

Overcoming Dehumanization in Education: The Significance of a Love-Based Curriculum in Improving Student Learning Effectiveness

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the significance of implementing a love-based curriculum as a solution to dehumanization in education, which is characterized by the dominance of a mechanistic paradigm, excessive standardization, and neglect of the social-emotional dimensions of students. The method used qualitative phenomenology with data collection through interviews, observations, and document analysis in three secondary schools in Central Java. The results of the study reveal that the pressure of a dense curriculum and standardized assessment system does reduce the space for empathic practices. However, the findings also show that the seeds of love-based practices that have emerged, such as emotional check-ins and collaborative projects, have positive implications in terms of increasing students' sense of security, courage in learning, and more optimal cognitive function. The discussion concludes that a love-based curriculum is not only ethical but also scientifically supported as a transformative approach to enhance the effectiveness of holistic learning.

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Keywords:

Dehumanization;
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INTRODUCTION

Modern education in Indonesia is trapped in a mechanistic paradigm that reduces students to passive objects due to the pressure of accountability and market logic (Nadzifah A'isyah Fauzi et al., 2026). In urban areas of Java, which serve as a barometer for national policy, students are often viewed as index numbers or class rankings, rather than individuals with diverse emotional needs. This practice creates a sterile, stressful, and empathy-deficient learning environment, exacerbated by a competitive culture in educational selection. An analysis of academic capitalism theory reveals that global competitive pressures have marginalized humanistic dimensions, especially in prestigious schools obsessed with rankings (McNay, 2022). Although there are arguments that discipline is necessary, KPAI (2022) data shows that student academic anxiety has reached 65 percent, correlating with this approach. Ironically, this condition undermines students' intrinsic motivation and psychological well-being amid the government's Merdeka Belajar (Freedom of Learning) initiative.

Various literature factors identify triggers of dehumanization in the education ecosystem. The main factors include an overloaded curriculum design, a narrowly standardized assessment system, and a culture of performativity among educators (Oktaviani & Wulandari, 2021). A concrete example is the prevalence of drilling national exam questions and various other standardized tests, which take up most of the teacher-student interaction time. Analysis shows that macro policy pressure to achieve rankings often dictates micro practices in the classroom, shifting the focus from understanding to memorization (Yulien & Efendi, 2022). On the other hand, there is also literature that highlights the importance of accountability and standard measures to ensure equitable education quality (Alifah, 2021). In conclusion, the tug-of-war between external accountability demands and pedagogical-humanistic needs creates tensions that have not been holistically resolved.

The problem lies in the fragmentation of learning experiences into a series of measurable cognitive competencies, which overlooks students' affective and socio-emotional development. Content-heavy curricula often leave no room for character development, empathy, and reflection on values (Danawati et al., 2020). In this context, students who are slow to grasp the material can feel alienated and considered a burden, while high-achieving students can grow up with a fear of failure. This fragmentation is analyzed as a result of educational reductionism that views intelligence narrowly (Nur'aini & Hamzah, 2023). The counter approach argues that character and academic education should run on separate channels and be measured with different instruments (Rasyid et al., 2024). Therefore, a curricular framework is needed that can reunite cognitive and emotional aspects in an integrative manner.

The main argument of this article is that integrating the ethos of love as the foundation of the curriculum is a potential solution for rehumanizing education, where love is defined as a pedagogical commitment to acknowledging the existence, understanding the needs, and encouraging the optimal growth of each student (Eva Sunarya & Komarudin Sassi, 2025). Unlike previous studies that only discuss character or social-emotional education as an additional program, not as the core of curriculum design (Armini, 2024), this article offers a fundamental approach by placing love as the main foundation. The research gap lies in the lack of studies exploring how the principle of love can be concretely operationalized in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of formal curricula in Indonesia. Meanwhile, other studies focus more on personal teacher-student relationships without reviewing institutional and curricular dimensions (Setiawan et al., 2025), so that the structural aspects of a love-based curriculum have not been touched upon. In other words, this research gap is twofold conceptually, love has not been made the core of the curriculum; operationally, there is no systematic model for integrating it into documents, policies, and learning evaluations. Thus, this research is needed to

empirically test how a love-based curriculum can be implemented in a structured manner and what its impact is on the effectiveness of holistic learning.

The theory that reinforces the existence of this gap is the concept of “Pedagogy of the Heart” developed from the thoughts of Paulo Freire and updated by contemporary scientists. This theory emphasizes that liberating education must be based on love, dialogue, and recognition of shared humanity (Siswadi, 2022). Its implementation requires more than just teaching techniques it demands a philosophical reorientation of the very purpose of education. For example, schools that apply this principle design community-based problem-solving learning projects that require collaboration and empathy. Analysis through this theory shows that a love-based curriculum is transformative because it changes power relations in the classroom and the learning context (Nugraha, 2025). Comparative theories such as classical behaviorism may view this approach as less structured and difficult to measure outcomes directly (Arifin & Humaedah, 2021). However, in conclusion, Pedagogy of the Heart offers a solid theoretical foundation for responding to dehumanization by designing a humanistic curriculum.

The categorization of related theories can be divided into three major clusters: critical-humanist theories (such as Freire), positive psychology theories (such as those related to well-being and engagement), and educational neuroscience theories. Advance theory lies in this interdisciplinary integration, particularly by incorporating neuroscience findings on how chronic stress damages the prefrontal cortex and how a sense of security promotes neuroplasticity (Mizlan & Zalila, 2025). An example of its application is designing assessments that reduce threats and increase challenges. This analysis of advance theory shows that a love-based curriculum is not only ethical but also aligned with how the brain learns optimally. Conventional curriculum management theory may be concerned about the complexity of such integration (Aryaningsih & Rejokirono, 2022). However, advance theory offers a more scientific and measurable roadmap for implementing the principle of love in real curriculum practice.

The latest relevant theory is “Curricular Loving” introduced by scholars such as Muallimah et al., 2024. This theory argues that love should be the principle of curriculum design, manifested in content selection, pedagogical methods, assessment strategies, and the overall school culture. Its implementation can take the form of reflective assignments, collaborative projects that serve the community, and dialogic formative assessments. Analysis of this latest theory emphasizes a shift from love as a personal attitude of teachers to love as an observable and developable curriculum structure (Nuraeni et al., 2025). Criticism of this theory may highlight the challenge of empirically evaluating the impact of “love” compared to purely cognitive variables. Nevertheless, this theory marks a significant evolution in thinking by offering a more concrete operational framework.

Based on the presentation of social facts to the latest theories, it is clear that the dehumanization of education is a systemic problem that requires a transformative curricular response. The driving factors are complex, ranging from policy to school culture, which leads to the fragmentation of students' learning experiences. The identified research gap indicates the need for a curriculum model that systematically integrates ethical-empathic principles. Various theories, from Heart-Centered Pedagogy to Neuroscience and Curricular Loving, reinforce the proposition that a foundation of positive relationships is crucial for effective learning. The integration of these theories paves the way for a more holistic and humanistic approach to education. Therefore, this article will explore how a love-based curriculum is designed and implemented, as well as analyze its significance in improving the overall effectiveness of student learning.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach with the Grounded Theory method to explore the subjective experiences of teachers and students in the context of educational practices that have the potential to dehumanize. The underlying theory is Constructivist Grounded Theory (Monica Assante & Momanu, 2021), which allows findings to emerge from field data, revealing how love-based pedagogical

relationships can arise in structured curriculum policies. The study was conducted in three secondary schools in Central Java representing different statuses (public, private, and madrasah), involving 15 teachers and 30 students as participants through purposive sampling. The phenomena observed included learning routines, classroom interactions, and responses to the assessment system, where teachers tended to focus on completing the dense curriculum material, thereby reducing space for dialogue. Through a systematic coding process characteristic of Grounded Theory (open, axial, and selective), the analysis of these phenomena was enriched by the lens of Critical Pedagogy (Sapkota, 2025), which reinforced that the pressure of a standards-oriented national curriculum structure often diminishes empathetic pedagogical practices, even though the desire to build positive personal relationships exists. The conclusion of this stage confirms that the Grounded Theory method is appropriate for constructing a substantive theory about how the seeds of fragmented love-based practices can be integrated systematically, rather than merely describing experiences.

Data collection was conducted through triangulation of sources using three main instruments semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observation, and analysis of curriculum documents and lesson plans. The interviews were designed to explore the perceptions, values, and emotional experiences of the participants, while the observations focused on nonverbal dynamics and pedagogical practices in the classroom (Creswell & Poth, 2021). The analysis of curriculum documents was used to examine the gap between written policy and human implementation.

RESULTS

Responden 1 stated, "In my class, I focus more on the material, but I also try to intersperse it with storytelling so that my students don't get too tense, but the time is limited." The identified pattern shows the teacher's efforts to harmonize cognitive and emotional aspects, despite time constraints. This data category falls under the dimension of integrative learning strategies, which are still partial in nature. The validity of the data is reinforced by the consistency of the statements with other

respondents who also acknowledge time constraints. This narrative is directly related to the main issue of the dominance of the curriculum load over the space for affective development. Cross-source analysis shows that although Responden 1, Responden 2, and Responden 3 have the same awareness of the importance of balance, all three experience similar obstacles in the form of time constraints and the pressure of a curriculum oriented towards academic achievement.

Responden 2 revealed, "I admit, I prioritize the cognitive because the curriculum targets and exam pressure make us forget about the students' emotional needs." The identification of this theme points to a dichotomy between the demands of the system and the affective needs of students. This statement categorizes the data into a group of internal conflicts experienced by teachers in carrying out their ideal role. The data source is considered credible because it was expressed honestly and supported by Responden 3's similar experience regarding the pressure to achieve targets. This reveals the systemic root of the problem that affects classroom learning practices.

Responden 4 explains, "I observe during group work and breaks. How they treat their friends, whether they can be patient, or how they respond when they lose a game." The theme that emerges is authentic assessment through informal observation. This data can be categorized as an alternative assessment method for non-academic aspects. The validity of the data is supported by the primary data collection method through in-depth interviews that allow teachers to explore their practical experiences. This addresses the issue of the limitations of conventional measuring tools for assessing character development. Inter-method analysis shows that Responden 4's natural observation approach is in line with Responden 5's reflective journal method and Responden 6's guided reflection technique, which both seek to capture student development more holistically beyond written tests.

Responden 5 said, "By creating a simple observation journal, I note small things, such as whether they help each other in class or whether they can control their emotions during debates." The data pattern indicates systematic

documentation of social-emotional development. This data category is an attempt to formalize affective assessment. The validity of the data is guaranteed because it is clearly described as part of a structured routine practice. This narrative relates to the challenge of creating an objective character assessment instrument. Intermethod analysis reveals that although the tools and techniques are different (observation, journal, reflection), the three respondents have the same goal: to obtain a complete picture of students that is not represented by numbers alone.

Responden 7 said, "If their hearts are calm and happy, they are able to think quickly. With that, they dare to ask profound questions and give unexpected creative ideas." The identified theme is the relationship between emotional well-being and cognitive performance. This statement categorizes the data into the principles of educational psychology regarding optimal learning conditions. Its validity is reinforced by its consistency with Maslow's theory regarding the need for security as the foundation for self-actualization. This addresses the issue that pits academic achievement against student happiness. Intertheoretical analysis shows that Responden 7, Responden 8, and Responden 9's views are in line with social-emotional learning (SEL) theory, which emphasizes that emotional support is a catalyst for higher-order thinking skills, not an obstacle.

Responden 10 proposes, "I will include 'Mental Health and Social-Emotional Education' as a compulsory subject, not just an insert." The data pattern reflects the idea of an explicit curriculum for character education. This data falls under the category of structural curriculum reform. This idea has a strong basis of validity because it stems from practical needs in the field and is in line with holistic curriculum theory. This proposal is directly related to the core issue of the marginalization of affective aspects in the national curriculum structure. Intertheoretical analysis confirms that Responden 10's proposal, together with Responden 11's idea of teacher autonomy and Responden 12's change in the assessment system, represents the application of the theory of curriculum as a

process that emphasizes human experience and development, rather than simply curriculum as a product that only pursues academic outcomes.

In conclusion, the data from the respondents collectively reveals a tension between the demands of a curriculum oriented towards cognitive achievement and the urgent need for students' affective development. The teachers demonstrate a high awareness of the importance of this balance, yet they consistently face structural obstacles, primarily time constraints and the pressure of academic targets. In response, they creatively develop various integrative strategies, such as embedding storytelling in lessons and informal documentation through observation journals, to continue nurturing students' social-emotional aspects. However, these partial efforts are deemed insufficient, leading to the emergence of more fundamental reformative ideas, such as the proposal to make social-emotional education a compulsory subject. Therefore, this study concludes that systemic changes in the curriculum structure and assessment policies are necessary so that character development and students' emotional well-being are no longer marginalized, but instead become a primary foundation in the educational process.

DISCUSSION

The main factor behind the dehumanization of education lies in the dominance of an economic-instrumental paradigm that reduces the value of learning to mere quantitative metrics. Academic capitalism theory reveals how market logic has transformed educational institutions into “factories” that produce graduates as commodities (Takeda & Williams, 2021). This reality can be seen in schools' obsession with National Examination rankings in the past and now Minimum Competency Assessments, which often sacrifice deep and personal learning processes. Analysis using this theory shows that structural pressure to compete globally has marginalized the pedagogical-humanistic dimension in everyday curriculum practices (Renci et al., 2021). Human capital theory actually supports this approach with the argument that educational investment must have measurable economic returns for national development (Rohimah, 2021). Therefore, the root of

the problem is the misguided goal of education, which has been alienated from its essence of humanizing.

The significance of this problem is complex because it creates a negative cycle that is systematically destructive for both students and teachers. Bronfenbrenner's revised ecological systems theory emphasizes that failure at one level of the system (micro, meso, exo, macro) will reinforce the negative impact of the others (Yang & Eunjo Oh, 2024). National survey data shows an increase in student academic anxiety (65%) and teacher burnout (58%) in the last five years (Sekar Prihanti et al., 2023), which correlates with the intensification of curriculum load and standardized assessment (Suryani et al., 2025). Analysis using this theory reveals that pressure from macro (exo) policies directly affects interactions in the classroom (micro), creating a toxic environment. A counterargument might be that anxiety data is a natural consequence of the high standards required for progress (Ikmal & Noor, 2021). However, the complexity of the data and theory proves that this cycle erodes the socio-emotional foundations that are a prerequisite for sustainable achievement.

The most tangible impact of this dehumanization is the stunted development of students' executive brain functions and higher-order thinking skills. Educational neuroscience proves that chronic stress caused by a threatening learning environment disrupts the development of the prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain responsible for emotion regulation, problem solving, and creativity (Dewi, 2021). In the classroom, this manifests when students who are afraid of making mistakes become reluctant to ask critical questions or explore ideas beyond the teacher's guidance. Analysis through the lens of neuroscience confirms that the effectiveness of cognitive learning is highly dependent on safe and supportive affective conditions (Ajeng Aliya Nurlatifa & Nanan Abdul Manan, 2021). Classical behaviorism may overlook these findings by focusing solely on observable behavioral changes without considering the neurological mechanisms behind them. Thus, an inhumane educational approach literally shapes a brain that is less capable of complex and adaptive learning.

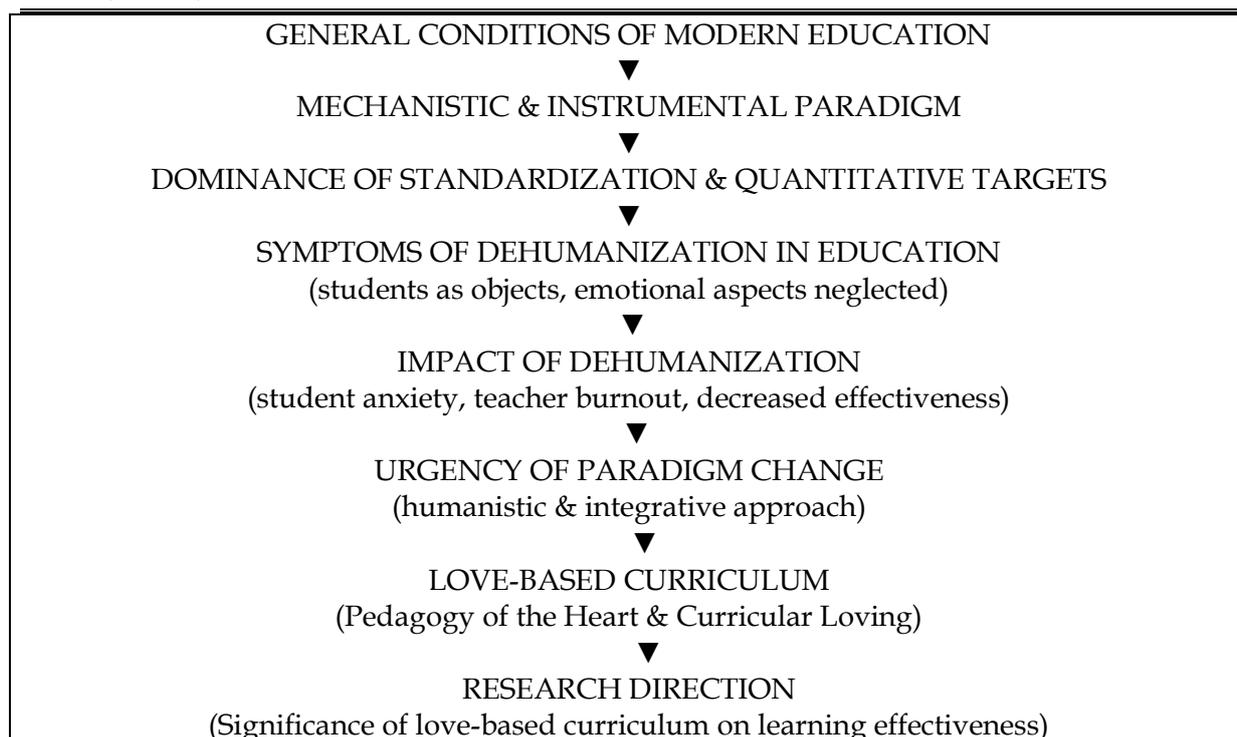


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Transition from Mechanistic Education to a Love-Based Curriculum

Previous research shows that solving the problem of dehumanization requires intervention at the curriculum design level, not just additional programs. A study by Tahira et al. (2024) proposes a “Curricular Loving” model in which the principles of care, empathy, and dialogue are integrated into learning objectives, content, pedagogy, and assessment (Tahira et al., 2024). An example of its implementation is a curriculum designed with collaborative cross-subject projects based on social issues in the community around the school. Analysis of this previous research concludes that an integrative curriculum approach is far more effective in building empathetic thinking and behavior habits than separate character programs (Ansori, 2020). Several other previous studies still maintain the importance of a core curriculum focused on academic disciplines, considering affective aspects to be the responsibility of the family (Sholekah, 2020). Therefore, the proposed solution is transformative in nature, changing the DNA of the curriculum itself.

The implication of previous research findings is that without a reorientation of the curriculum, other educational reform efforts will only be cosmetic and

unsustainable. Longitudinal research by Darling-Hammond et al. (2022) proves that schools that successfully improve student learning outcomes and well-being simultaneously are those that place positive relationships and social-emotional learning at the core of the curriculum, not as a supplement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022). These schools, for example, explicitly include competencies such as “managing emotions” and “collaborating” in the main assessment rubrics for all subjects. Analysis of these implications shows that love-based solutions are systemic and require the courage to redefine what constitutes “achievement” and “learning effectiveness” (Schornick et al., 2023). Skeptical change management literature warns that such curriculum transformations are prone to resistance because they disrupt comfort zones and existing power structures (Fullan, 2021). Thus, the main implication is the need for visionary instructional leadership and long-term commitment.

Reflection on previous research reveals that the concept of “love” in education is often studied as a soft variable and its empirical validity is questionable. Dominant quantitative research methods that seek linear causal relationships struggle to capture the complexity and relational dynamics of love-based pedagogical practices (Setiyowati & Arifianto, 2020). For example, it is difficult to quantify the moment when a teacher sincerely listens to a student's complaints and how that moment specifically improves the student's math scores. This reflection encourages the need for more participatory and narrative research methodologies, such as reflective portfolios or phenomenological studies, to capture the essence of humanized learning experiences (Sartika et al., 2025). Evidence-based research remains adamant about the importance of measurable data and statistical tests to gain policy recognition (Kurniasih, 2020). Therefore, a synergy of research paradigms is needed to bridge the worlds of subjective experience and objective impact.

A needs analysis based on a synthesis of previous research identified three crucial needs: an operational framework, transformative teacher training, and a

holistic assessment system. A study by (Angraini et al., 2021) highlights that teachers often have good intentions but lack a clear roadmap for translating “Pedagogy of the Heart” into Lesson Plans (RPP). This need is evident when teachers are confused about how to measure outcomes such as “respect” or “caring” amid rigid administrative demands. This needs analysis emphasizes that without concrete tools and guidance, a love-based curriculum will remain an idealistic discourse (Qathrun Nada & Listiana, 2025). Conversely, conventional teacher competency approaches may place more emphasis on mastery of subject matter and teaching techniques than on developing empathy and self-reflection (Akbar, 2021). Therefore, developing the capacity of educators must be a priority for investment.

According to previous research, an effective solution is to adopt a co-design curriculum model that involves teachers, students, parents, and the community as co-designers. Participatory action research by (Shodikin et al., 2024) shows that the process of collaboratively designing learning units on “local wisdom” actually builds a sense of ownership and shared responsibility for the learning process. For example, students are involved in choosing project themes and negotiating assessment criteria with their teachers. Analysis of this action shows that active participation in curriculum design itself is a manifestation of love and appreciation for the voices of all parties (Hermansyah et al., 2020). The top-down model from the central government is still considered necessary by some studies to maintain national standards and prevent disparities (Pambudi, 2022). However, strong findings show that sustainability lies in a participatory and contextual design process.

A concrete action that must be taken immediately is to start a pilot project or demonstration school that implements a comprehensive love-based curriculum, equipped with a rigorous documentation and evaluation system. This step is in line with the recommendations for the gradual implementation of curriculum innovation put forward by (Zahroh et al., 2025) in their theory of innovation diffusion. This pilot project can be started in schools that already have strong teacher social capital and a

commitment to experimentation, such as several Sekolah Penggerak (Agency Schools) under the Merdeka Belajar (Freedom of Learning) program. This action analysis is important to produce contextual evidence in Indonesia about the impact of the curriculum, while also developing good practices that can be replicated. A policy approach that waits for a perfect framework from the center before acting will actually slow down the necessary changes (Oktavia et al., 2021). Therefore, the momentum of curriculum autonomy in the Merdeka Curriculum must be utilized for real action at the grassroots level.

The main limitation of this study is that the arguments are based more on theoretical analysis and qualitative research findings, which require further confirmation through large-scale longitudinal studies in Indonesia. The methodological limitations of the previous studies synthesized also affect the strength of the generalization of the recommendations produced (Krisnawwati et al., 2022). The novelty of this article lies in its multidisciplinary integration efforts that connect critical education theory, neuroscience, and curriculum science to build an argument for a “love-based curriculum,” as well as efforts to operationalize it in the context of the current Indonesian curriculum policy. An analysis of novelty shows that this integrative approach can open up a new, more holistic discourse in responding to dehumanization (Sari et al., 2025). Critics may argue that this kind of integration risks being overly ambitious and lacking focus (Lubis et al., 2022). Nevertheless, this article contributes by offering a coherent conceptual roadmap that challenges established curriculum paradigms.

CONCLUSION

Based on the synthesis of results and discussion, a love-based curriculum is a paradigmatic solution to overcome the dehumanization of education by reconnecting cognitive and emotional fragmentation in learning. The theory of “Curricular Loving” asserts that love must be a structural design principle, not just a personal attitude, which is manifested in goals, pedagogy, and assessment. Its practical implementation can be seen in pilot schools that have replaced threatening

assessments with community-based collaborative projects, making students feel valued. Analysis through the lens of neuroscience reinforces the evidence that this approach creates a secure psychological foundation that supports the optimal functioning of the prefrontal cortex for complex thinking. Human capital theory may criticize this approach as lacking directly measurable economic impact. However, it can be concluded that the effectiveness of holistic learning can only be achieved when the curriculum recognizes and nurtures the humanity of learners.

The main recommendation for further research is to design and test a contextualized love-based curriculum model through exploratory and research and development (R&D) studies in various types of schools in Indonesia. Rogers' (2020) theory of innovation diffusion suggests the need for observable and replicable pilot projects to accelerate the adoption of curricular innovations. For example, collaborative action research can be conducted at Sekolah Penggerak (School of Change) to design modules that integrate “Pedagogi Hati” into the Kurikulum Merdeka (Independent Curriculum) project. Previous needs analysis confirms that this kind of empirical testing is crucial to produce the tools and operational guidelines that teachers need. A purely top-down policy approach may consider this step slow, but evidence-based reform requires strong evidence before national scaling. Therefore, this recommendation emphasizes the importance of building contextual empirical evidence as the foundation for broad and sustainable curriculum transformation.

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