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Progressivism Philosophy in Education: A Conceptual Analysis and Its Implications for 21st-Century Learning Practices

Naufal Akmal Syammary[1], Amri Yahya[2], Hanik Mahliatussikah[3]
[1,2,3] Universitas Negeri Malang

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ABSTRACT

Progressivism is a modern educational philosophy emphasizing flexibility, rationality, and adaptability to changing times. This study aims to analyze progressivism philosophy and its implications for 21st-century educational practices. Utilizing a descriptive qualitative approach with the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) framework based on PRISMA protocols, a synthesis of 20 selected peer-reviewed articles indexed in Sinta and Scopus from the last five years was conducted. Results indicate that progressivism impacts three main domains: flexible curricula responsive to the digital era, the transformation of educators into facilitators providing constructive feedback, and the empowerment of student agency in solving social-ecological issues. The novelty of this study lies in providing a comprehensive mapping that integrates classic Deweyan pragmatism with digital learning dynamics and modern curriculum frameworks

ABSTRAK

Progresivisme merupakan aliran filsafat pendidikan modern yang menekankan fleksibilitas, rasionalitas, serta adaptabilitas terhadap perkembangan zaman. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis filsafat progresivisme serta implikasinya terhadap praktik pendidikan abad ke-21. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan kerangka Systematic Literature Review (SLR) protokol PRISMA, sintesis dilakukan terhadap 20 artikel terpilih terindeks Sinta dan Scopus terbitan 5 tahun terakhir. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa implikasi progresivisme terealisasi pada tiga domain utama: kurikulum yang fleksibel dan responsif terhadap era digital, transformasi peran pendidik sebagai fasilitator pembelajaran berbasis umpan balik konstruktif, serta penguatan kemandirian peserta didik dalam memecahkan masalah sosial-ekologis. Kebaruan penelitian ini terletak pada pemetaan komprehensif yang mengintegrasikan pemikiran pragmatisme klasik Dewey dengan dinamika pembelajaran digital dan Kurikulum Merdeka.

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**** Corresponding Author:***

Naufal Akmal Syammary
Email: naufal.akmal.2302318@students.um.ac.id

INTRODUCTION

Education is a central medium in human civilization that functions to perpetuate the transfer of knowledge, skills, and noble values from one generation to the next (Worku, 2023). Amidst the pace of 21st-century changes, social dynamics and technological disruptions demand that the educational system not merely serve as a place for passive information transmission (Sibanda & Marongwe, 2022). The demands of today's globalized world require graduates who not only master academic content, but also possess cognitive agility, adaptability, and concern for the complex issues of modern society.

In responding to these challenges, traditional educational approaches rooted in Perennialism and Essentialism are beginning to show their limitations (Gunardi & Hartati, 2024). These conventional schools of thought tend to focus the learning process on mastering rigidly structured curricula, absolute truths of the past, and emphasizing the role of the teacher as the sole authority of knowledge (Faelasup, 2024). Consequently, learners are often positioned as passive recipients of information isolated from everyday life realities and unaccustomed to navigating dynamic problem situations.

The need for a more adaptive new paradigm drives the growing relevance of progressivism philosophy in modern educational practice (Navisa et al., 2022). Progressivism offers a conceptual framework asserting that education is not preparation for future life, but the process of life itself, which must be relevant to individual needs and the context of its time (Dewey, 2024). Through its core pillars, this movement calls for fundamental changes so that schools transform into learning communities that are democratic, flexible, and responsive to developments in science and technology ("Progressive Education: Views from John Dewey's Education Philosophy," 2022).

Historically, the philosophy of progressivism pioneered by John Dewey in the early 20th century emerged as a reaction against the rigidity of formal schooling systems that restricted students' freedom of thought (P et al., 2024). Dewey emphasized that experiential learning and student-centered learning are the main keys to developing independent thinking (Li, 2023). Through the principle of learning by doing, students are invited to explore their environment, conduct empirical investigations, and formulate problem solutions independently and collaboratively.

Although the ideas of progressivism are more than a century old, their implementation continues to spark fierce academic debate among educational practitioners and theorists. Proponents of progressivism believe that this approach is highly effective in fostering critical reasoning, creativity, and problem-solving skills highly needed in the modern era. Conversely, critics worry that excessive freedom without strong structure has the potential to lower academic standards and overlook the mastery of essential basic concepts (Gerrard, 2023).

Entering the third decade of the 21st century, the debate surrounding progressivism philosophy has become increasingly complex and encountered new forms of challenges. Criticism of progressivism is no longer limited to matters of declining academic material standards alone; rather, it collides with the reality of global standardized assessments such as the Programmed for International Student Assessment (PISA). Modern educational systems are frequently trapped in a dilemma between the demand for humanistic learning flexibility on one hand, and the pressure of accountability for academic performance on an international scale on the other.

These challenges are exacerbated by the arrival of the digital disruption era and the dominance of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology in the schooling world (Kim et al., 2022). When access to information and answers to academic questions can be obtained instantly through smart algorithms, the role of learning freedom advocated by progressivism is tested both theoretically and practically. Without proper philosophical guidance, reliance on technology risks eroding students' ability to articulate independent thought and the depth of their reflective processes (Ren & Wu, 2025).

Amidst these dilemmas, an epistemological question arises: how should the classical principles of progressivism reposition themselves to remain relevant without sacrificing academic quality? Progressivism can no longer be interpreted merely as directionless learning freedom; instead, it must be understood as an instrument to build student agency, namely, the ability of students to act responsibly, critically, and ethically within a fast-paced digital ecosystem.

Various countries, including Indonesia through the Kurikulum Merdeka policy and the Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) program, have essentially adopted the spirit of progressivism philosophy on a massive scale (Fitriani et al., 2023; Sukiastini et al., 2024; Yunaini et al., 2022). This policy emphasizes curriculum flexibility, diversification of teaching methods, and recognition of the differentiation of students' talents and interests. However, in field reality, the transition from a rigid centralistic curriculum to a flexible-progressive paradigm frequently causes conceptual confusion among educators regarding their true role as facilitators (Hidayat et al., 2025).

This condition emphasizes the importance of a comprehensive academic review to map how progressivism values are implemented in a concrete and measurable manner (Rahma et al., 2022). Discussions regarding progressivism must transform the normative narrative about "enjoyable education" into a critical-applicative analysis that evaluates its impact on the three main pillars of education: curriculum, educators, and learners.

However, an examination of prior literature reveals a significant research gap. Most literature review studies on the philosophy of progressivism to date remain dominated by purely theoretical discussions of John Dewey's historical thought without connecting it to the empirical context of 21st-century learning (Chen, 2023; Thi, 2025). These studies tend to be general and descriptive, lacking the use of systematic and measurable review methodologies.

On the other hand, several published Systematic Literature Review (SLR) studies generally have a limited scope for instance, focusing strictly on the elementary school level or partially reviewing the skills of prospective educators. There is no comprehensive and integrated literature synthesis evaluating how progressivism integrates with digital learning dynamics (e-learning) (Bahi & Aloysius, 2025; Meirbekov et al., 2022), post-pandemic teacher-student interaction patterns (Abanid et al., 2025; Tleuov, 2025), and 21st-century students' ecological character building ("Authentic Assessment in Online Learning to Develop Students' Character," 2023).

This study aims to fill this knowledge gap by offering novelty in conceptual mapping. Through a PRISMA-compliant SLR approach applied to scientific publications from the last five years (2019–2024), this study critically synthesizes Dewey's classical pragmatism thought with the realities of modern educational transformation (Aksan et al., 2025). The novelty of this study lies in its ability to present a systematic roadmap of the implications of progressivism philosophy

across three critical dimensions: curriculum flexibility, educator role transformation, and student autonomy enhancement (Faelasup, 2024; Wahdah, 2024).

The novelty of this analysis is also expected to bridge the theoretical debate between student-oriented learning freedom and the demand for global competency achievement. By exploring empirical findings from reputable national (Sinta-indexed) and international (Scopus-indexed) studies, this research presents synthesized evidence on how structured autonomy enhances critical thinking without sacrificing academic quality (Pandia et al., 2025; Rohmah et al., 2025).

Based on the background, urgency, and research gaps presented, this study aims to analyze in-depth and holistically the philosophy of progressivism along with its practical implications for the 21st-century educational system. Specifically, this study will outline: 1) the forms of curriculum reconstruction responsive to modern dynamics; 2) the shift in the roles and professional strategies of educators as constructive facilitators (Foreman-Brown et al., 2023; Imran et al., 2024); and 3) the manifestation of student autonomy and character development in the digital era. The outcomes of this analysis are expected to provide a robust conceptual contribution to policy-making and modern teaching practices.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach with a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design strictly referencing the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) protocol. The application of the PRISMA framework aims to guarantee accountability, transparency, and methodological precision at every stage of data collection and synthesis. Secondary data collection was conducted through systematic searching across three high-reputation scientific publication databases: Google Scholar, Mendeley, and ScienceDirect (Kulsum & Erlitawanty, 2023). The search strategy was executed using Boolean operators (AND/OR) combining specific keyword phrases, such as "Philosophy of Progressivism" AND "21st Century Education", "Progressive Education" AND "Curriculum Flexibility", "Filsafat Progresivisme" DAN "Kurikulum Merdeka", and "Progresivisme" DAN "Peran Guru Abad 21" (Sopacua & Fadli, 2022).

To maintain the academic quality of the analyzed data, article selection applied measurable operational inclusion and exclusion criteria (Marsaulina et al., 2023). Inclusion criteria required articles to originate from accredited scientific journals specifically Sinta-indexed (Sinta 1–4) for national journals and Scopus/SJR-indexed for international journals published within the last five years (2019–2024) (Cahayani & Suastra, 2024). Additionally, articles had to explicitly examine the implications of progressivism on curriculum, educator, or learner components, as well as be available in full text in Indonesian or English (Syammary et al., 2024). Conversely, exclusion criteria rejected publications in the form of proceedings, textbooks, non-refereed undergraduate/master's theses, popular articles, articles without a valid DOI number, and studies reviewing purely historical pragmatism theory without linking it to the learning context (De Guzman, 2023).

The literature screening process proceeded through four main PRISMA stages (Page et al., 2021). At the identification stage, a total of 84 relevant articles were retrieved through automated searches based on keywords. The screening stage then eliminated 21 duplicate articles, followed by abstract assessment which left 42 candidate articles. Next, at the eligibility stage, a comprehensive full-text review was conducted on those 42 articles to test methodological suitability and depth of analysis (Faelasup, 2024; Hatija et al., 2025). The final selection set 20

chosen articles consisting of 10 Sinta-indexed national articles and 10 Scopus/SJR-indexed international articles that met all quality criteria (Yanti, 2024; Zainudin et al., 2025).

Data from the 20 final selection-cleared articles were subsequently synthesized using thematic analysis techniques (Uswah et al., 2022). The authors operationalized the analysis through the extraction of key findings regarding curriculum, educators, and learners, followed by finding groupings and cross-study comparisons (Florungco, 2022; Nir et al., 2024). This critical synthesis was constructed to continuously connect John Dewey's classical pragmatism framework of thought with the demands and practical learning dynamics of the 21st-century digital era (Naatonis et al., 2022; Yunaini et al., 2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

History and Principles of Progressivism Philosophy

Synthesis of the reviewed literature shows that progressivism is rooted in the social reform movement and American pragmatism philosophy of the late 19th century, pioneered by Charles S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey (Shook, 2021; Tubbs, 2023). This concept reconstructs the rigid and authoritarian conventional schooling system toward learning that liberates students (Luo, 2024; Maltsev, 2023). In the 21st century era, classic principles of progressivism such as experiential learning, teachers as facilitators, and schools as social laboratories transform into modern concepts of student agency and personalized learning (Fitzpatrick, 2021 ; Hoang & Hoang, 2025). This transformation becomes an epistemological imperative so that students do not merely absorb knowledge passively, but are instead able to think critically and navigatively amidst the swift flow of information and the dominance of artificial intelligence algorithms (Meşegülü, 2025).

The progressivism paradigm dictates that the direction of education must continuously move dynamically, adapting to changing times (Mohmmed, 2024). Humans are viewed as possessing intelligence and flexible potential to solve various personal and social problems. In practice, progressivism integrates the psychological dimension, which is the understanding of each student's unique potential, with the sociological dimension, which is the direction of students' prospective contributions to society (Kulsum & Erlitawanty, 2023). The integration of these two dimensions underpins the creation of a learning ecosystem that is humanistic, inclusive, and oriented toward fulfilling students' basic rights.

In the aspect of curriculum design, progressivism emphasizes the importance of mastering methods of thinking (how to think) and acting over memorizing static material (what to think). According to this view, a good curriculum must prioritize improving the quality of children's lives, developing concrete creative power, and building adaptability to developments in science and technology. This methodological framework equips individuals with the cognitive agility necessary to interact effectively in a constantly changing global environment. The position of students is established as active learners through five main pillars: learning autonomy, experiential learning, intrinsic motivational drive, participatory engagement, and continuous self-capacity building (Khobir & Sabiq, 2025).

Philosophy of Progressivism and Its Implications for Educational Practice

Based on the screening and data extraction results from 20 selected articles published in the last 5 years (2019–2024), the synthesis map of findings regarding the implications of progressivism philosophy in 21st-century educational practice is

presented in Table 1 (Florungco, 2022; Navisa et al., 2022; Syammary et al., 2024; Uswah et al., 2022; Wahdah, 2024).

Tabel 1. Matrix of Selected Literature Synthesis (SLR)

No	Authors & Year	Focus / Study Domain	Methodology	Main Findings / Practical Implications
1	(Permana & Rahmawati, 2023)	Curriculum (MBKM)	Qualitative	MBKM realizes progressive flexibility in exploring students' potential.
2	(Cahayani & Suastra, 2024)	Kurikulum Merdeka	Descriptive Qualitative	Strengthens the autonomy of educational institutions in designing democratic learning.
3	(Ningsih et al., 2023)	Curriculum & Character	Literature Review	Flexible experience-based curriculum forms problem-solving abilities.
4	(Jannah, 2024)	Language Curriculum	Qualitative	Progressivism reconstructs syllabi, methodologies, and performance-based assessment.
5	(Nuha & Gustama, 2024)	Curriculum & E-Learning	Philosophical Study	Progressive concepts make e-learning more dynamic and responsive to changing times.
6	(Handayani et al., 2024)	Curriculum Relevance	Critical Analysis	Directly connects classroom material with social issues and real contexts.
7	(Amaruddin et al., 2024)	Inclusive Curriculum	Qualitative	Values the diversity of students' perspectives to create an inclusive environment.
8	(Hakiky et al., 2023)	Blended Learning	SLR (PRISMA)	TPACK integration facilitates digital technology-based learning freedom.
9	(Yunaini et al., 2022)	Educators & Curriculum	Qualitative	Educators leverage digital platform innovation spaces for contextual learning.
10	(Kurniawan, 2024)	Educator / Facilitator	Qualitative	Educators set aside authoritarian patterns to explore students' natural intelligence.
11	(Noer et al., 2023)	Educators & Methods	Qualitative	Educators design participatory strategies that adapt to students' interests and talents.
12	(Fitriani et al., 2023)	Educators & Assessment	Empirical / Qualitative	Teachers provide constructive feedback and a safe space for students to reflect.

No	Authors & Year	Focus / Study Domain	Methodology	Main Findings / Practical Implications
13	(Sukiastini et al., 2024)	Educators & 4C Skills	Qualitative	Emphasizes the educator's role in training 4C skills (Critical Thinking, Communication, Creative Thinking, Collaboration).
14	(Irawati & Paidi, 2023)	Students / Agency	Conceptual Study	Guided freedom facilitates students in mastering independent competencies.
15	(Rokhman et al., 2022)	Students & Character	Case Study	Direct experience strengthens religious, disciplined, honest, and environmentally caring character.
16	(Utami & Utari, 2023)	Elementary School Students	SLR	Ideal education positions students as active and creative learners.
17	(Sopacua & Fadli, 2022)	Philosophical Principles	Literature Review	Dewey's pragmatism liberates students from pressured/dogmatic learning models.
18	(Telaumbanua et al., 2022)	Philosophical Principles	Qualitative	Emphasizes the use of human intelligence to improve the social environment.
19	(Fadli & Sopacua, 2022)	Progressivism Evaluation	SLR	Confirms the effectiveness of student-centered learning in fostering critical reasoning.
20	(Houlden & Veletsianos, 2021)	Criticism & Academic Standards	Qualitative Analysis	Reminds of the importance of structure so that learning freedom does not compromise material quality.

Implications for the Curriculum

The synthesis of the literature confirms that progressivism provides a strong conceptual foundation for the emergence of curricula based on flexibility and autonomy, such as the *Kurikulum Merdeka* and the *Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM) policies in Indonesia (Cahayani & Suastra, 2024; Permana & Rahmawati, 2023). Comparative findings from studies by Permana & Rahmawati, 2023) as well as (Cahayani & Suastra, 2024) indicate that progressive curricula allow educational units the latitude to explore students' intelligence and talents in a democratic and enjoyable manner. Within the digital scope, this flexibility is realized through e-learning and TPACK (Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge)-based blended learning schemes, where syllabus structures, teaching methods, and evaluation systems can be continuously adapted to individual needs and the dynamics of the times (Hakiky et al., 2023; Jannah, 2024; Ningsih et al., 2023; Nuha & Gustama, 2024).

Furthermore, an integrated analysis of the findings from (Handayani et al., 2024) and (Amaruddin et al., 2024) demonstrates that progressive curricula successfully bridge classroom theory with real social issues. The curriculum is no longer viewed as a rigid, isolated document, but rather as an open space that values the diversity of students' perspectives (Amaruddin et al., 2024). This emphasis proves that the philosophical adaptation of progressivism is capable of shifting the conventional curriculum paradigm centered on test achievement toward a contextual curriculum that equips students with real-world problem-solving skills.

Implications for Educators

Regarding the role of educators, the progressivism movement reconstructs the teacher's position from the sole authority of the classroom into a facilitator, guide, and learning motivator (Noer et al., 2023). Educators leverage a variety of learning resources and digital platforms to innovate student-centered media and learning strategies (Noer et al., 2023; Yunaini et al., 2022). In the assessment process, findings by (Fitriani et al., 2023) highlight that progressively minded educators do not act authoritatively, but instead prioritize constructive feedback and create a safe learning environment for students to reflect courageously and learn from failure.

Studies by (Sukiastini et al., 2024) and (Kurniawan, 2024) complement these findings by asserting that the practice of progressivism trains educators to equip students with 21st-century skills or the 4Cs (Critical Thinking, Communication, Creative Thinking, Collaboration). Teachers do not merely teach technical material; rather, they manage dynamic, natural, and efficient classroom ecosystems so that learners are prepared to become lifelong learners who adapt to changing times (Kurniawan, 2024; Sukiastini et al., 2024).

Implications for Learners

For learners, the implications of progressivism lead to the strengthening of student agency and critical awareness regarding contemporary issues (Irawati & Paidi, 2023). The synthesis of studies by (Irawati & Paidi, 2023) and (Yunaini et al., 2022) shows that guided learning freedom facilitates students to engage directly in real-world projects, such as sustainable lifestyle issues, entrepreneurship, cultural preservation, and the ethical use of technology. Through this empirical involvement, learners can take concrete action in responding to problems in their surrounding environment according to their developmental stages (Yunaini et al., 2022).

In addition to honing practical thinking agility and problem solving, empirical evidence from (Rokhman et al., 2022) as well as (Ningsih et al., 2023) proves that progressive learning practices effectively shape a well-rounded personality character. Students not only excel cognitively, but also grow into individuals who are religious, disciplined, honest, creative, and possess high social-ecological concern (Rokhman et al., 2022). The merger of cognitive autonomy and character building fulfills the ideal aspirations of quality education responsive to individual needs and societal progress in the 21st-century digital era (Hakiky et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on the results of the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) analysis of 20 selected articles published in the last five years (2019–2024), the philosophy of progressivism is proven to provide a robust yet dynamic conceptual foundation for the pillars of 21st-century educational practice. These implications are concretely realized across three main domains: the reconstruction of flexible, adaptive, and digitalized curricula; the shift in the role of educators into transformative facilitators

who prioritize constructive feedback; and the strengthening of student agency that shapes independent critical thinking and the social-ecological character of learners. The novelty of this study confirms that John Dewey's classical pragmatism values are no longer merely theoretical but transform linearly into navigative instruments for managing digital learning (e-learning/blended learning), contextual curricula (such as Kurikulum Merdeka/MBKM), and ethical challenges in the era of artificial intelligence.

implications yield several important recommendations for policymakers, educational practitioners, and future researchers. For educational policymakers, it is recommended to continuously strengthen national curriculum flexibility by providing structured autonomy to educational units so they can design local project-based learning without being overly burdened by administrative accountability and rigid standardized tests. For educators, it is recommended to consistently enhance digital pedagogical competence (TPACK) and adopt reflection-based formative assessment techniques to foster an inclusive, democratic, and safe classroom climate for student expression. Meanwhile, for future researchers, it is recommended to conduct mixed-methods field research to empirically test the effectiveness of this synthesized progressive framework on student competency achievement in 3T (Underdeveloped, Frontier, and Outermost) regions as well as in mitigating the impact of reliance on artificial intelligence (AI) technology in the learning process.

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