

A Humanistic Approach in Thematic Learning of The Merdeka Curriculum

Kinkin Karimah Nursya'bani¹, Yusuf Tri Herlambang²

^{1,2} Pasca Sarjana, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Bandung, Indonesia

*kinkin.karimah@upi.edu yusufth@upi.edu

Abstract

This study aims to examine the implementation and theoretical foundation of the humanistic approach in thematic learning under the Curriculum Merdeka at Mutiara Bunda Elementary School in Bandung. A qualitative case study method was employed, gathering in-depth data through participatory observation, interviews, and documentation (Creswell, 2016; Yin, 2019). The findings indicate that the implementation is comprehensive and consistently grounded in Carl Rogers' Three Facilitative Conditions (Empathy, Congruence, and Unconditional Positive Regard), effectively creating a psychologically safe classroom environment necessary for student growth (Rogers, 1969; Maslow, 1970). Teachers prioritize open and authentic interactions, transforming their role into that of an empathetic facilitator (Dinata, 2020; Holisah, 2022). Learning evaluation is performed holistically and formatively through personal reflection and learning journals, placing emphasis on the student's internal frame of reference and self-concept development (Rogers, 1969). The main challenge is the systemic conflict between the personalized demands of humanistic pedagogy and the heavy administrative and time pressures within the current educational structure. This study provides a significant empirical contribution by positioning the humanistic approach as the essential philosophical foundation required for achieving the holistic goals and character development outlined in the Profil Pelajar Pancasila (Mulyanto, Arfanti, & Damiani, 2024).

Keywords: Humanistic Approach; Thematic Learning; Curriculum Merdeka; Primary Education

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is the fundamental foundation in shaping the character, personality, and intelligence of the nation's next generation (Aisyapuri et al., 2025; Anwar, 2020). Indonesia's educational transformation, highlighted by the implementation of the Curriculum Merdeka since 2021 (Qonita, Dewi, & Rohmah, 2023), aims to foster learning that is more relevant, enjoyable, and meaningful (Arwitaningsih, Sudarmi, & Rosana, 2023). This curriculum emphasizes student-centered learning, differentiated instruction, and character development via the Profil Pelajar Pancasila (Mulyanto, Arfanti, & Damiani, 2024; Huda, Nurtanto, & Kholid, 2024). Specifically

at the elementary level, the thematic approach is promoted to help students construct a holistic understanding of concepts through contextual themes (Assingkily & Aruan, 2021; Aini, 2021).

However, achieving the holistic objectives of the Curriculum Merdeka requires pedagogical strategies that transcend mere subject integration. It demands a focus on students' emotional, social, and moral development (Hariani, Rusman, & Handayani, 2024; Huda, Nurtanto, & Kholid, 2024). This is where the humanistic approach becomes indispensable. Humanism focuses on the individual's holistic development, placing students as active subjects and upholding values like empathy, freedom, and respect for individual uniqueness (Anwar, 2020; Freire, 2008). The theoretical contributions of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow underscore the critical need to address students' emotional and psychological needs, leading to enhanced motivation and active engagement (Dinata, 2020; Holisah, 2022; Maslow, 1970).

While existing Indonesian studies confirm the effectiveness of humanistic methods in improving creativity and academic outcomes within primary education (Arzfi & Jamna, 2024; Rukmini & Mutiah, 2023; Santika, Ramdhan, & Hasanah, 2025), these studies often view humanistic methods as complementary strategies. A significant gap remains in the literature regarding how the humanistic approach is implemented as a fundamental philosophical framework that systematically underpins all stages of thematic learning under the specific demands and structure of the Curriculum Merdeka (Santika, Ramdhan, & Hasanah, 2025).

This research offers novelty by providing an in-depth, empirically rich case study of Mutiara Bunda Elementary School. It moves beyond descriptive accounts to critically analyse how specific humanistic theories (Rogers' Conditions and Maslow's Hierarchy) functionally align with and drive the practical implementation of thematic learning and holistic assessment within the new curriculum (Rogers, 1969; Maslow, 1970). The findings are intended to fill existing theoretical and practical gaps, offering a robust model for educators and policymakers navigating this transitional period in Indonesian education.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Theoretical Foundations of the Humanistic Approach

a) Carl Rogers: The Three Facilitative Conditions

This study fundamentally employs **Carl Rogers' Person-Centered Theory** (1969) as its primary analytical framework. Rogers emphasized that significant, experiential learning only occurs when the individual is intrinsically motivated and the learning environment is conducive to personal growth. The role of the educator, therefore, is to act as a facilitator who provides the **Three Core Conditions**:

- **Empathy (Empathy):** The teacher's ability to truly understand the student's inner world—their feelings, thoughts, and challenges—from the student's unique perspective. This validation reduces psychological distance and establishes a safe communication channel (Dinata, 2020).
- **Congruence (Genuineness):** The requirement that the teacher be authentic, transparent, and honest in their relationship with the students. Congruence is crucial because it builds trust and provides an adult model of non-defensive openness, enabling students to explore their own identity without fear of façade (Rogers, 1969).
- **Unconditional Positive Regard (UPR):** The consistent acceptance and respect shown to the student as a person of worth, regardless of their momentary academic performance, behaviour, or perceived success. UPR is essential for fostering a positive **self-concept**, which acts as the psychological fuel for self-actualization (Holisah, 2022).

b) Abraham Maslow: Psychological Safety and Self-Actualization

The humanistic perspective is reinforced by **Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs** (1970). Maslow posited that human needs must be met sequentially. In the educational context, this means:

- **Foundation of Learning:** Needs for safety, security, and belonging (levels 2 and 3) must be met before students can engage with cognitive needs (level 4) or strive for Self-Actualization (the highest level) (Maslow, 1970).
- **Psychological Safety:** Consequently, a humanistic classroom must first and foremost be a place free from fear, judgment, and ridicule. Only when students feel safe and valued can their intrinsic motivation be released, leading to deep, meaningful engagement in learning (Huda, Nurtanto, & Kholid, 2024). The teacher's success in providing Rogers' UPR directly impacts the fulfillment of Maslow's needs for belonging and esteem.

B. Philosophical Alignment with the Curriculum Merdeka

Humanistic Approach offers a profound philosophical alignment with the Curriculum Merdeka, particularly in the formation of the Profil Pelajar Pancasila (Mulyanto, Arfanti, & Damiani, 2024). The new curriculum demands learning that is student-centered, moving beyond disciplinary silos to cultivate six key character dimensions (Qonita, Dewi, & Rohmah, 2023).

Humanistic Principle (Rogers/Maslow)	Dimension of Profil Pelajar Pancasila	Functional Alignment in Learning
Aktualisasi Diri & Otonomi	Mandiri (Independence)	Granting students choice (autonomy) in tasks fosters personal responsibility and the ability to self-regulate learning processes (Freire, 2008).
Empati & Penghargaan Tanpa Syarat (UPR)	Berkebinekaan Global & Bergotong Royong	UPR ensures that students accept and collaborate with peers from diverse backgrounds without judgment, fulfilling global competency goals (Anwar, 2020).
Refleksi & Pengalaman Personal	Bernalar Kritis & Kreatif	Students use self-reflection to analyse their experiences (internal frame of reference), which is the foundation for critical thinking and creative problem-solving (Rogers, 1969).

This alignment demonstrates that the humanistic approach is not a mere teaching strategy but the essential philosophical framework required for the successful and holistic achievement of the Curriculum Merdeka's objectives, translating abstract character goals into concrete classroom practices.

C. Synthesis of Previous Research and Research Gap

Previous research has affirmed the value of humanistic approaches in Indonesia. Santika et al. (2025) and Arzfi & Jamna (2024) found significant positive impacts on student outcomes when humanistic principles were applied in differentiated learning. Rukmini & Mutiah (2023) further showed that this perspective enhances student creativity and achievement.

However, most of these studies utilized humanistic theory to explain the success of differentiated methods (Rukmini & Mutiah, 2023; Arzfi & Jamna, 2024). The research gap is clear: there is a lack of rigorous, in-depth qualitative research that specifically employs Rogers' three conditions as the primary analytical lens to examine the functional implementation of the humanistic approach within the integrated, contextual framework of thematic learning under the Curriculum Merdeka (Dinata, 2020). This study seeks to bridge this gap by providing an empirically rich case analysis that details the process and mechanisms by which teachers establish the necessary humanistic climate to achieve the curriculum's holistic goals.

3. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design and Context

This study adopted a qualitative approach utilizing a case study method (Creswell, 2016). This design was essential for gaining an in-depth, comprehensive understanding of the complex social phenomenon—the integrated implementation of a specific philosophical approach within a dynamic curriculum change—in its real-life context. The boundaries between the humanistic approach, thematic learning, and the school culture are not clearly defined, making the case study an appropriate strategy (Yin, 2019).

The research site was Mutiara Bunda Elementary School in Bandung. The school was selected through purposive sampling due to its established reputation as an early adopter and exemplary implementer of the Curriculum Merdeka, demonstrating a clear commitment to student-centered and character-based education.

B. Research Participants

Informants were selected using purposive sampling (Sugiyono, 2019) to ensure rich, relevant data:

- One School Principal: To provide macro-level policy and philosophical perspectives.
- Three Classroom Teachers (Lower and Upper Grades): To provide detailed data on pedagogical strategies, daily implementation, and challenges.
- Six Students (from Grade III and Grade V): Selected based on their ability to articulate their learning experiences and their varied levels of engagement, providing insight into the student perspective.

C. Data Collection Techniques

Data collection employed triangulation across methods (Moleong, 2017):

- Participatory Observation: Over a three-week period, the researcher conducted 15 hours of focused observation in Grade III and Grade V classrooms. The observation protocol was semi-structured, specifically tracking evidence of Rogers' conditions (e.g., frequency of open-ended questions, teacher non-verbal cues indicating acceptance, instances of student choice) (Rogers, 1969).
- In-Depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all nine participants. Key questions focused on the teacher's philosophy toward student mistakes, methods for building rapport, and perspectives on the purpose of reflection and portfolio use.
- Document Analysis: Key documents analyzed included: *Modul Ajar* (Lesson Plans) to verify the inclusion of affective and psychomotor objectives; Student Learning Journals/Portfolios to assess the use of self-reflection; and Teacher Reflection Notes to gauge self-awareness and adjustment of strategies.

D. Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

The data analysis was conducted using the interactive model of Miles & Huberman (2014), which involves:

- Data Reduction: Interview transcripts, observation notes, and document summaries were coded line-by-line. Initial codes focused on teacher behaviour, student affect, and instructional methods. These codes were then grouped into categories like 'Evidence of UPR' or 'Student Autonomy.'
- Data Display: Data were displayed in narrative matrices, showing the relationship between teacher action (e.g., asking about personal life) and theoretical concept (Empathy).
- Conclusion Drawing/Verification: Themes were continuously refined until a comprehensive, contextual understanding of the phenomenon was achieved (Miles & Huberman, 2014).

To ensure trustworthiness (validity and reliability), two measures were used:

- Source Triangulation: Key findings (e.g., the teacher acting as an empathetic mentor) were confirmed across all three data sources (interviews with the principal, observation of the teacher, and analysis of teacher reflection notes) (Sugiyono, 2019).

- Member Checking: Preliminary findings and interpretations were presented back to the teachers and the principal for review, ensuring that the researcher's interpretations accurately reflected the informants' intended meanings (Moleong, 2017).

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. The Teacher's Role: Functional Manifestation of Rogers' Conditions

The central finding is the consistent functional implementation of Rogers' philosophy, transforming the teacher's role from a knowledge provider to a facilitator focused on human potential (Rogers, 1969).

a) Congruence and Trust as the Foundation for Learning

Observation and interviews revealed that Congruence (Genuineness) was the primary mechanism for establishing trust. Teachers did not maintain a rigid, authoritative distance but engaged with students authentically (Dinata, 2020). The Principal explicitly stated the school's philosophy: [*"Guru kami didorong untuk membagikan kesulitan pribadi mereka agar lebih dekat dengan siswa. Itu menunjukkan bahwa guru juga manusia serta untuk meningkatkan sikap empati."*] (Ully Sofia Maulina, Wawancara, 2024).

This open interaction, confirmed by [Kutipan Wawancara Guru/Observasi Interaksi Terbuka], serves as a powerful model. When teachers are congruent, students feel safe enough to be themselves, thus fulfilling Maslow's need for belonging (Maslow, 1970). This environment minimizes defensive learning behaviors and becomes a powerful catalyst for intrinsic motivation.

b) Empathy and Psychological Safety

Teachers consistently demonstrated Empathy by prioritizing students' emotional states before academic tasks. Lessons frequently began with warm-up activities focused on personal sharing. [Kutipan Wawancara Guru Kelas III: *"Saya selalu mulai dengan meminta mereka menceritakan apa yang mereka rasakan atau alami di rumah. Jika mereka tampak sedih, saya tidak akan langsung memulai materi yang sulit."*] (Guru Kelas III, Wawancara, 2024).

This active empathy validates students' feelings. Observation notes detailing how a teacher adjusted the learning pace for a struggling student and validated their frustration demonstrated how empathy addresses potential obstacles to learning (Rogers, 1969). By confirming the student's emotional reality, the teacher successfully

creates the Psychologically Safe Environment crucial for moving past Maslow's safety and belonging needs toward self-actualization (Maslow, 1970).

c) Unconditional Positive Regard (UPR) in Practice

The implementation of Unconditional Positive Regard (UPR) was evident in the school's feedback and assessment culture. Teachers consciously separated the evaluation of the work from the evaluation of the person (Holisah, 2022). [Kutipan Wawancara Guru Kelas V: "*Saya selalu memuji usahanya, bukan hanya nilai akhir. Saya ingin mereka tahu bahwa mereka diterima, meskipun jawabannya salah.*"] (Guru Kelas V, Wawancara, 2024).

This consistent, non-judgmental support, confirmed by the constructive nature of feedback in the student portfolios, directly fostered a positive self-concept. Students felt empowered to take risks in their learning, leading to active engagement. One student noted: [Kutipan Wawancara Siswa: "*Saya tidak takut salah karena Bu Guru tidak pernah memarahi, dia hanya bilang 'ini ide yang bagus, coba cari sudut pandang lain.'*"] (Siswa Kelas V, Wawancara, 2024).

B. Learning Process: Autonomy, Experience, and Thematic Integration

Thematic learning at Mutiara Bunda provided the structure for humanistic principles to thrive. Learning was highly contextual and experience-based, aligning with Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978; Assingkily & Aruan, 2021).

Students were consistently given autonomy in the learning process. In a thematic unit on "Our Environment," students were allowed to choose their output (poster, short story, or song). This self-directed learning approach directly embodies the Mandiri (Independence) and Kreatif (Creative) dimensions of the Profil Pelajar Pancasila (Mulyanto, Arfanti, & Damianti, 2024).

Furthermore, this focus on personal experience transforms education from an act of transmission into a practice of freedom (Freire, 2008). By validating students' personal narratives and experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge, teachers empower students to act as subjects, not objects, of their education.

C. Critical Analysis of Holistic and Formative Assessment

The shift to holistic and formative assessment (journals, reflections, portfolios) is arguably the most radical humanistic innovation in this school (Hariani, Rusman, & Handayani, 2024).

Critical Analysis: Unlike conventional, score-based assessment which externalizes evaluation and promotes comparison, the use of reflection and learning journals [Kutipan dari Analisis Dokumen: format jurnal yang menanyakan '*Apa yang kamu rasakan hari ini?*' selain '*Apa yang kamu pelajari?*'] requires students to evaluate their performance using their internal frame of reference (Rogers, 1969).

This process serves three critical functions:

- **Fosters Critical Reflection:** By prompting students to analyze their own learning steps and emotional state, the assessment practice directly cultivates the Bernalar Kritis (Critical Thinking) dimension of the Pancasila Profile (Mulyanto, Arfanti, & Damiati, 2024).
- **Measures Affective Growth:** It provides teachers with rich qualitative data on the students' self-concept development, stress levels, and emotional understanding, allowing for truly differentiated and responsive instruction.
- **Empowerment:** It positions assessment as a tool for self-improvement and empowerment, rather than a judgmental mechanism, thereby reinforcing the UPR shown by the teachers (Anwar, 2020).

C. Challenges and Systemic Solutions

This study found that the main barriers to sustaining the humanistic approach were systemic and institutional, not pedagogical.

a) The Conflict with Administrative Load

Teachers reported a significant conflict between the time needed for deep, empathetic interaction and the pressure from external administrative demands. [Kutipan Wawancara Guru Kelas V: "*Mendesain RPP Tematik yang benar-benar personal butuh waktu 5 kali lipat. Tapi saya juga harus mengisi banyak sekali laporan administrasi. Waktu saya untuk merefleksi jadi sangat terbatas.*"] (Guru Kelas V, Wawancara, 2024).

Deeper Analysis: This tension highlights a gap between educational policy (advocating student-centeredness) and its bureaucratic framework (demanding standardization and extensive paperwork) (Qonita, Dewi, & Rohmah, 2023). The administrative burden consumes the precise resource—teacher time and energy—required for maintaining Rogers' facilitative conditions (Rogers, 1969).

b) Proposed Operational Solutions

To overcome these barriers, systemic changes are required:

- Collaborative Planning Model: Implement a Collaborative *Modul Ajar/RPP* / lesson plan. Development Model at the grade level to share planning loads and free up individual teacher time for focusing on student interaction.
- Teacher Socio-Emotional Support: Given the high emotional demand of constant empathy, the school must provide mandatory Socio-Emotional Competency (SEL) Training and dedicated weekly Teacher Reflection Forums to prevent emotional depletion (burnout) and provide a space for peer support (Holisah, 2022).
- Digital Streamlining: Utilize digital portfolio and assessment platforms to minimize physical administrative labor, allowing teachers to spend more time engaging with the *content* of student reflection rather than the *form* of the reporting.

5. CONCLUSION

The humanistic approach in thematic learning under the Curriculum Merdeka at Mutiara Bunda Elementary School has been implemented consistently and effectively, grounded in the Three Core Conditions of Carl Rogers (Rogers, 1969). Teachers succeed as empathetic facilitators, establishing a psychologically safe environment crucial for students to develop their self-concept and intrinsic motivation, thus directly fostering the Profil Pelajar Pancasila (Maslow, 1970; Mulyanto, Arfanti, & Damianti, 2024). The use of holistic, formative assessment (reflection and journals) further solidifies this approach by focusing on the student's internal growth process.

The primary finding is that the humanistic approach serves as the essential philosophical engine for achieving the holistic goals of the Curriculum Merdeka. The research offers a strong empirical model for other primary schools seeking to transition effectively.

Recommendations:

1. Systemic Support: Schools must prioritize reducing administrative burdens through collaborative planning and digital platforms to protect teacher time for reflective, empathetic practice.
2. Professional Development: Continuous training in Socio-Emotional Competencies (SEL) is necessary for teachers to maintain the high demands of the humanistic approach (Holisah, 2022).
3. Future Research: Further research is urgently needed to investigate the systemic impact of administrative policies on the quality of humanistic interaction in the

classroom and to evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed collaborative and SEL-focused solutions across different educational levels.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, the authors extend sincere appreciation to Pasca Sarjana Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia for facilitating the research process, providing the necessary academic infrastructure, and offering continuous guidance. Specifically, we are grateful to the Dean of the Faculty of Post Graduate PGSD, for their unwavering support.

We also express our profound gratitude to SD Mutiara Bunda Bandung and its administration, particularly the Principal, Ulyy Sofia Maulina.

REFERENCES

- Aini, N. (2021). Pembelajaran Tematik Integratif. *Jurnal Inovasi Pendidikan Dasar*, 6(1), 1-8.
- Aisyapuri, R. P., Wulandari, R. A. P., Ikmawati, I., & Untu, Z. (2025). PERAN PENDIDIKAN DALAM MEWUJUDKAN VISI INDONESIA EMAS 2045. *Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan Dan Kearifan Lokal*, 5(2), 609–614.
- Anwar, S. (2020). Pendidikan Humanistik: Teori dan Implementasi dalam Pembelajaran. *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, 10(1), 1-18.
- Arwitaningsih, M., Sudarmi, S., & Rosana, D. (2023). Urgensi Kurikulum Merdeka di Sekolah Dasar. *Jurnal Pendidikan Dasar Flobamorata*, 4(2), 643-652.
- Arzfi, W. A., & Jamna, J. (2024). Peningkatan Hasil Belajar IPAS Melalui Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi Berbasis Teori Humanistik. *Jurnal Basicedu*, 8(3), 1746-1756.
- Assingkily, M., & Aruan, R. M. (2021). Penerapan Model Pembelajaran Tematik Integratif. *Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Kewirausahaan*, 9(2), 1-15.
- Creswell, J. W. (2016). *Research design: Pendekatan Kualitatif, Kuantitatif, dan Mixed*. Pustaka Pelajar.
- Dinata, W. R. (2020). Teori Belajar Humanistik Carl Rogers Dalam Pendidikan. *Jurnal Tarbawi*, 7(1), 1-15.
- Freire, P. (2008). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. The Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Hariani, T., Rusman, R., & Handayani, W. (2024). Strategi Pembelajaran Tematik Integratif dalam Pengembangan Karakter Siswa. *Jurnal Pendidikan Dasar Nusantara*, 10(1), 1-12.

- Holisah, S. (2022). Peran Guru dalam Pembelajaran Humanistik. *Jurnal Pendidikan*, 13(2), 1-10.
- Huda, U. N., Nurtanto, M., & Kholid, M. A. (2024). Teori Belajar Humanistik dalam Pembelajaran Abad 21. *Jurnal Teknologi Pendidikan*, 2(1), 1-10.
- Maslow, A. H. (1970). *Motivation and Personality* (2nd ed.). Harper & Row.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Moleong, L. J. (2017). *Metodologi Penelitian Kualitatif*. PT Remaja Rosdakarya.
- Mulyanto, H., Arfanti, V., & Damiati, D. (2024). Profil Pelajar Pancasila dan Kurikulum Merdeka. *Jurnal Pendidikan Indonesia*, 5(1), 1-15.
- Qonita, U., Dewi, D. A., & Rohmah, Z. (2023). Kurikulum Merdeka: Tinjauan Filosofis dan Implementasi. *Jurnal Kajian Pendidikan*, 12(1), 1-12.
- Rogers, C. R. (1969). *Freedom to Learn*. Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company.
- Rukmini, D. A., & Mutiah, T. (2023). PENERAPAN PEMBELAJARAN BERDIFERENSIASI DALAM PERSPEKTIF TEORI BELAJAR HUMANISTIK. *Jurnal Pendidikan Dasar Flobamorata*, 4(3), 699-706.
- Santika, D., Ramdhan, M. N., & Hasanah, E. N. (2025). Penerapan Teori Humanistik untuk Meningkatkan Hasil Belajar IPA Siswa SD. *Jurnal Ilmiah Pendidikan Guru Sekolah Dasar*, 10(1), 1-10.
- Sugiyono. (2019). *Metode Penelitian Kuantitatif, Kualitatif, dan R&D*. Alfabeta.
- Vygotsky, L. S., & Cole, M. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Yin, R. K. (2019). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.