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The Relevance of John Locke's Thoughts to the Development of Empiricism-Based History Learning in the Era of Independent Learning

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relevance of John Locke's empiricism as a philosophical foundation for developing contextual and reflective history learning in the era of Merdeka Belajar. The research responds to the persistent dominance of memorization-oriented history learning, which limits students' critical thinking and historical awareness despite contemporary educational demands that emphasize active, student-centered learning. This study aims to analyze how Locke's concepts of *tabula rasa*, sensation, and reflection contribute conceptually to the development of inquiry-oriented and meaningful history learning. The study employed a qualitative, philosophical library research approach, using Locke's major philosophical works as primary sources and contemporary literature on the philosophy of education, history education, inquiry learning, and Merdeka Belajar as secondary sources. Data analysis was conducted through data reduction, conceptual categorization, interpretive analysis, and constructive synthesis. The findings indicate that Locke's empiricism strengthens the ontological, epistemological, and axiological foundations of history learning by emphasizing evidence-based reasoning, reflective inquiry, and active knowledge construction. The study also finds that empiricism-based learning supports inquiry-based, project-based, and authentic-source analysis, as well as reflective assessment practices relevant to the objectives of Merdeka Belajar. Therefore, Locke's empiricism provides both a conceptual contribution to the philosophy of history education and practical implications for developing more critical, contextual, and meaningful history learning in contemporary Indonesian education.

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4678

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1. INTRODUCTION

The transformation of education in the 21st century requires a shift from teacher-centered knowledge transmission to student-centered knowledge construction, emphasizing critical thinking, reflection, and contextual understanding. In Indonesia, this transformation has been strengthened through the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar policy, which promotes independent learning, inquiry, project-based activities, and character development. However, history learning practices in schools still tend to rely on narrative-descriptive approaches that focus heavily on memorization of facts, dates, and figures. As a consequence, students often experience difficulties in developing historical thinking skills, including source analysis, interpretation, and contextual reflection on historical events [1], [2], [3], [4].

The problem becomes increasingly complex in the digital era, where students are exposed to abundant historical information on social media, online platforms, and other digital content that is not always academically verified. This condition requires students to possess strong historical literacy and critical reasoning skills in order to evaluate competing narratives and avoid misinformation. Nevertheless, history learning that still prioritizes memorization often fails to provide students with an adequate epistemological foundation for dealing with the complexity of digital historical information [5], [6]. In practice, although the curriculum has encouraged inquiry-based and project-based learning, many teachers still encounter obstacles in implementing learner-centered approaches optimally. These obstacles include limited pedagogical training, administrative burdens, and insufficient philosophical understanding regarding the nature of knowledge and the learning process itself [7], [8]. Consequently, the challenges of history education are not merely technical but also philosophical.

In this context, John Locke's empiricism becomes highly relevant to revisit. Locke argued that human knowledge is acquired through experience and reflection rather than innate ideas. Through his concept of *tabula rasa*, Locke viewed the human mind as a blank slate shaped by interaction with the environment and learning experiences [9], [10], [11]. This perspective provides an important philosophical foundation for history learning because historical understanding is fundamentally constructed through interaction with evidence, interpretation of sources, and reflective reasoning. Therefore, history learning should not merely transfer historical facts but engage students in investigative and reflective processes that allow them to construct historical understanding actively. When applied to history learning, Locke's empiricism supports inquiry-oriented learning in which students analyze documents, archives, artifacts, and local historical sources as part of meaningful intellectual experiences [12], [13]. However, current pedagogical practices still show that the principles of empiricism have not been fully integrated into history education. Learning activities remain dominated by textbooks as the primary source of truth, while the use of authentic sources, field studies, and reflective projects remains limited [14], [15].

Several previous studies have examined inquiry-based learning and experiential learning in history education. Research inspired by Peter Seixas emphasizes the importance of historical thinking and source analysis in improving students' critical reasoning skills.

Other studies influenced by John Dewey highlight the effectiveness of project-based learning in increasing student participation and motivation. Meanwhile, studies on John Locke's educational philosophy generally discuss empiricism, *tabula rasa*, and character formation in broader educational contexts [16], [17], [18], [19]. In addition, other scholars explain that Locke's empiricism emphasizes rational reflection and experience as the basis for human knowledge and educational development [20], [21]. However, these studies have not specifically analyzed the relevance of Locke's empiricism as an ontological, epistemological, and axiological foundation for the learning of history within the framework of Merdeka Belajar. This gap indicates the need for a more focused philosophical study that directly connects Locke's ideas to the contemporary challenges of history education in Indonesia.

Another important issue in history learning is the low level of students' historical awareness. Historical awareness refers to the ability to connect the past, present, and future through reflective understanding. Without experience-oriented and reflective learning approaches, history education cannot function optimally as a medium for character formation and the development of national identity. In multicultural and democratic societies, critical and inclusive historical understanding is also essential for strengthening social cohesion and preventing identity-based conflicts [22], [23]. Therefore, strengthening the philosophical foundation of history learning becomes increasingly important in responding to the intellectual and moral challenges of the contemporary era.

Based on these conditions, this study aims to analyze the relevance of John Locke's empiricism to the development of history learning in the era of Merdeka Belajar. The research specifically addresses the following questions: (1) how are Locke's concepts of empiricism and *tabula rasa* relevant to the philosophical foundations of history learning, and (2) how can Locke's ideas contribute conceptually to the development of contextual and reflective history learning models in contemporary education? By answering these questions, this study seeks to formulate a conceptual framework that integrates experience and reflection into history learning practices.

This study argues that Locke's empiricism can provide a strong philosophical basis for inquiry-based and experience-oriented history learning. By integrating source analysis, historical investigation, reflective discussion, and project-based activities, students can more effectively develop historical awareness, critical literacy, and rational thinking skills. Furthermore, this research is expected to contribute theoretically to the development of the philosophy of history education in Indonesia and practically to the improvement of history learning models, teaching strategies, and teacher training in the context of educational transformation. Thus, revisiting Locke's philosophical framework is important not only for strengthening the theoretical foundation of history education but also for responding to contemporary educational challenges in the digital and Merdeka Belajar era.

2. METHOD

This study aims to analyze the relevance of John Locke's empiricism to the development of history learning in the era of Merdeka Belajar. The research employs a qualitative approach, combining a literature review with conceptual-philosophical analysis,

4680

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because it focuses on reconstructing Locke's philosophical ideas as a foundation for contextual and reflective history learning [24], [25]. The sources used in this study were divided into primary and secondary sources. The primary sources consisted of John Locke's major philosophical works, especially *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, as well as studies discussing empiricism, sensation, reflection, and *tabula rasa*. Meanwhile, the secondary sources consisted of contemporary literature related to philosophy of education, history learning, inquiry-based learning, historical literacy, and the implementation of Merdeka Belajar. Data collection was conducted through a structured literature review using Sciencedirect, Google Scholar, Crossref, ResearchGate, books, and accredited journals accessed from October 6, 2025, to January 30, 2026. The literature selection process applied several inclusion criteria, namely articles discussing Locke's educational philosophy, empiricism, history learning, inquiry learning, reflective learning, and educational transformation published between 2014 and 2026. Articles lacking relevance, academic credibility, or conceptual relation to the study focus were excluded. Through this screening procedure, 65 relevant references were selected for analysis [26], [27], [28], [29].

The study used content analysis, conceptual synthesis, and philosophical interpretation to examine the relevance of Locke's empiricism to contemporary history education [30]. The analysis process was conducted through several stages, including data reduction by selecting concepts related to empiricism, inquiry, reflection, and history learning; conceptual categorization into ontological, epistemological, and axiological dimensions; interpretive analysis to examine the relevance of Locke's philosophical ideas to educational issues in the Merdeka Belajar era; and constructive synthesis to formulate a conceptual framework for empiricism-based history learning. To strengthen methodological rigor, the interpretation process was validated through repeated cross-reading of Locke's primary works and contemporary educational literature to ensure conceptual consistency and minimize subjective bias. Through this process, the study seeks to produce a systematic, academically grounded conceptual formulation of the relevance of John Locke's thought to the development of contemporary history learning.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. The Relevance of John Locke's Concept of Empiricism to the Philosophical Foundations of History Learning

The findings of this study suggest that John Locke's empiricism provides a strong philosophical foundation for the development of reflective, inquiry-oriented history learning. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke rejects innate ideas and argues that knowledge is formed through sensation and reflection. Human understanding develops gradually through interaction with the environment, making experience the central element in the learning process [31], [32]. This perspective is highly relevant to history education because historical understanding is not simply obtained from memorizing narratives, but from analyzing evidence, interpreting sources, and reflecting critically on historical events.

Ontologically, history concerns the reconstruction of past realities through traces such as archives, documents, artifacts, maps, and testimonies. Epistemologically, historical

knowledge is constructed through interpretation, source criticism, and analytical reasoning. Axiologically, history learning aims to build historical awareness, social responsibility, and national identity. Therefore, Locke's empiricism strengthens the idea that history learning must place students as active participants in the construction of knowledge rather than passive recipients of information [33], [34]. In practical terms, teachers can implement this principle by involving students in document analysis, local history investigations, and comparative interpretation activities. For example, students may be asked to compare several historical accounts of the Indonesian Proclamation of Independence and identify differences in perspective and bias. Such activities encourage analytical thinking and evidence-based reasoning [35].

Ontologically, history, as a reconstruction of the past, requires an empirical approach. Locke's empiricism emphasizes the importance of sensory experience as the basis of ideas. In a historical context, this "experience" can be realized through direct interaction with documents, archives, artifacts, maps, or visual recordings. Although students cannot experience the past directly, they can engage in the process of historical investigation using available evidence. This process creates an authentic and meaningful intellectual experience [36], [37].

Axiologically, history learning aims to shape critical awareness and social responsibility. Locke's empiricism, which emphasizes rational reflection, provides space for character education grounded in reasoning, not indoctrination. When students are invited to reflect on the values of struggle, justice, or democracy through the analysis of historical events, they do not simply accept these values as dogma; they understand them through a process of reflection. This is the essence of liberating and humanistic education [20], [38]. Strengthening the philosophical foundation of history learning also requires a shift in teachers' paradigms. In the transmissive tradition, teachers are positioned as the sole source of truth. However, within the empiricist framework, teachers act as facilitators of learning experiences. They design situations that enable students to explore, question, and reflect.

The conceptual findings also show that Locke's empiricism is closely connected to the historical inquiry approach. Inquiry learning encourages students to formulate questions, gather evidence, analyze sources, and draw independent conclusions. This process reflects Locke's concepts of sensation and reflection, in which knowledge is gradually formed through investigation and rational analysis [39], [40], [41]. In classroom practice, inquiry-based learning may include activities such as examining colonial archives, interpreting historical photographs, conducting oral history interviews, or creating historical timelines from primary data. Through these activities, students experience the process of historical investigation directly, making learning more meaningful and contextual.

In the digital era, Locke's empiricism also becomes relevant in strengthening historical literacy. The abundance of information on social media and digital platforms often exposes students to biased or unverified historical narratives. Empiricism encourages skepticism based on evidence and logical reflection, enabling students to evaluate information critically before accepting it as truth [5], [21], [42]. However, the implementation of empiricism-based history learning also faces several limitations. Locke's empiricism tends to emphasize rational and sensory experience, while emotional, cultural,

and social dimensions of learning may receive less attention. In addition, not all schools in Indonesia possess equal access to archives, digital technology, or historical learning resources. Many teachers still struggle to implement inquiry-oriented learning due to curriculum pressure, administrative burdens, limited training, and inadequate school facilities. Consequently, although empiricism provides a strong philosophical framework, its practical application requires institutional support, teacher readiness, and contextual adaptation to local educational conditions.

Another conceptual implication identified in this study is the transformation of the teacher's role. Within the empiricism framework, teachers function not as the sole source of truth but as facilitators who guide students in constructing knowledge through investigation and reflection [43], [44], [45]. This shift supports the spirit of participatory and dialogical learning promoted in the Merdeka Belajar policy. Nevertheless, the transition from transmissive teaching traditions to reflective and inquiry-based learning remains challenging for many educators. Some teachers are still accustomed to textbook-centered instruction and struggle to design interactive learning experiences. Therefore, strengthening teachers' competence through pedagogical training and professional development is essential for effectively implementing empirically based history learning.

The conceptual findings demonstrate that Locke's empiricism is relevant to strengthening the ontological, epistemological, and axiological foundations of history learning. The principles of experience, evidence, reflection, and rational inquiry support the development of history education that is critical, participatory, and contextual. However, implementing these principles requires a balanced consideration of practical educational realities, including teacher preparedness, curriculum structure, technological access, and institutional support in Indonesian schools.

The concept of *tabula rasa* has egalitarian implications in education. Every individual has the potential to develop through the right experiences. In history learning, this means that teachers must create inclusive, diverse learning opportunities so that all students can build understanding at their own pace. A learning environment rich in discussion, local history projects, field studies, and document analysis is a concrete means of actualizing this principle [46], [47]. By strengthening the ontological, epistemological, and axiological foundations of history learning, it can be asserted that John

Locke's empiricism is both relevant and fundamental to the formulation of the paradigm of modern history education. It provides a theoretical basis that affirms that historical knowledge is constructed through experience and reflection; that historical truth is argumentative and evidence-based; and that history education must shape individuals who are critical, rational, and responsible. Therefore, integrating Locke's concept of empiricism into history education is not merely an attempt to adopt a classical theory, but a strategic step to strengthen the philosophical foundations of history education. With this foundation, history education can move from mere memorization to a process of forming a deep historical consciousness, while also responding to the intellectual and moral challenges of contemporary society.

3.2. The Conceptual Implications of John Locke's Thought on History Learning Models in the Era of Independent Learning

The findings of this study conceptually show that John Locke's empiricism has important implications for the development of history learning models in the era of Merdeka Belajar. The Merdeka Belajar policy emphasizes flexibility, student independence, creativity, and learner-centered education, which are fundamentally aligned with Locke's view that knowledge develops through experience and reflection [48], [49], [50]. In this framework, history learning should no longer focus solely on the transmission of historical facts, but rather on facilitating intellectual exploration and active meaning-making.

One important implication is the shift from transmissive learning to constructive learning. Students are encouraged to build understanding independently through interaction with historical sources and social realities. In practice, teachers can design learning activities such as historical debates, role-playing simulations, local history projects, museum observations, and analysis of digital archives [51], [52], [53]. For instance, students may conduct a small-scale research project about local historical sites in their communities and present their findings through digital storytelling or documentary videos. Such activities provide meaningful learning experiences while strengthening communication and collaboration skills.

The study also identifies inquiry-based learning as one of the most relevant pedagogical models within Locke's empiricism. Inquiry learning reflects the processes of sensation and reflection, as students actively investigate historical problems before forming conclusions. Rather than simply listening to lectures about historical events, students engage in analytical processes such as evaluating sources, comparing interpretations, and formulating arguments based on evidence [54]. This model is particularly relevant to Merdeka Belajar's objectives because it promotes higher-order thinking skills and independent learning habits.

Another conceptual implication concerns project-based learning and authentic assessment. Locke's emphasis on experience supports the use of historical projects that integrate knowledge, skills, and attitudes simultaneously. In history education, projects may involve creating local history exhibitions, producing podcasts about historical figures, or reconstructing historical events using multimedia platforms [55], [56], [57]. Correspondingly, assessment should not focus only on factual memorization but also on analytical abilities, creativity, collaboration, and reflective thinking. Forms of authentic assessment may include project portfolios, reflective essays, presentations, and source analysis reports [58].

The fourth implication relates to the role of teachers as facilitators. In the empiricism paradigm, teachers are not absolute authorities who determine the truth, but rather guides who provide learning experiences. The Era of Independent Learning requires teachers to be flexible and adaptable in designing learning experiences tailored to student needs. History teachers need to create an open space for dialogue, encourage critical discussion, and respect diversity of perspectives. This approach is in line with Locke's spirit of rationality, which places reflection as the main means of acquiring knowledge [59]. The fifth implication lies in the learning evaluation system. If knowledge is acquired through a process of experience

4684

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and reflection, then evaluation should not only measure the final result in the form of memorized facts.

Technology integration also becomes an important implication of empiricism-based history learning. Digital archives, virtual museums, online historical databases, and documentary media can enrich students' learning experiences and provide broader access to historical evidence [49]. However, technology integration still faces implementation barriers in Indonesia. Unequal internet access, limited digital infrastructure, and disparities between urban and rural schools can hinder the implementation of innovative history-learning models. In addition, some teachers still lack digital literacy and experience difficulties integrating technology into inquiry-oriented pedagogy. Therefore, educational transformation requires not only conceptual change but also infrastructural and institutional support.

Furthermore, the study finds that Locke's empiricism contributes to strengthening historical awareness and character education. Through reflective analysis of historical events, students can develop values such as tolerance, democracy, justice, and social responsibility without relying on indoctrination [60], [61]. Nevertheless, empiricism also has limitations, as excessive emphasis on rational experience may overlook the emotional and cultural dimensions that are equally important in history education. Consequently, empiricism-based learning should be integrated with contextual, cultural, and humanistic approaches to ensure balanced educational development.

The conceptual findings indicate that Locke's empiricism provides a relevant theoretical foundation for developing active, inquiry-based, reflective, and contextual history learning in the era of Merdeka Belajar. Its implementation encourages paradigm shifts in learning orientation, teacher roles, assessment systems, technology integration, and character education. However, successful implementation depends on teacher readiness, curriculum flexibility, infrastructure support, and the ability to adapt philosophical principles to the diverse realities of Indonesian education.

Furthermore, the conceptual implications of Locke's empiricism support a differentiated approach to learning. The concept of tabula rasa asserts that individuals develop through diverse experiences. Therefore, teachers need to provide a variety of learning strategies to meet students' needs and learning styles. In history learning, these variations can take the form of group discussions, simulations, historical debates, or visual media. This diversity of experiences allows each student to build knowledge at their own pace [62].

In the context of Merdeka Belajar, curriculum flexibility provides teachers with space to develop pedagogical innovations. Locke's thinking can be the conceptual basis for designing a history curriculum that is not only content-oriented but also focused on the process of knowledge formation. The curriculum needs to provide space for exploration, independent research, and the development of higher-order thinking skills. Thus, history learning is no longer a static subject but rather a dynamic and contextual one [63]. Overall, the conceptual implications of John Locke's thinking on historical learning models in the Merdeka Belajar era include paradigm shifts, experience-based learning designs, shifts in

the role of teachers, the development of authentic evaluation, technology integration, and character building through rational reflection.

Locke's empiricism provides a solid theoretical foundation for building active, critical, and meaningful historical learning. By integrating the principles of experience and reflection into pedagogical practices, history learning can be transformed into a liberating and empowering process. Students become not only memorizers of facts but also individuals who can understand, interpret, and learn from the past to face future challenges. It is within this framework that Locke's thinking finds its actualization in contemporary history education, particularly in the spirit of Merdeka Belajar, which places freedom of thought and independence in learning at the core of educational transformation.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that John Locke's empiricism provides a relevant philosophical foundation for the development of reflective, inquiry-based, and contextual history learning in the era of Merdeka Belajar. Locke's concepts of sensation, reflection, and *tabula rasa* conceptually support the transformation of history education from memorization-oriented learning into a process emphasizing evidence analysis, historical interpretation, critical reasoning, and active student participation. The findings indicate that empiricism-based history learning is closely aligned with the objectives of Merdeka Belajar, particularly in promoting learner autonomy, historical literacy, authentic assessment, and critical thinking skills. Therefore, integrating Locke's empiricism contributes to strengthening the ontological, epistemological, and axiological foundations of history education in Indonesia. Practically, this study recommends that teachers develop more inquiry-oriented and participatory learning activities, curriculum developers strengthen contextual and source-based history learning designs, and educational policymakers improve teacher training and digital learning infrastructure to support innovative history education practices.

However, this study is limited by its conceptual nature and by its reliance on philosophical interpretation and literature analysis, without direct empirical classroom testing. In addition, differences in teacher readiness, educational facilities, and technological access across Indonesian schools were not examined comprehensively and may influence the implementation of empiricism-based learning in practice. Therefore, future research is recommended to conduct empirical implementation studies, classroom action research, comparative philosophical studies, and investigations into digital history learning to evaluate the practical effectiveness of empiricism-based history learning models across diverse educational contexts. Overall, this study enriches the discourse on the philosophy of history education while providing a conceptual foundation for developing more critical, reflective, and meaningful history learning in contemporary Indonesian education.

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