibility.

For Neill, the ultimate goal of education is the happiness of children. He opposes education that focuses solely on academic grades, achievements, and obedience. According to him, education should help children become well-rounded individuals: free from fear, confident, and empowered. By giving them autonomy, children grow as active learners, not passive objects of the education system.

Neill's ideas later became one of the foundations of the humanistic approach to education, which views students as whole beings with emotional needs, values, and desires that must be respected. The concept of autonomy that he championed inspired various modern educational reforms that place freedom of learning at the heart of the learning process.

### **The Principle of Student Freedom in the Merdeka Curriculum**

The Merdeka Curriculum is the Indonesian government's response to the need for a more flexible, inclusive, and learner-centered education system. One of the main features of this curriculum is that it gives students more space to learn according to their potential, needs, and pace (Wijayanti et al., 2024). In this case, freedom of learning and student autonomy are important components the curriculum aims to achieve through various strategies .

First, the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes differentiated learning, a learning approach that takes into account differences in students' characteristics in terms of learning readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Supianto et al., 2024). Teachers are no longer considered a uniform source of information for all students but rather facilitators who tailor strategies and materials to the individual circumstances of each student (Patahuddin et al., 2024). Thus, students can develop themselves without being standardized by a single teaching method.

Second, the principle of freedom in the Merdeka Curriculum is realized through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) (Nur Hakim et al., 2024). In this activity, students can explore fundamental issues in their social and cultural surroundings through a thematic, collaborative, and reflective approach. They are trained to think critically, make decisions, and work independently or in groups as the project requires. This space for freedom is not merely symbolic but serves as a strategic approach to shaping students' character and identity in a contextual and meaningful way (Halomoan et al., 2024).

Third, changes in teachers' roles in the Merdeka Curriculum also reinforce the value of student autonomy (Yafie et al., 2024). Teachers are now expected to be more flexible, collaborative, and responsive to students' needs. Instead of being controllers, teachers are positioned as guides in the learning process, creating an atmosphere that encourages exploration and initiative among student (Rahmah et al., 2024). This change indirectly encourages a sense of ownership of the learning process among students.

The Merdeka Curriculum policy also gives schools the freedom to develop their operational curriculum structure (KOSP), including selecting teaching materials and managing learning time (Astuti et al., 2024). This allows teachers and students to tailor the learning process to each school's character and local needs while strengthening the principle of independence in learning (Samsudi et al., 2024).

With these various approaches, the Merdeka Curriculum embodies an educational spirit that no longer dictates to students but gives them the confidence to shape their learning paths (Halil et al., 2024). This principle demonstrates a commitment to humanistic education, which aligns with the humanistic values that have long been championed in various progressive educational thinking.

## Discussion

### **The Relevance of Alexander S. Neil's Educational Concepts to the Merdeka Curriculum from a Humanistic Educational Perspective**

Humanistic education is an approach that places learners as the main subjects in the learning process, with a focus on developing personal potential, freedom of will, and achieving self-actualization (Armentia & Oteo, 2025). Within this framework, humans are viewed as fundamentally sound beings, capable of growth and needing space to make choices and take responsibility for those choices (Bland & DeRobertis, 2019). Two key figures in humanistic education theory, Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers emphasize that education should guide individuals toward self-actualization and autonomy (Marchi & Paganotti, 2025).

According to Maslow, human needs are arranged in a hierarchy, with self-actualization at the top. Humanistic education enables students to reach this level by creating a safe, respectful, and supportive learning environment that fosters the full potential of learners (Feigenbaum, 2024). In practice, Alexander S. Neill applied this principle through a policy of complete freedom at Summerhill School, where students were given the right to choose whether to study or not and to participate in decision-making at the school. This model reflects an appreciation of students' basic needs for safety, love, and self-esteem—according to Maslow, are prerequisites for self-actualization (Oryngaliyeva et al., 2024).

With his student-centered learning approach, Carl Rogers also emphasized that teachers should act as facilitators who create a positive, non-authoritarian learning environment that respects students' feelings and desires. Rogers identifies three key conditions for meaningful learning: authenticity, unconditional positive regard, and empathy (Martin, 2025). These three principles are evident in Neill's approach to students: not forcing, not judging, and allowing space for students' emotions and decisions to develop naturally.



In the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, these humanistic educational principles are accommodated through various policies that emphasize freedom and differentiation (Jasiah et al., 2024). Differentiated learning is theoretically based on the belief that every child has unique characteristics and potential (Sitorus, 2025). Within a humanistic framework, this means recognizing the existence of the "self" within students and supporting them in finding their learning path. The Pancasila Student Profile Project (P5) is a means of contextual learning that allows students to learn through real experiences, shape their identities, and solve problems collaboratively (Nurdyansyah et al., 2022).

In addition, the paradigm shift in the role of teachers in the Merdeka Curriculum—from authoritarian to facilitator—is a direct application of Rogers' facilitative teaching approach (Nurdiyanti et al., 2024). Teachers are no longer tasked with imparting curriculum content top-down but rather with creating a learning environment that supports students' emotional development, interests, and thinking skills (Prasetyo et al., 2024). This aligns with Rogers' principle that "learning will be effective if students are actively involved in the process on a personal level."

Furthermore, the Self-Determination Theory (Deci et al., 2017) reinforces the validity of the relationship between freedom of learning and intrinsic motivation. This theory states that humans have three basic needs: autonomy, competence, and social connectedness. When these needs are met, individuals will show high engagement, motivation, and well-being levels (Gagné et al., 2022). Both Neill and the Merdeka Curriculum place significant emphasis on these needs. Summerhill fulfills the need for autonomy by allowing children to choose their learning; the Merdeka Curriculum fulfills it through the flexibility of its curriculum structure, project choices, and interest-based learning.

However, there is an important difference in the level of implementation of radicalism. Neill provides absolute freedom—students are even allowed to skip classes—while the Merdeka Curriculum remains within the framework of the national system with specific learning outcomes (Saa, 2024). Thus, the Merdeka Curriculum adopts a more moderate and systemic humanistic approach, balancing individual autonomy and institutional responsibility. This also demonstrates the adaptation of humanistic values in the context of mass education and public policy.

Therefore, the Merdeka Curriculum, in terms of values and orientation, is strongly relevant to Alexander S. Neill's ideas, particularly in terms of granting learning autonomy, changing the role of teachers, and valuing students' potential. Within the framework of humanistic educational theory, this connection is not only pedagogical but also philosophical. Neill provides extreme inspiration from freedom-based education, while the Merdeka Curriculum adopts a similar approach in a more systematic and contextual format to address the challenges of national education in the modern era.

## Conclusion

This article shows a strong relevance between Alexander S. Neill's educational principles and the orientation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Both place students as active subjects in the educational process, emphasize the importance of freedom and encourage the role of teachers as facilitators in a supportive learning environment. This relevance can be understood through the framework of humanistic educational theory, particularly Abraham Maslow's perspective on self-actualization, Carl Rogers' student-centered learning approach, and the Self-Determination Theory of Motivation, which emphasizes the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in fostering intrinsic motivation.

In practical terms, this framework can strengthen the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in the field so that it does not get stuck in an administrative or technical approach alone. Learning practices that truly give students autonomy encourage interest-based exploration and build a democratic and empathetic classroom climate, translating Neill's values into the context of systemic national education. Therefore, Neill's ideas can serve as a reflective and inspirational source in designing more humanistic pedagogical approaches across various levels and contexts of education in Indonesia.

## Declarations

### Author contribution statement

No one else contributed to this research except the author himself

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### Data availability statement

Because this article uses a literature study approach, the data used in this article is taken and available on the internet. More details regarding the data used will be mentioned in the bibliography section.

### Declaration of interests statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

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