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TEACHERS' ADAPTIVE RESPONSES TO THE INDEPENDENT CURRICULUM: INSIGHTS FROM TEACHER AGENCY IN MADRASAHs

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana guru madrasah beradaptasi dalam implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka melalui perspektif *teacher agency*. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif yang melibatkan wawancara, observasi kelas, dan analisis dokumen, hasil penelitian menunjukkan adanya respons adaptif pada dimensi kognitif (pemaknaan), afektif (komitmen profesional dan kesadaran moral), serta perilaku (adaptasi pedagogis). Temuan menunjukkan bahwa *teacher agency* di madrasah tidak hanya dibentuk oleh pertimbangan profesional, tetapi juga oleh nilai-nilai moral-spiritual Islam yang melekat dalam budaya institusi. Hal ini menegaskan bahwa implementasi kurikulum dipengaruhi oleh konteks kelembagaan serta tanggung jawab etis guru dalam pendidikan berbasis agama. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi dalam memberikan pemahaman bagi kepemimpinan pembelajaran dan dukungan kebijakan pada institusi pendidikan berbasis keagamaan, khususnya dalam implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka di madrasah.

Keywords:

adaptive response, madrasah teachers, Merdeka Curriculum, teacher agency

ABSTRACTS

This study explores how madrasah teachers adapt to the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) through the lens of teacher agency. Using a qualitative case study with interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, results show adaptive responses across cognitive (sense-making), affective (professional commitment and moral awareness), and behavioral (pedagogical adaptation) dimensions. Findings indicate that teacher agency in madrasahs is shaped by professional reasoning and Islamic moral-spiritual values, emphasizing that curriculum implementation is influenced by institutional culture and ethical responsibility. The study provides insights for instructional leadership and policy support in religious-based educational settings.

A. INTRODUCTION

Curriculum reform has become a persistent global phenomenon driven by rapid social transformation, technological advancement, and the increasing demand for 21st-century competencies. Contemporary reforms extend beyond curriculum document revision to the transformation of pedagogical practices and the repositioning of teachers as key agents of educational change. In this context, teachers are no longer viewed solely as implementers of policy, but as active interpreters who determine how reforms are translated into classroom practice.

In Indonesia, the Merdeka Curriculum represents a significant shift toward competency-based, student-centered, and differentiated learning. It grants teachers greater autonomy in designing instruction that responds to learners' needs and contextual conditions. However, empirical studies indicate that curriculum implementation is still influenced by disparities in teacher readiness, limited conceptual understanding, and inconsistent pedagogical adaptation (Rizki & Fahkrunisa, 2021; Afida et al., 2023). This suggests that policy flexibility alone is insufficient without teachers' capacity to meaningfully interpret and enact reform.

Teacher agency has been widely identified as a critical determinant of curriculum reform success. It refers to teachers' capacity to interpret policies, exercise professional judgment, and act purposefully within structural constraints (Priestley et al., 2021; Leijen et al., 2020). From an ecological perspective, agency emerges through interactions between individual beliefs, professional experience, institutional contexts, and policy environments (Spillane, 2021; Datnow & Park, 2020). In Indonesia, recent studies also confirm that teacher agency plays a significant role in shaping adaptive instructional practices within the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum (Rachmawati & Maulida, 2024).

Despite this growing body of literature, existing studies tend to emphasize cognitive and professional dimensions of teacher agency, while the affective and normative dimensions remain underexplored. This limitation becomes more evident in Islamic educational institutions such as madrasahs, which integrate national curriculum mandates with Islamic values, moral education, and spiritual formation. In this context, teachers are not only professional educators but also moral and spiritual agents responsible for shaping students' character and religious identity (Widodo, 2019; Zulfikar, 2021).

Although prior studies on madrasahs have discussed curriculum adaptation and implementation challenges, they rarely examine how teacher agency is constructed through the interaction between policy demands and Islamic institutional values. Moreover, the role of moral and spiritual commitments in shaping teachers' interpretive and adaptive processes remains insufficiently addressed in existing ecological models of agency.

Addressing these gaps, this study investigates how madrasah teachers develop adaptive responses in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum by integrating cognitive, affective, and normative dimensions of agency within an Islamic educational context.

This study addresses three research questions: (1) How are madrasah teachers' adaptive responses formed in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum? (2) How do cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions interact in shaping teacher agency within the madrasah context? (3) In what ways do Islamic institutional values influence policy interpretation and pedagogical adaptation?

This study contributes theoretically by extending the ecological framework of teacher agency to incorporate moral-spiritual dimensions rooted in Islamic education. Empirically, it provides insight into how curriculum reform is interpreted and enacted in madrasahs, with implications for strengthening instructional leadership and policy support in faith-based educational settings.

B. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design conducted at MTs Miftahul Akhyar, Riau. The participants consisted of four Islamic Education subject teachers, selected as key informants due to their direct involvement in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. The informants included: G₁ (Fiqh teacher), G₂ (Aqidah Akhlak teacher), G₃ (Al-Qur'an Hadith teacher), and G₄ (Sejarah Kebudayaan Islam/SKI teacher).

For clarity, the distribution of participants is presented in the following table:

Code	Subject Taught
G₁	Fiqh
G₂	Aqidah Akhlak
G₃	Al-Qur'an Hadith
G₄	SKI

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participatory observation in classroom settings, and document analysis related to learning implementation. The study applied the interactive data analysis model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which includes data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.

To ensure data credibility, triangulation was conducted using both source triangulation and technique triangulation. Ethical considerations were also applied by obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring confidentiality, and using coded identities (G₁–G₄) to protect participants' anonymity.

Although the study provides in-depth insights into a limited number of participants, the findings are intended to offer contextual understanding rather than statistical generalization. Therefore, transferability is emphasized through thick description of the research context and participants' experiences.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

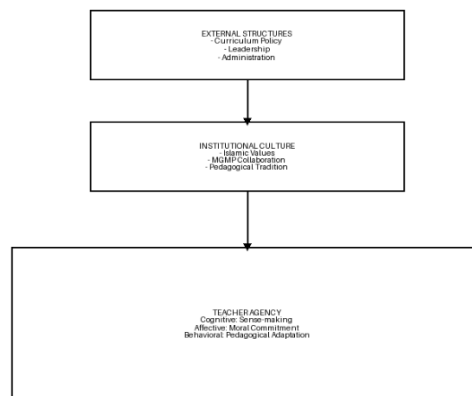


Figure 1. The Interaction of Cognitive, Affective, and Behavioral Dimensions in Madrasah Teacher Agency

The findings of this study demonstrate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in madrasahs constitutes a complex and multidimensional process involving the reconstruction of teacher agency across cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. These dimensions interact dynamically within an ecological system influenced by external policy structures and institutional cultural contexts.

From the **cognitive dimension**, the results indicate that teachers actively engage in a sense-making process when responding to curriculum changes. Many teachers initially experienced confusion, particularly in distinguishing between Learning Outcomes (CP) and Learning Objective Sequences (ATP). However, this phase reflects an ongoing cognitive restructuring process rather than a lack of competence. Teachers construct understanding through reflection, interaction, and contextual interpretation.

The findings also reveal that **MGMP (Musyawarah Guru Mata Pelajaran)** plays a significant role in supporting this cognitive process. MGMP functions not merely as an administrative forum, but as a collaborative space for knowledge construction. Through collective discussions, teachers are able to clarify concepts, reduce ambiguity, and develop shared pedagogical understanding.

In the **affective dimension**, the results show a strong professional commitment among teachers toward curriculum reform. Teachers generally perceive the Merdeka Curriculum as an opportunity to improve teaching practices rather than as a burden. This positive orientation reflects openness to change and sustained motivation in implementing new policies.

A notable finding is the presence of **moral-spiritual awareness** as part of teacher commitment. Teachers interpret their professional responsibilities within the framework of Islamic values, which strengthens their dedication and persistence in adapting to curriculum changes.

In the **behavioral dimension**, the findings indicate observable changes in classroom practices. Teachers have begun to implement differentiated instruction, project-based learning, and more flexible assessment strategies. These practices reflect a shift toward student-centered learning and demonstrate the development of adaptive teaching competence.

However, the study also identifies several **structural constraints**, particularly limited instructional time and high administrative workload. These factors influence the extent to which teachers can fully implement innovative pedagogical approaches.

Based on these findings, the study formulates a **value-embedded ecological model of teacher agency**, where teacher agency emerges from the interaction between:

1. External structures (curriculum policy and administrative systems),
2. Institutional culture (Islamic values and collaborative practices), and
3. Internal dimensions (cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes).

Discussion

The findings of this study provide important insights into the nature of teacher agency in the context of curriculum reform. The results confirm that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is not a linear or technical process, but rather a dynamic and interpretive one.

From a cognitive perspective, the findings challenge technocratic assumptions that policy implementation can occur through direct transmission of information. Instead, teachers function as active interpretive agents who construct meaning through social interaction and contextual engagement. This supports the view that cognition in educational reform is inherently social and distributed.

The significant role of MGMP further strengthens this argument. As a collaborative learning space, MGMP facilitates professional dialogue and shared understanding, which are essential for effective policy implementation. This aligns with sociocultural perspectives that emphasize the importance of collective knowledge construction in teacher learning.

In the affective dimension, the strong professional commitment observed among teachers highlights the critical role of emotional and motivational factors in sustaining reform efforts. The findings suggest that successful implementation depends not only on teachers' knowledge, but also on their willingness and enthusiasm to engage with change.

More importantly, the integration of moral-spiritual values into teacher agency represents a distinctive contribution of this study. Unlike conventional models of teacher agency, which often focus on professional and structural aspects, this study shows that values play a central role in shaping teacher motivation and resilience. In the context of madrasahs, Islamic ethical principles provide an internal source of commitment that strengthens teachers' engagement with policy implementation.

The behavioral findings further indicate that curriculum reform has led to meaningful changes in teaching practices. The adoption of student-centered approaches reflects the development of adaptive expertise, where teachers adjust their strategies based on classroom needs. However, the presence of structural constraints confirms that teacher agency is not absolute, but shaped by contextual limitations.

These findings support an ecological perspective of teacher agency, where teacher actions are influenced by the interaction between individual capacities and environmental conditions. The proposed value-embedded ecological model extends existing theoretical frameworks by incorporating cultural and moral dimensions into the analysis of agency.

The implications of this study are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it contributes to the development of a more holistic understanding of teacher agency, particularly in faith-based educational settings. Practically, it suggests that efforts to improve curriculum implementation should not focus solely on technical training, but also on strengthening collaborative structures, reducing administrative burdens, and fostering value-based professional development.

In conclusion, this study emphasizes that effective curriculum reform requires alignment between cognitive understanding, affective commitment, and behavioral practice, all of which are embedded within a supportive ecological system. Teachers should therefore be recognized not merely as policy implementers, but as active, reflective, and value-driven professionals operating within complex educational environments.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the adaptive response of madrasah teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum is shaped through the dynamic interaction of cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions within a supportive institutional ecosystem. In the cognitive dimension, teachers engage in an active sense-making process, developing their understanding of curriculum structures through reflection and participation in collective reflective spaces such as professional learning communities. These collaborative forums play a crucial role in reducing ambiguity and strengthening shared pedagogical understanding.

In the affective dimension, teachers exhibit openness to change, which is reinforced not only by professional commitment but also by the integration of moral-religious values rooted in the madrasah context. This moral-spiritual awareness serves as an internal motivational force, enabling teachers to sustain engagement with reform despite challenges. Institutional support, particularly through instructional leadership and a culture that promotes collaboration and reflection, further strengthens this affective commitment.

In the behavioral dimension, teacher adaptation is reflected in the implementation of differentiated instruction and formative assessment practices. These pedagogical transformations indicate the development of adaptive expertise, although their full realization remains influenced by structural constraints such as time limitations and administrative workload. The presence of institutional support systems helps mitigate these challenges and facilitates more consistent implementation.

These findings confirm that teachers' adaptive responses are not merely individual processes, but are co-constructed through interactions between policy frameworks, institutional culture, and Islamic identity. The study therefore extends the ecological perspective on teacher agency by demonstrating that, in the context of madrasahs, agency is simultaneously professional and normative-moral in nature. The integration of instructional leadership, collective reflective spaces, and value-based orientation emerges as a critical foundation for sustaining meaningful pedagogical transformation.

For future research, it is recommended to employ longitudinal or mixed-method approaches in order to capture the evolution of teacher agency over time and to enhance the generalizability of findings across diverse madrasah contexts. Such approaches

would provide deeper insights into how adaptive processes develop, stabilize, or transform in response to ongoing educational change.

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