

BRIDGING WELFARE-BASED EDUCATION BETWEEN FINLAND
AND INDONESIA: TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS, EXPERIENCES,
AND READINESS IN THE ERA OF MERDEKA BELAJAR

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Article Info	Abstrak
<p>Article history:</p> <p>Received July 15, 2025 Revised July 28, 2025 Accepted July 31, 2025</p> <hr/> <p>Kata Kunci:</p> <p>Welfare-based education, <i>Merdeka Belajar</i>, Teacher well-being, Finnish education model, Ki Hajar Dewantara</p>	<p>This study investigates Indonesian teachers’ perceptions, experiences, and readiness in implementing welfare-based teaching strategies inspired by the Finnish educational model and contextualized through Ki Hajar Dewantara’s philosophy. Using a qualitative multiple case study approach, five teachers from junior and senior high schools in West Nusa Tenggara and Java participated through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis revealed three key findings: (1) teachers conceptually recognize the importance of welfare in fostering emotional safety, autonomy, and motivation; (2) some welfare-oriented practices, such as brain breaks and student-friendly interactions, have been partially adopted, but teacher self-care remains neglected; and (3) readiness to fully implement welfare-based pedagogy is constrained by structural barriers, including policy pressures, heavy curriculum demands, and limited institutional support. These findings underscore the gap between aspirational reforms like <i>Merdeka Belajar</i> and the practical realities of classroom implementation. To achieve transformative change, policies must embed teacher well-being, curriculum flexibility, and localized pedagogical support. This study contributes actionable insights for aligning global best practices with Indonesia’s educational reform agenda.</p> <p>Copyright © 2025 STKIP Paracendekia NW Sumbawa. All rights reserved.</p>

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Indonesia's education system has been undergoing a significant transformation through the "*Merdeka Belajar*" (Freedom to Learn) initiative launched by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. The policy, spearheaded by Nadiem Makarim since 2019, seeks to decentralize curriculum management, empower teachers, and foster student-centered learning environments that support holistic development and creativity (Irhamisyah, 2023; Tabroni et al., 2022). However, its implementation has encountered various challenges, including teachers’ limited understanding of its pedagogical philosophy and the practical implications of learner autonomy and well-being (Zainiansyah et al., 2024).

In contrast, Finland's globally admired education system integrates core values of *welfare*, *freedom*, and *happiness* into classroom practice—principles also echoed in the Merdeka Belajar vision. Timothy D. Walker, an American educator teaching in Finland, encapsulates these values in his book *Teaching Like Finland*, offering concrete strategies that foster well-being among students and teachers alike (Walker, 2017). These include brain breaks, emotional safety, professional autonomy, and prioritizing joy in the learning process. Finland's success is attributed to its emphasis on student welfare, teacher empowerment, and egalitarian educational philosophy, all grounded in sustainable, research-backed classroom practices (Yustiani et al., 2024; Hailitik, 2024).

Although the Indonesian education system shares philosophical roots with Finland—particularly through the educational thoughts of Ki Hajar Dewantara—the translation of these ideals into daily classroom practice remains limited. Dewantara's foundational principle, *Tut Wuri Handayani* ("to guide from behind"), aligns closely with the Finnish notion of fostering student independence through compassionate teaching (Hailitik, 2024). However, current instructional practices in Indonesia continue to reflect teacher-centered approaches, heavy curriculum loads, and performance-oriented assessments, which limit the cultivation of welfare-based learning environments (Retno Susanti et al., 2024).

The concept of *welfare in education*—defined here as the creation of emotionally safe, motivating, and meaningful learning conditions for both students and teachers—is increasingly recognized as central to educational effectiveness. In the Finnish model, student welfare and teacher well-being are not treated as secondary concerns but as the foundation of academic success and personal growth. When compared to the Indonesian context, this reveals a gap between policy aspiration and classroom-level readiness.

This study aims to analyze the perceptions, experiences, and readiness of Indonesian teachers in implementing welfare-based teaching strategies inspired by Walker's Finnish approach. It further explores how these practices align with or diverge from the ideals of Merdeka Belajar. By examining how teachers interpret and apply principles of student welfare, this study seeks to uncover the cognitive and structural barriers that hinder effective reform and provide insights into localizing global best practices within the Indonesian educational landscape.

Theoretical Framework

A strong theoretical foundation is essential for understanding how educational philosophy influences teaching practice. This study draws upon three interrelated frameworks: (1) the Finnish welfare-based education model as articulated by Timothy D. Walker, (2) the philosophical educational doctrines of Ki Hajar Dewantara, and (3) student-centered pedagogical theories that emphasize autonomy, emotional well-being, and professional teacher agency.

Welfare-Based Education: Finnish Perspective

Finland's education system is globally recognized for placing student and teacher welfare at the core of its pedagogical design. According to Walker (2017), *welfare in education* encompasses physical comfort, psychological safety, professional autonomy, and a balance between academic rigor and personal well-being. His model, outlined in *Teaching Like Finland*, emphasizes strategies such as brain breaks, minimalistic classroom design, teacher "recharge time", and fostering student

independence—practices linked to increased student engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes.

Finnish education aligns with the *well-being theory* in positive psychology, suggesting that happiness, autonomy, and competence are prerequisites for effective learning (Seligman, 2011). Moreover, studies confirm that Finnish strategies are associated with high academic achievement without the stress-laden pressures found in many other countries (Hailitik, 2024).

Ki Hajar Dewantara's Educational Philosophy

The philosophical underpinnings of Indonesian education are deeply rooted in the teachings of Ki Hajar Dewantara, the father of Indonesian education. His educational triad—*Ing Ngarsa Sung Tuladha* (leading by example), *Ing Madya Mangun Karsa* (engaging alongside), and *Tut Wuri Handayani* (supporting from behind)—promotes moral leadership, participatory learning, and learner autonomy (Irawati et al., 2022). These principles mirror Finland's emphasis on mutual respect, student empowerment, and holistic growth.

Dewantara's *Among system* integrates ethics, emotional development, and freedom, asserting that education should guide rather than command. His “free spirit education theory” advocates intrinsic motivation and balance between cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains (Niyarci, 2022). These values resonate with the Finnish emphasis on non-coercive, empathetic, and individualized education.

Recent scholarship highlights the compatibility between Dewantara's vision and modern practices like Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL), which adapts instruction based on students' developmental readiness—a philosophy that mirrors both Walker's adaptive strategies and Dewantara's personalized learning ideals (Putri & Siswanto, 2024).

Student-Centered Learning and Emotional Pedagogy

Modern educational theory also emphasizes learner agency, emotional well-being, and flexible instruction. Student-centered learning approaches assert that students are active constructors of knowledge, requiring autonomy, competence, and relatedness to thrive (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Welfare-based education enhances student performance by ensuring emotional safety, minimizing cognitive overload, and reinforcing intrinsic motivation.

In the Indonesian context, scholars argue that implementing such student-centered paradigms requires rethinking rigid, exam-focused systems in favor of creativity, collaboration, and happiness in learning (Hailitik, 2024; Zainiansyah et al., 2024). The convergence of these global and local theories offers a compelling framework for evaluating Indonesian teachers' readiness to apply welfare-based strategies.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design using a multiple case study approach to explore Indonesian teachers' perceptions, experiences, and readiness in applying welfare-based teaching strategies. This method was chosen to capture the complexity and depth of teacher beliefs

and behaviors within their natural contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The case study approach allows for cross-case analysis to explore variation among teachers from different regions and educational levels (Maulana, 2022).

Qualitative methods are especially appropriate for investigating values, beliefs, and practices—particularly in the context of emerging educational paradigms like Merdeka Belajar and welfare-based education. By using both semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, this study aimed to generate rich, triangulated data across individual cases (Rakhmania et al., 2024; Sipayung & Hsu, 2023).

Participants

Participants included five teachers from junior and senior high schools across West Nusa Tenggara and Java, selected using purposive sampling. Criteria for selection included: a minimum of three years of teaching experience, familiarity with the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, and willingness to participate in interviews and questionnaires. Three participants were further selected for in-depth interviews to provide narrative depth. All participants were anonymized using code identifiers (e.g., T1, T2) to protect confidentiality.

Data Collection

Data were collected over a three-week period through two main instruments. Questionnaires (Google Forms) was used to collect demographic data and perceptions about welfare-based education. Semi-structured interviews (via WhatsApp and Google Meet) was designed to explore teachers' understanding, practices, and challenges related to implementing welfare strategies. Interview protocols were guided by key themes derived from Walker's (2017) *Teach Like Finland* and Dewantara's educational philosophy. Questions focused on areas such as emotional safety, instructional freedom, and alignment with Merdeka Belajar values. The interviews ranged from 30 to 45 minutes and were audio-recorded with participant consent.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step method, enabling the identification of recurring patterns across cases. Initial codes were derived both inductively from raw data and deductively from the theoretical framework. NVivo software was not used, but coding was conducted manually in Excel spreadsheets. Themes were verified through cross-case comparison and reflective memoing.

To enhance trustworthiness, the following measures were applied: (1) Triangulation between questionnaire and interview data, (2) Member checking during follow-up interviews, and (3) Peer debriefing with two qualitative research experts for external validation.

Ethical Considerations

The study received informed consent from all participants. Ethical safeguards included anonymity, voluntary participation, and data security. While this study was not affiliated with a formal institutional ethics board, it followed general ethical standards for social science research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the thematic findings from questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with five Indonesian teachers. Three major themes emerged from the data analysis: (1) Understanding of Welfare in Education, (2) Experience of Welfare-Based Practices, and (3) Readiness to Implement Welfare Strategies. These themes are aligned with the theoretical constructs from Walker's (2017) welfare principles and Dewantara's learner-centered education model.

Understanding of Welfare in Education

All five teachers expressed general awareness of the concept of student welfare, associating it with emotional safety, motivation, and a non-coercive learning environment. However, there was inconsistency in their understanding of how teacher welfare intersects with student outcomes.

"I know students should be comfortable, but I never thought about my own welfare affecting them," (T3, interview).

This indicates a cognitive gap similar to findings in Priskila Purba et al. (2024), which noted that Indonesian teachers often dissociate their well-being from teaching quality due to systemic pressure and workload.

Experience of Welfare-Based Practices

Despite limited formal training, some elements of Walker's (2017) welfare strategies were present in practice. These included breaks during lessons, creating student-friendly environments, and informal teacher-student communication.

Table 1. Teacher Practices Aligned with Walker's Welfare Principles

Welfare Practice	No. of Teachers Applying
Brain breaks	4
Emotional check-ins	2
Professional autonomy	1
Student independence	3
Teacher self-care	0

Most teachers emphasized student-centered efforts but neglected their own well-being. As Sowiyah & Perdana (2022) and Hailitik (2024) argue, a holistic welfare framework should address both student and teacher needs.

Readiness to Implement Welfare-Based Strategies

Teachers showed mixed readiness to adopt welfare-based pedagogy fully. They cited barriers such as lack of institutional support, overloaded curriculum, and confusion over Merdeka Belajar implementation.

"We are told to be independent but also must follow a heavy academic schedule," (T1, interview).

This mirrors tensions observed in earlier studies on curriculum reform and well-being (Sipayung & Hsu, 2023), where teachers embraced the idea of autonomy but were constrained by rigid school routines.

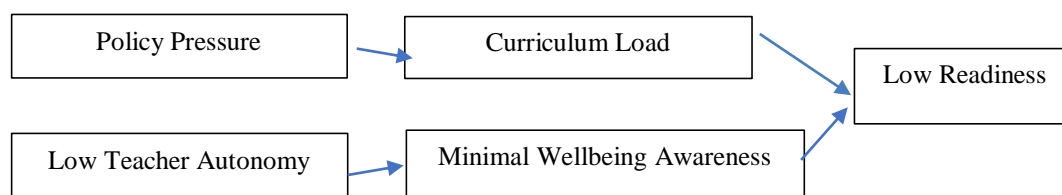


Figure 1. Conceptual Map of Barriers to Welfare-Based Teaching

Aligning Practice with Philosophy

The findings suggest a gap between teachers' conceptual endorsement of welfare and their operational capacity to apply it. While their intentions resonate with both Finnish practices and Dewantara's ideals (Irawati et al., 2022), implementation is hindered by structural and cultural constraints.

The absence of teacher-focused welfare strategies, in particular, highlights a critical blind spot. As emphasized by Purba et al. (2024), professional well-being directly affects motivation, student engagement, and instructional creativity. To bridge the readiness gap, teacher development programs must integrate welfare literacy and emotional pedagogy, encourage reflective practice, and embed Dewantara's "Among" values into daily routines (Niyarci, 2022). Finally, the *Merdeka Belajar* policy must move beyond slogans and offer teachers actionable frameworks to align philosophical vision with practice.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored Indonesian teachers' perceptions, experiences, and readiness in applying welfare-based teaching strategies inspired by *Teaching Like Finland* and contextualized through Ki Hajar Dewantara's educational philosophy. The findings revealed a conceptual alignment between the teachers' values and the principles of student well-being and autonomy. However, a critical implementation gap persists—teachers focus on student-centeredness while neglecting their own welfare, and struggle to operationalize these ideals within the constraints of a rigid curriculum and institutional expectations.

Despite a general understanding of the importance of emotional safety, motivation, and autonomy in the classroom, teacher readiness remains limited. Most participants had partially implemented practices such as brain breaks and informal communication but lacked structural support, autonomy, and training. These constraints reflect systemic tensions between aspirational reform (e.g., *Merdeka Belajar*) and the everyday realities of Indonesian classrooms.

The study confirms the urgent need for localized and practical frameworks to translate policy vision into pedagogical practice. Without simultaneous attention to teacher well-being and structural conditions, welfare-based education will remain aspirational rather than transformative. Based on the findings, the following strategic actions are recommended to improve the integration of welfare-based strategies in Indonesian education:

1. Embed Welfare Literacy in Teacher Training: Teacher education programs must include explicit modules on student and teacher welfare, grounded in both Finnish practices and Dewantara's humanistic values. These should cover emotional regulation, psychological safety, and sustainable workload practices (Walker, 2017; Irawati et al., 2022).
2. Institutionalize Teacher Well-being Policies: Schools should formally recognize teacher well-being as a performance indicator. Support mechanisms such as emotional support groups, well-being workshops, and workload management systems are essential (Purba et al., 2024).
3. Realign Curriculum Flexibility with Pedagogical Autonomy: The *Merdeka Belajar* policy should be operationalized with concrete guidelines that allow teachers to customize content delivery and assessment strategies. This includes time for reflection, innovation, and collaboration (Sipayung & Hsu, 2023).
4. Foster Cross-cultural Pedagogical Exchange: More structured efforts are needed to translate global insights (e.g., Finland's welfare model) into culturally adaptive tools for Indonesian classrooms. Action research and teacher-led innovation hubs may help localize these strategies effectively (Hailitik, 2024).
5. Prioritize Policy-Driven Support Systems: Policy stakeholders should develop metrics that assess both implementation and the psychological readiness of teachers. These metrics should go beyond content delivery to evaluate motivation, professional agency, and emotional resilience.
6. Empowering teachers to care for themselves while nurturing students is not a peripheral concern—it is foundational to educational reform. Welfare-based education, when grounded in local wisdom and supported structurally, can reshape classrooms into spaces of joy, autonomy, and mutual respect.

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