

Elementary School Teachers' Perceptions in Balikpapan on the Dynamics of Curriculum Changes in Indonesia

Reza June Sidiq

2111102421056@umkt.ac.id

Khusnul Khatimah

kk645@umkt.ac.id

Rani Herning Puspita

rhp546@umkt.ac.id

Universitas Muhammadiyah Kalimantan Timur

ABSTRACT

This study explores the perceptions of elementary school teachers in Balikpapan regarding the ongoing changes in Indonesia's national curriculum, focusing on the shift from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum. Frequent changes in the national curriculum have led to confusion and varied responses among educators, particularly in terms of instructional adaptation and professional readiness. The purpose of this research is to understand how teachers perceive these changes, what challenges they face in implementing the new curriculum, and the extent to which they feel supported through training and resources. This study employed a qualitative descriptive design, using semi-structured interviews and classroom observations to collect data from nine teachers selected through purposive sampling. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and develop categories based on participant responses. Findings reveal that while teachers generally view the Merdeka Curriculum positively emphasizing its flexibility, student-centered learning, and relevance to current needs they also report significant challenges related to limited training, unclear implementation guidelines, and mismatched support systems. These results contribute to a deeper understanding of how educational reforms are received at the grassroots level and underscore the importance of teacher involvement, practical training, and contextualized guidance in successful curriculum implementation.

Key words: Curriculum Reform; Merdeka Curriculum, Teacher Perception; Elementary Education

INTRODUCTION

Frequent curriculum changes in Indonesia have created confusion among educators and revealed systemic shortcomings in teacher preparation and institutional support. While curriculum reform is often intended to enhance educational quality and relevance, in practice, many teachers face uncertainty, inconsistent training, and misalignment between policy and classroom realities. This problem is

especially visible in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, introduced in 2022, which aims to promote flexibility, student-centered learning, and character development. However, these goals are often hindered by inadequate infrastructure, a lack of practical guidelines, and disparities in teacher readiness across regions.

The curriculum is central to the effectiveness of educational systems, acting not only as a structured guide for instructional activities but also as a framework that shapes students' learning experiences (Putri et al., 2023; Mulenga & Kabombwe, 2019). In Indonesia, the curriculum has undergone numerous revisions—from the 1947 Curriculum to the KTSP 2006, the 2013 Curriculum, and now the Merdeka Curriculum—reflecting shifts in political, cultural, and pedagogical priorities (Mukminin et al., 2019). However, each change is frequently introduced without comprehensive evaluation of previous models or adequate stakeholder involvement, leading to the perception that curriculum policy is politically driven and inconsistently implemented (Alhamuddin et al., 2020; Martaliana et al., 2021; Putri et al., 2023).

Recent qualitative studies have highlighted these issues. Wibowo et al., (2023) found that English teachers in public high schools struggle with implementing Merdeka Curriculum due to a lack of practical training. Alhamuddin et al., (2020) examined vocational teachers in Balikpapan and noted the importance of localized professional development to support reform. Keni Nurhayati and Samiati, (2018) emphasized that even with PPG (Professional Teacher Education), teachers often lack classroom-level coaching needed to apply innovative methods. Moulidyah et al., (2024) observed that without reflective supervision, pedagogical innovation under Merdeka remains inconsistent. These studies point to a national trend—but few have focused on how teachers in urban yet under-resourced regions like Balikpapan specifically experience curriculum change at the elementary level.

This study seeks to fill that gap by exploring how elementary school teachers in Balikpapan perceive the transition to the Merdeka Curriculum. While existing research has explored teacher readiness in broad terms, this study provides a localized, qualitative perspective that captures lived experiences, challenges, and institutional support from within schools. Using a qualitative descriptive design, the study aims to identify teachers' interpretations of curriculum reform, the challenges they face during implementation, and the extent of professional support available to them. The findings are intended to inform policy, training, and future research by amplifying teacher voices in one of Indonesia's key education reform zones.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous Related Study

Curriculum change in Indonesia has long been a central issue in educational research.

Hidayah et al., (2022) explored elementary teachers' experiences in Yogyakarta with the 2013 Curriculum and found that many educators felt anxiety and confusion due to insufficient training and support. This study is similar in its focus on teacher readiness, but it differs from the present research, which focuses on the Merdeka Curriculum and uses teachers in Balikpapan as the focal point.

Irawan et al., (2024) investigated teacher perceptions of curriculum reform and discovered a wide range of responses—some teachers welcomed innovation, while others felt overwhelmed by the structural changes. While both studies explore teacher interpretation of reform, the current research narrows its scope to elementary teachers in a specific urban region and emphasizes their support systems. Maba, (2017) emphasized that less-experienced teachers often remain in the "recognition phase" when trying to understand the content and application of new curricula. While Maba's study focuses on teacher expertise, the current study adds value by exploring not only readiness but also perception, institutional challenges, and contextual differences under the 2022 Merdeka Curriculum.

Keni Nurhayati & Samiati, (2018) found that English teachers often preferred the older KTSP 2006 curriculum due to its familiarity and simplicity, illustrating resistance to policy shifts. In contrast, this study focuses on broader curriculum perceptions across multiple subjects, not limited to English language instruction. Falikul Isbah, (2020) examined curriculum implementation in a vocational school (SMK Negeri 3 Balikpapan), emphasizing how localized teacher training influences reform success. Although aligned in setting (Balikpapan), this study contributes a new angle by addressing elementary schools, which face different pedagogical and structural challenges.

Taken together, these studies highlight that curriculum success is highly dependent on teacher readiness, training, perception, and local support systems. However, most existing research either focuses on older curricula (e.g., 2013 Curriculum) or different school levels. This study addresses the gap by providing qualitative insights from elementary teachers navigating the newly introduced Merdeka Curriculum in an urban Indonesian context.

Curriculum Change

Curriculum change is more than a policy shift; it involves a transformation in the philosophy, pedagogy, and structure of the education system. According to Sudarmo et al., (2021), curriculum change is complex and non-linear, requiring long-term support, experimentation, and systemic reform to be successful. In Indonesia, past reforms such as the 2013 Curriculum aimed to enhance character education and integrate cross-disciplinary competencies. However, they were often criticized for their rigid implementation and lack of clarity (Putri et al., 2023; Irawan et al., 2024). The more recent Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes teacher autonomy, project-based learning, and differentiated instruction. As Ben Gurion and Nasir, (2024) explain, it places teachers at the center of pedagogical innovation.

However, its success depends on whether teachers are empowered and equipped to navigate this flexibility effectively. This study uses curriculum change theory to explore how these structural shifts are experienced on the ground and how institutional conditions either support or hinder reform outcomes.

Perception

Teacher perception is a critical mediating factor in education reform. Sachs, (2016) defined perception as the lens through which individuals interpret and act on their experiences, shaped by prior knowledge, institutional culture, and peer influence. Falikul Isbah, (2020) argued that teacher buy-in is essential for reform sustainability, emphasizing that involvement in the process enhances ownership and willingness to adapt. Kriswanto & Hasanah, (2021) found that while initial resistance is common, perception evolves positively with sufficient support. Sachs (2016) linked teacher identity and perception, showing that reforms are more effective when aligned with educators' values and professional beliefs. This theoretical framework is used to interpret how teachers in Balikpapan internalize curriculum reform: not merely by observing policy compliance, but by understanding their beliefs, motivations, and perceived barriers to change.

METHOD

Design and Samples

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore the perceptions of elementary school teachers in Balikpapan regarding the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. This design was chosen for its ability to provide rich, real-world insights into teacher experiences in natural settings. Unlike quantitative research, which emphasizes generalizability, qualitative descriptive research focuses on depth over breadth, offering thick descriptions of participants' experiences in context (Moulidiah et al., 2024). The study was conducted in three elementary schools: SD Latihan YBBSU, SD Negeri 15 Balikpapan, and MIN 1 Balikpapan. These schools were purposively selected to represent a range of public and religious-based educational environments that were actively implementing the Merdeka Curriculum.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select nine teachers who had at least three years of teaching experience and were directly involved in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. The number of participants was determined based on the concept of data saturation, where recurring themes begin to emerge and additional interviews yield diminishing new insights. Given the focused scope and the rich detail generated by each participant, nine interviews were deemed sufficient and feasible for this small-scale qualitative inquiry.

Instrument and Procedure

Data collection involved two main instruments: semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, allowing for methodological triangulation. The interviews followed a flexible guide consisting of open-ended questions to encourage detailed responses while allowing the interviewer to explore emerging topics more deeply. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was conducted in person at the participants' schools. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed verbatim. Classroom observations were conducted to gain a direct view of how the Merdeka Curriculum was being applied in real classroom settings. These observations focused on teaching strategies, student engagement, instructional flexibility, and the shift in teacher roles. A structured observation checklist was used, based on key Merdeka Curriculum indicators. Field notes were also taken to complement and contextualize the interview data.

To ensure validity, several strategies were employed. Triangulation was applied by comparing data from interviews and observations to cross-check findings. Member checking was also used, in which preliminary interpretations were shared with participants to confirm that their views were accurately represented. Additionally, an audit trail of field notes, transcripts, and coding decisions was maintained to enhance transparency and credibility. Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. Participants were informed of the research purpose and procedures, and signed consent forms were collected. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by using pseudonyms and securing all data.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to examine both interview transcripts and observation notes. After transcribing the interviews, the researcher read through the data repeatedly to gain familiarity. Codes were then generated inductively emerging from the data rather than imposed beforehand. These codes were grouped into larger themes that reflected the research objectives, such as teacher perceptions, implementation challenges, curriculum comparisons, and professional support. To enhance credibility, findings from classroom observations were cross validated with interview responses. Direct quotes were included in the final report to represent the participants' authentic voices and highlight key insights. This process allowed for a coherent and trustworthy interpretation of how teachers experience curriculum change in their daily teaching practices.

RESULT

Teachers' Perceptions on the Transition from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum

The results show that most elementary teachers in Balikpapan perceive the Merdeka Curriculum as a natural evolution of the education system rather than a complete

overhaul. They emphasize the curriculum's strength in recognizing student individuality and promoting creativity and flexibility in teaching. Teachers feel that it aligns more closely with current educational needs, especially character development and student independence. These findings support Kriswanto and Hasanah, (2021), who stated that when teachers understand the philosophy of change, their perception tends to shift positively. Teachers in this study viewed the new curriculum as relevant and timely, though still requiring adjustments.

Table 1
Teachers' Perceptions Toward Curriculum Change

Theme	Sub-theme	Participant Response Example
Perception of curriculum change	Curriculum as an evolving system	"The curriculum, in essence, does not completely change; it simply adapts to developments and evolves over time." (R4)
	Emphasis on student potential and character	"The Merdeka Curriculum focuses on recognizing students' individual abilities and nurturing each student's character." (R1)
	Creative and flexible teaching approach	"Merdeka Curriculum encourages us to be more flexible and creative in designing learning activities, which helps students become more independent and confident." (R7)

Challenges Faced by Teachers in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

Although the Merdeka Curriculum promotes flexibility, several challenges emerge in its implementation. Teachers reported difficulties transitioning to a student-centered approach and highlighted the lack of clear implementation guidelines. The absence of structured instructions often leaves teachers confused about how to apply the curriculum in daily practice. Moreover, limitations in time, training, and resources hinder creative and differentiated instruction. These challenges are in line with findings from Hidayah et al., (2022), who noted that inadequate support and preparation often lead to anxiety and confusion during curriculum reform. The result contributes to understanding how practical barriers can limit even well-intentioned policy innovations.

Table 2. Challenges in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

Theme	Sub-theme	Participant Response Example
Implementation barriers	Shifting teacher roles	"One of the main challenges is adjusting to the student-centered approach. We must shift our role to facilitators." (R2)

	Ambiguity in curriculum guidance	“The curriculum evolves, but it doesn't provide clear, step-by-step instructions.” (R5)
	Limited time and resources	“Designing creative and individualized learning activities can be difficult, especially with limited time, training, or resources.” (R8)

Teachers' Views on Differences Between the 2013 and Merdeka Curriculum

Teachers clearly feel a difference in instructional structure between the 2013 Curriculum and the Merdeka Curriculum. They view the Merdeka Curriculum as more flexible and responsive to student needs. While they appreciate the freedom to innovate, many also find the increased planning demand to be overwhelming.

This comparison supports the view of Ben Gurion and Nasir, (2024) who emphasized the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on teacher autonomy. However, it also highlights the dual burden of freedom teachers are encouraged to innovate yet often do so without adequate systemic support.

Table 3. Comparison Between 2013 Curriculum and Merdeka Curriculum

Theme	Sub-theme	Participant Response Example
Curriculum comparison	From structured to flexible instruction	“Under the 2013 Curriculum, lessons were more structured... With the Merdeka Curriculum, there's more freedom.” (R3)
	Emphasis on student independence	“Merdeka Curriculum shifts the focus toward character building and student independence. This change is both a challenge and an opportunity.” (R6)
	Increased planning demand	“It allows us to be innovative, but it also takes more time and planning.” (R9)

Teachers' Experience with Support and Training During Curriculum Transition

Although most teachers acknowledged that government initiatives like KKG, MGMP, and KOMBEL exist, they felt the training offered was too general and lacked practical classroom application. Teachers in Islamic schools also expressed the need for curriculum guidance tailored to their religious education context. These findings align with Falikul Isbah, (2020), who argued that educational reform cannot succeed without targeted and sustained professional development. This study contributes to the call for localized, hands-on training that addresses real challenges faced by teachers in diverse school environments.

Table 4. Support and Professional Readiness

Theme	Sub-theme	Participant Response Example
Training and support perception	Appreciation for government support	“The government has been very supportive... through programs like KOMBEL, KKG, and MGMP.” (R3)
	Insufficient practical training	“Support is helpful, but the training feels too general. Teachers need more targeted, hands-on workshops.” (R9)
	Religious curriculum support gap	“Integrating religious values with the Merdeka Curriculum remains challenging. We need more tailored guidance.” (R6)

The findings of this study reveal that elementary school teachers in Balikpapan perceive curriculum change not as a sudden shift, but as a continuous evolution within Indonesia’s education system. Teachers generally supported the Merdeka Curriculum, recognizing its emphasis on student independence, flexibility, and holistic development. This aligns with the findings of Kriswanto and Hasanah, (2021), who argued that when reforms align with teachers' core beliefs and classroom realities, they are more likely to be embraced. Likewise, Putri et al., (2023) found that teachers responded positively to reforms when those changes were perceived to meet modern educational demands. However, the current study adds depth by showing that, despite their philosophical support, teachers simultaneously felt overwhelmed by how frequently curriculum policies shift in Indonesia often with each new administration. This reinforces the concerns raised by Alhamuddin et al., (2020), who noted that constant reform without clear implementation strategies breeds distrust and policy fatigue among educators.

A recurring theme in this study was the gap between the intended flexibility of the Merdeka Curriculum and the lived reality of teachers. While the curriculum invites innovation and differentiated learning, many participants struggled with limited guidance, unclear frameworks, and inadequate examples. Teachers expressed a lack of step-by-step implementation tools particularly lesson plan models and teaching scenario simulations. This finding is in line with Hidayah et al., (2022), who reported that vague instructional direction leads to surface-level adoption and teacher hesitation. However, what distinguishes this study is the clear emphasis on the lack of practical training materials as a primary obstacle. Teachers reported that existing training focused too much on theory and not enough on actionable classroom strategies a gap less emphasized in prior research.

Another important contribution of this study is the distinction between how teachers in public schools and Islamic-based schools experience curriculum reform. While both groups encountered general challenges such as shifting instructional roles and increased planning demands, teachers in religious schools raised an additional concern: the absence of guidance on how to integrate national curriculum content

with Islamic educational values. This nuance is not thoroughly covered in previous studies like Maba, (2017) or even Falikul Isbah, (2020), who primarily addressed curriculum implementation at the vocational level. The current findings highlight a critical and unique gap in curriculum support that context-specific alignment is still lacking, particularly for faith-integrated institutions.

Teachers also commented on the pressure to adopt new pedagogical roles. Moving from knowledge transmitters to facilitators of learning required not only pedagogical adjustment but a redefinition of their professional identity. While studies such as Rahminawati and Supriyadi, (2023) and Indriawati et al. (2020) acknowledge the cognitive load associated with this transition, the present study expands on this by detailing how teachers in Balikpapan feel this change is not yet adequately scaffolded. In particular, several participants noted that while workshops (e.g., KKG, MGMP, KOMBEL) were available, the training often lacked situational relevance and classroom-level mentoring. This echoes the critique by Sabilah et al. (2021), who emphasized that teacher professional development must be practical, continuous, and context-driven.

Another insight emerging from this study concerns the limited teacher involvement in the reform process. Many participants described curriculum changes as top-down mandates, with little opportunity for grassroots feedback. This sense of disconnection reduces teacher agency and undermines long-term reform success, aligning with the critique from Sachs, (2016), who highlighted that reforms imposed without teacher voice often result in low ownership and passive compliance. The current study confirms this and further shows that such exclusion is a significant demotivating factor, especially in urban areas like Balikpapan, where teacher communities are active but underutilized in decision-making.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore elementary school teachers' perceptions in Balikpapan regarding the transition from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum. The findings revealed three major insights. First, teachers generally perceived the curriculum change as a positive evolution, especially due to its emphasis on student-centered learning, flexibility, and character development. Second, despite this positive perception, teachers encountered major challenges in adapting to new roles, understanding vague guidelines, and operating with limited training and classroom resources. Third, although government support systems such as KKG, MGMP, and KOMBEL were in place, many teachers especially those in Islamic-based schools felt the training lacked practical, contextual relevance.

These findings suggest that while teachers are open and willing to embrace reform, successful implementation depends on sustained, targeted, and context-aware professional development. Curriculum change cannot succeed if teachers are treated merely as policy recipients rather than as implementers and co-designers of reform. Therefore, education policymakers, local education authorities, and school

leadership teams should collaborate to deliver more grounded, hands-on training programs and develop curriculum materials that are adaptable to different school types, including faith-based institutions. Moving forward, the Ministry of Education should prioritize teacher consultation and ensure that reform efforts are rooted in the realities of classroom practice to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of future curriculum changes.

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