

# ON LIBERATING EDUCATION AND THE CREATION OF GOLDEN INDONESIA BY 2045

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American tradition admires “effort, energy, commitment,” and fears “laziness and mediocrity” (Lewis M. Dabney. 1982. “Edmund Wilson”. In Richard Kostelanets (Ed.), *American Writing Today*. Washington, D.C.: United States International Communication Agency, p. 12.

## Abstract

This article focusses on education. Here, the writers argue that liberating education, widely known as “Program Merdeka Belajar” in Indonesia, be used consistently as a means to successfully create golden Indonesia by 2045. To make its implementation more effective, however, the following ideas be seriously taken into account. First, it is necessary to implement an educational system, from primary to tertiary institutions, based on each single student’s talents, interests, and learning needs. Second, in relation to the first, it is urgent that Indonesian Government stops creating a national curriculum to be nationally applied throughout Indonesia; the Government instead allows each educational institute in this country to have its own “Merdeka Belajar Curriculum,” that is, a school curriculum based on each single student’s talents/potentials, interests, and learning needs. It is, therefore, suggested that a curriculum for each educational institution may no longer be created by Jakarta/Nusantara. Third, to implement “Program Merdeka Belajar” successfully, having great teachers who teach based on their students’ talents, interests, and learning needs is necessary. To achieve this, we suggest, among other things, that the teachers be freely allowed to have further education and/or proper training and that their salary be increased significantly. This, in turn, will lead to the successful creation of Golden Indonesia in 2045 and beyond.

Keywords: Liberating Education, Relevant Curriculum, Great Teachers, and Golden Indonesia

## I. INTRODUCTION

In this article, the term “liberating education” concerns the “creation of golden Indonesia by 2045.” We believe that is indeed “liberating education” that can create “golden Indonesia” by 2045 in which all aspects of Indonesian life as a nation also enter their golden era.

In the context of this article, Indonesia as an archipelagic region is viewed as a place or a region where liberating education as such is to be totally-wholeheartedly implemented. Although, we have to say, that the term “liberating education” (see, for example, Rogers, 1983; Neville, 1989) can also be universally implemented; it is worth implementing not only in archipelagic regions like Indonesia, but also elsewhere where there are some educational institutions with their students who learn and their teachers who teach.

Within that line of thought, our thesis statement for this paper is this: liberating education be used as means to create golden Indonesia by 2045. The question is how it can be used to achieve such a big dream of Indonesia as a great nation. Below is our answer to the question.

Yet, before answering the question, we would like to define first what we mean by the term “liberating education”.

## II. DEFINING LIBERATING EDUCATION

Liberating education is not indeed a new idea. It has been introduced, for example, by Freire (1976) who says that education has to be seen as a practice of freedom. He stresses this because, based on his observations, education has been widely used as a means of oppression; it has become a *pedagogy of the oppressed* (1972) which happens mostly in the third world. Since it violates human rights, he strongly urges those who practise it to stop it and replace it by a kind of education that can set people free from their problems whatever they might be. In other words, Freire demands that schools should no longer be used by non-democratic governments as a means to maintain their power. Freire’s voice is logical because those governments usually strictly control their educational institutions, particularly their teaching materials (i.e. what to teach). Within those non-democratic institutions, what is allowed to be taught or learned is usually teaching material which is in line with their non-democratic policies designed to preserve their non-democratic powers.

Schools, including tertiary institutions, Freire (1972) argues, be freed from the *pedagogy of the oppressed* (1972) by giving the schools total freedom to teach their students based on their talents/potentials, interests, and learning needs (cf. Rogers, 1983; Tans, 2011a/b/2014). In our educational context, Indonesia, Nadiem Anwar Makarim, Indonesian Minister of Education, Culture, Research and Technology, calls this “liberating education” or, in Indonesian, it is called “Program Merdeka Belajar.”

In that sense, Nadiem Anwar Makarim’s “Program Merdeka Belajar” is basically the same as “liberating education,” that is, an educational system based on the principle of freedom-to-learn as proposed by Rogers (1983). That program is similar to liberating education because it argues within its perspective that all teachers/lecturers are encouraged to teach based on their students’ talents, interests, and learning needs. Yet, in its implementation though, teachers/lecturers and educational decision makers seem to be confused for several reasons. First, it is indeed a new idea that they fail to understand. Such an understanding failure happens because they have been very deeply influenced by their traditional practices of teaching based on a curriculum provided by schools/tertiary institutions without any dialogs with their students to know what it is that they really want to learn in their schools. Secondly, they have no freedom to implement the program as they have to follow the regulations made

the government in order to implement it. This makes this free learning program basically far from being free (Tans et al., 2022).

To get rid of those confusing conditions, it is, therefore, necessary that educational practitioners, including parents and students themselves, understand not only the nature of this liberating education, but also how it should be comprehensively implemented in schools. This is to make sure that such a great program, namely, liberating education, really works in all aspects of our life along our journey to becoming a golden Indonesia by 2045 as detailed below.

### **III. THOROUGHLY IMPLEMENTING LIBERATING EDUCATION IN OUR SCHOOLS**

In order to be very successful in implementing this idea of liberating education, we strongly suggest that the following ideas be adopted, namely: 1) education based on students' talents, interests, and needs; 2) having great teachers; and, 3) establishing dialogue-based education. These are discussed further below.

#### **3.1 EDUCATION BASED ON STUDENTS' TALENTS, INTEREST, AND NEEDS**

It has been widely acknowledged that our formal education has created, among other things, many great scientists that, in turn, have created our world with its technological wonders across all fields of our life nowadays; it is also our formal education that has created a lot of great people with great moral values that help us have the world as it is today. Yet, in some cases, our formal education, we should also acknowledge, has failed. Such a failure can be seen in what John F. Kennedy calls as common enemies of the world: poverty, diseases, war, and tyranny (in Dunbar et al., 1991: 486). In other words, it is our poor standard of education that has created such common enemies within our community – Indonesia, however, is now “lucky” because what is left out of these diseases is poverty and diseases. War and tyranny have been a history, except in Papua(?). Yet, it is not that when it comes to social “diseases” like high rates of corruption and crime as well as massive environmental destructions.

The question is why our formal education fails. There must be a very long answer to this question. Yet we summarise it into this single sentence: our formal education fails because our students do not learn based on their talents, interests, and needs (Cf. Rogers, 1983; Tans, 2011a/2014). In other words, our students do learn a lot of things in schools that, in many cases, they have no talents on, they are not interested in, and they don't really need them for

their future. In senior high schools, for example, there are around 15 subjects that they have to study. All of these subjects, of course, may not necessarily be related to their talents, interests, and future needs.

What makes things worse is that formal learning is mainly seen as a game of memorizing; the more students memorize, the better. In this sense, the law of forgetting is widely ignored (Rogers, 1983: 19-20). This is why our students are so busy in memorizing what they study that they practically have no time to relax or to play. This, in turn, could lead them to learning failure because we understand that to relax is indeed an integral part of one's way to success.

In addition, learning within such contexts is still widely seen as a means of transferring knowledge, skills and values from teachers to their students. Students, therefore, have no opportunities to construct their own ideas, to practise (i.e. learning by doing), to be in touch with their nature, to express themselves freely, to be active in doing things they are interested in because they have no time for it or, to be more precise, they are not allowed to do so; with such a context, learning simply means listening to their teachers without any chances to learn and/or to live in their natural contexts. On the other hand, John Dewey, an American educationist, has made it very clear that education is life itself; it is not "a preparation for living" (in Cubberly, 1948:782).

Describing "the Dewey educational philosophy", Cubberly says:

"Education, therefore, in Dewey's conception, involves not merely learning, but play, construction, use of tools, contact with nature, expression, and activity; and the school should be a place where children are working rather than listening, learning life by living life, and becoming acquainted social institutions and industrial process by studying them. The work of the school is in large part to reduce the complexity of modern life to such terms as children can understand, and to introduce the child to modern life through simplified experiences. Its primary business may be said to be to train children in cooperative and mutually helpful living. The virtues of a school, as Dewey points out, are learning by doing; the use of muscles, sight and feeling, as well as hearing; and the employment of energy, originality, and initiative" (Cubberly, 1948: 782-783).

In that sense, it is crucial to stress here that it is important for us to educate our students based on their talents, interests and needs to make them more successful in schools and beyond. By doing this, our schools can then truly reflect real lives that the students will go through in their future lives after schooling as Dewey has suggested above.

### 3.2 HAVING GREAT TEACHERS

Formal education, like education in general, needs teachers whose main job is to teach their students. In that sense, Indonesian Government states that teachers from early childhood education level to secondary school level must have at least bachelor degree (S-1 degree); for S-1 level of education (bachelor level), lecturers must have at least master degree; and for masters and Ph.D. levels of education, they must have Ph.D. degrees (Bill No. 14 on Teachers and Lecturers in 2015). In recent years, practitioners without formal degrees as such are allowed to teach at those levels of education because of their practical experiences. This is why successful business people whose business experiences are needed by our students to follow through or great authors/writers whose writing experiences can help students become great prospective writers themselves are now allowed to teach in our schools despite the fact that they might not have relevant degrees.

Inviting those successful practitioners to teach in our schools/tertiary institutions is, of course, a great idea; it is to motivate our students in such a way that they will also do their best to be successful when they finish their study, namely, they will not be unemployed or involved in crime/corruption; and, when they work, they can then do their best to succeed and to make others' lives better.

To achieve the goals as such, teachers and lecturers as well as those teaching practitioners must have professional, pedagogical, social, and personal competences (Regulation of Indonesian Government No. 19, 2005, on Education National Standard, Chapter 18, Verse 3). It is, of course, great to have teachers/lecturers with such competences, but William A. Ward warns us that what we need to successfully empower our students is inspiring teachers – There are four kinds of teachers, according to William A. Ward, namely: 1. mediocre teachers who tells; 2. Good teachers who tells and explain; 3. Super teachers who tell, explain, and demonstrate; and, 4. Inspiring teachers who inspires (in Tans, 2011b; 1116).

In other words, to succeed in its national development in general, the development of its education in particular, Indonesia indeed needs not mediocre, good, and even super teachers, but inspiring teachers. Inspiring teachers are those whose professional competences, pedagogical competences, social and individual competences may not be excellent, but their character is so good and so inspiring that their students would always listen to what they say and would imitate their exemplary ways of life, that is, they would practise what they hear from those teachers and what they see through their excellent real life experiences. In other words, inspiring teachers/lecturers always inspire their students to be better day by day, to succeed, to be good people (i.e. having excellent characters), and to be skilful by simply doing their best,

by being all out/total in whatever they do; and, their students would miss them very much, if they are absent from teaching because they do believe that their teachers as such are those who are competent in motivating them to always do their best in schools and beyond.

Those inspiring teachers may not necessarily be smart, but their students will always turn to them when they are in trouble academically, socially, economically, and even religiously/spiritually because they are just happy to talk with to overcome their problems as students or as human beings with a lot of challenges. In addition, they are always in a position to help their students and others in trouble so they can be free from the problems/troubles they may be facing. So, those inspiring teachers admire “effort, energy, commitment,” and fear “laziness and mediocrity” in their whole lives as stated above and so do their students because they succeed in implanting in their students those great traditions as well. Having those kinds of tradition, we believe, is a guarantee for both an individual success and community greatness. On the other hand, the absence of those kinds of great tradition means failure, individually and socially. To prevent such a failure, it is necessary, among other things, to support our teachers not only by allowing them to have further studies or trainings, but also to increase their salary so that they can do their job better and Indonesian brilliant minds can then be more interested in becoming (great) teachers.

### 3.3 HAVING DIALOG-BASED CURRICULUM

This idea, that is, having a curriculum based on sincere dialogs between teachers and their (prospective) students, is for students who are already competent in literacy and numeracy. In that sense, we do not ask year one primary school students, for example, why they want to go to school because we know, among other things, that they go to school to be able to read, write, and numerate in simple ways as well as to broaden their social relationship. So, those first grade primary school students are, therefore, just taught right away reading, writing, and numerating as well as socialising with good character without asking such axiological questions to them. That teachers and their students have sincere dialogues during the teaching and learning process is, of course, something which is necessary to ensure that the students can be literate and numerate.

This is also the case for early childhood education. Dialogues as such are not needed because they go to those kinds of school with a very fixed aim, that is, having a kind of understanding how first steps of being educated should start. In addition, at that level of

education, we know, there is no need to study how to read, write, and numerate (basic literacy and numeracy skills); they are there to play and learn informally/subconsciously, but not to learn formally/consciously and/or to play in order to learn formally. Within that context, having a dialogue-based curriculum is irrelevant for those levels of education.

Dialogue-based curriculum is, however, very crucial for students who have pass through what we call basic literacy and numeracy skills, namely, students in upper grades of a primary school, i.e. grade IV-VI, and further (from junior high schools on). Within those level of education, dialog-based curriculum means a curriculum implemented in a particular school is based on dialogs between teachers and their (prospective) students, their parents, and/or friends in addition to observations/interviews in order to enrich their insights through pure dialogues. In such dialogues, the following ontological, epistemological, and axiological questions may come up.

#### Questions that May Be Asked When Having Dialogues with Students

1. Why do you want to study here?
2. What is your talent/potential?
3. What are things that you like to do?
4. What is your passion in life?
5. What is your interest?
6. What is your learning need?
7. What is your dream for your future?
8. Do you think that your family has any problems?
9. What do you think you can do to overcome the problems?
10. What social problems do you think we have nowadays which are so serious?
11. Do you want to overcome them? How will you overcome them?
12. Why do we have to overcome them or what is the aim of overcoming those problems?
13. Do you think that you are a good boy/girl?
14. Why do you think that you are a good boy/girl?
15. What do you think you will do to be a good man/boy or to be a boy/girl with great characters?

Let us imagine that a (prospective) student may say this: “Well, I think my family is poor and you see I don’t want to be poor. I want to get rid of our poverty. This is why I want to be a very professional businessman in the future. I am here, therefore, to learn how to be a successful businessman.” In that sense, that students should then be taught how to be a successful businessman. If it is what we do for him/her, I can guarantee that he/she will study harder because it is what he/she needs and such a need, we assume, should be based on her/his talents and interests. Why would I want to be a great musician, for example, if I know that I have no great music intelligence. It is also the case for those who want to be farmers, singers, soccer players, musician, and other fields like being a teacher, a policeman, a pilot, a doctor and many more.

Of course, they may change what they want to learn as they change their interests and learning needs. It is fine. In that sense, allowing students to learn as many subjects as they like is educationally sound, but when they have known what their real potentials, interests, and learning needs are, they should then start studying/learning subjects which are really related to their talents, interests, and needs. That is, students who want to be musicians can then just learn music-related subjects (Tans, 2011a/2014/2024).

If it is what kind of learning and teaching we do in our schools, we believe, our school graduates throughout Indonesia across generations will always be successful: no poverty, no crime, no corruption, no chaos, and their potentials can be well-actualized because what they study is based on their own talents, interests, and learning needs. What we learn from people like Thomas A. Edison, Louis Pasteur, Bill Gates, and Gunawan Muhammad who have become very successful in their lives, supports such an argument. They have excellently succeeded because they always do what they are interested in, they have great talents in what they do, and what they do/learn is what they need (Tans, 2011b).

Within that perspective, “Program Merdeka Belajar” proposed now by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology is theoretically great, but it has some weaknesses when it comes to its implementation (Tans et al., 2022). One of the major weaknesses of Anwar Nadiem Makarim’s Freedom-to-Learn Program, or “Program Merdeka Belajar” in Indonesian, is that it has its own curriculum. This is contradictory in itself because how can we have freedom in schools, if we are not free to learn based on our own talents, interests, and learning needs? To have that lost freedom back, it is, therefore, crucial to have a curriculum – what is supposed to be learned and taught in schools – which is really based on students’ talents, interests, and needs. In addition, character building in that dialogical education is also crucial because it is students’ characters that really count for their success or failure in their future development. This is why Tough says that what is crucial in the development of a child is “not how much information we can stuff into her brain in the first few years. What matters, instead, is whether we are able to help her develop a very different set of qualities, a list that includes persistence, self-control, curiosity, conscientiousness, grit, and self-confidence” (2012: iv). Having those kinds of qualities is indeed necessary to make sure that our students will be able to manage well or wisely whatever they have, including the money they possess, their relationship with others/environments, the energy and the time they have (Weber, 2015). In that sense, a good curriculum takes into account a student’s total development, namely, his/her talents/potentials, interests, learning needs, and his/her character building.



The question is how we can have that kind of curriculum. There could be a lot of answers to the question. Yet we suggest this answer here: we need to implement what Freire calls as dialogical education (1972/1976). Dialogical education simply means a kind of education based on sincere dialogues between a teacher and his/her student(s). Such dialogues will help a teacher understand his/her students' great talents (potentials), interests, and learning needs. If such dialogues are not sufficient, observations by a teacher or a student's friends (peer observations) or interviews with relevant students, their parents, and peers, may be done.

Through such dialogues and observations, students' talents, interests, and needs can then be found out. Once they are found, a curriculum be designed to make sure that the students' talents, interests, and needs are seriously taken into account and, therefore, their potentials and interests can definitely be growing bigger and bigger or stronger and stronger when they are in schools and beyond. In other words, it is crucial here to let our students learn based on their talents, interests, and needs by having a curriculum that can indeed accommodate their talents, interests, and needs. In this sense, Gay Swenson says:

I strongly feel that: 1) the curriculum can be self-selected by the student, based on his or her current interests and abilities; 2) there can be self-testing, self-evaluation, self-set goals, which are valid; 3) frequent evaluation of the effectiveness of a program can occur by a combination of input from the individual learner, the teacher, and the entire class (in Rogers, 1983: 68).

What Swenson says is important because we believe that our educational failure, as partially discussed above, happens, among other things, because in our schools our students learn things that are, in many cases, irrelevant to their needs, interests, and talents. In other words, what the students learn is not always related to their major intelligences (Cf. Gardner, 1993). Our teachers seem to be in the same condition as they often teach subjects/things that their students do not want to learn to because, they think, what is taught is irrelevant to their talents, needs, and interests. It is no wonder, therefore, they fail.

#### **IV. CONCLUSIONS**

To conclude, it is necessary to restate here some main points that we have mentioned before. First, it is important that our schools, including tertiary institutions, implement what is called here liberating education designed to make students capable of overcoming not only

their own problems, but also the problems of others surrounding them: poverty, diseases, corruption, crimes, and many more.

This can be implemented in schools by applying a kind of education that really takes into account each single student's talents, interests, and learning needs throughout Indonesia as an archipelagic nation or elsewhere. Along the process, great teachers be employed to make sure that the students can then develop well that, in turn, they can overcome not only their own problems, but also social and physical problems/challenges around them so that life can be better for all throughout Indonesia across generations.

In order to help those great teachers more capable in executing their jobs as teachers, it is necessary that they be given more chances to further their studies and/or to improve their professional, pedagogical, social and individual competences. In addition, giving them far better salary is necessary so that Indonesian most brilliant minds can then be interested in becoming (great) teachers.

Along the process, we need great teachers who are professionally, pedagogically, socially, and personally competent so that they can teach well, that is, their students can then be able to actualize their talents and develop their interests in line with their learning needs. In that sense, it is, therefore, crucial that schools have their curriculums established by themselves based on their students' talents/potentials, interests and learning needs. In other words, what schools need in that sense is a curriculum that they design based on their dialogs with their students.

Such dialogs are crucial for teachers to know their students' talents, interests, and needs and, therefore, they can then have a teaching and learning curriculum relevant to their students' potentials, interests, and needs. This is the essence of "Kurikulum Merdeka" (liberating education) proposed by the present government that we believe must be thoroughly implemented in our schools to make it more successful. If not, we are afraid, it will fail.

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