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Negotiating Pedagogical Change: Teacher Agency and the Policy-Practice Gap in Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum History Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study critically examines challenges history teachers face implementing Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum at SMA Negeri 12 Semarang. Through interviews, observations, and document analysis, it explores teacher perceptions, practices, obstacles, and coping strategies. Findings indicate teachers value the curriculum's flexibility and student-centered philosophy, yet implementation is hindered by limited understanding of new concepts, difficulty designing differentiated instruction, insufficient professional development, and inadequate resources. Teachers navigate these constraints via informal collegial sharing, self-directed learning, and gradual experimentation. The study contributes to international discourse on curriculum reform in post-colonial systems, highlighting policy innovation and teacher agency. It underscores the need for sustained, context-sensitive professional support, offering insights for policymakers and educators in the Global South.

KEYWORDS

Teacher Challenges, Merdeka Curriculum, History Education, Curriculum Implementation, Teacher Agency

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ABSTRAK

Studi kasus kualitatif ini secara kritis meneliti tantangan yang dihadapi guru sejarah dalam mengimplementasikan Kurikulum Merdeka Indonesia di SMA Negeri 12 Semarang. Studi ini mengeksplorasi persepsi, praktik, hambatan, dan strategi penanggulangan guru. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa guru menghargai fleksibilitas kurikulum dan filosofi yang berpusat pada siswa, namun implementasinya terhambat oleh pemahaman yang terbatas tentang konsep-konsep baru, kesulitan dalam merancang pembelajaran diferensiasi, kurangnya pengembangan profesional, dan sumber daya yang tidak memadai. Guru mengatasi kendala ini melalui berbagi pengalaman informal antar kolega, pembelajaran mandiri, dan eksperimen bertahap. Studi ini berkontribusi pada wacana internasional tentang reformasi kurikulum di sistem pasca-kolonial, menyoroti inovasi kebijakan dan peran guru. Studi ini menggarisbawahi perlunya dukungan profesional yang berkelanjutan dan peka terhadap konteks, serta menawarkan wawasan bagi para pembuat kebijakan dan pendidik di negara-negara berkembang.

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Introduction

Education serves as a fundamental mechanism for developing human potential, enabling individuals to navigate the complexities of contemporary life while contributing to societal advancement (Alvén, 2024; Miles & Gibson, 2022; Smets, 2024). The quality of educational outcomes, however, depends critically on the curriculum frameworks that structure teaching and learning processes (Smets & Savenije, 2025). Curriculum, as Smith et al. (2025) articulates, constitutes a systematic program encompassing planned learning experiences designed to guide educators and students toward achieving educational objectives. Throughout Indonesia's post-independence history, curriculum reform has functioned as a primary instrument for aligning educational provision with evolving national aspirations and global developments (Pratama, 2022).

The Indonesian educational landscape has witnessed recurrent curriculum changes, each responding to shifting political, social, cultural, economic, and technological contexts. From the 1947 curriculum through subsequent iterations in 1952, 1964, 1975, 1984, 2004, 2006, and 2013, each reform represented what Alhamuddin (2019) terms a "logical consequence" of broader societal transformations. The most recent transition from Curriculum 2013 to the Merdeka Curriculum, initiated through Ministry of Education and Culture Regulation in 2021 and formally established in 2022, embodies this ongoing process of educational adaptation (Kemendikbudristek, 2022).

The Merdeka Curriculum, translated as "Freedom Curriculum" or "Emancipated Curriculum," represents a significant paradigm shift in Indonesian educational philosophy. Unlike its predecessors, which emphasized structured competency-based approaches, the Merdeka Curriculum prioritizes flexible, student-centered learning that accommodates individual student interests and talents (Fakhruddin et al., 2025). The curriculum's foundational principle of "*merdeka belajar*" (freedom to learn) grants teachers greater autonomy in designing learning experiences while encouraging students to develop their potential without rigid instructional constraints (Amiruddin et al., 2023).

This curricular transformation carries particular significance for history education. History instruction occupies a strategically vital position within Indonesian secondary education, serving as a vehicle for character formation, national identity construction, and cultivation of patriotic sensibilities (Fakhruddin et al., 2025; Kusumawati & Umam, 2025). As Kartodirdjo (1999) emphasizes, history education shapes how young Indonesians understand their collective past, situate themselves within national narratives, and envision possible futures. The Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on flexible, student-centered learning offers potential to address long-standing criticisms that history instruction remains monotonous, overly focused on factual memorization, and disconnected from students' lived experiences (Fufa et al., 2024; Kusumawati & Umam, 2025).

However, curriculum reform success depends fundamentally on teachers' capacity to translate policy intentions into classroom practice. Teachers serve as the "frontline" implementers whose understanding, skills, and commitment determine whether curricular innovations achieve their intended outcomes (Golledge, 2024a; Smith et al., 2025b). The transition from Curriculum 2013 to Merdeka Curriculum demands that teachers develop new competencies, adapt established practices, and navigate

unfamiliar pedagogical terrain. Teachers must move beyond traditional roles as information transmitters to become facilitators, problem-solvers, and designers of differentiated learning experiences responsive to diverse student needs (Reisman & Jay, 2024a).

Despite the curriculum's promising philosophical foundations, early implementation research reveals significant challenges. Teachers across Indonesian schools report difficulties adapting to new administrative requirements, mastering innovative pedagogical approaches, and accessing adequate professional development (Pratiwi et al., 2025; Rohmah et al., 2024). These challenges are particularly acute in history education, where teachers must reconcile curriculum flexibility with the discipline's distinctive demands for historical thinking, source analysis, and temporal understanding (Wineburg, 2001; Seixas & Morton, 2013).

SMA Negeri 12 Semarang, located in Gunungpati District, Semarang City, Central Java, adopted the Merdeka Curriculum in the 2022/2023 academic year for tenth and eleventh grades, while twelfth grade continued with Curriculum 2013. As one of numerous schools navigating this transition, it provides a valuable site for examining the concrete challenges teachers encounter when implementing curriculum reform. Preliminary observations suggested that teachers faced obstacles spanning substantive and technical dimensions, creating gaps between policy expectations and classroom realities.

This study addresses four interconnected research questions: (1) How do tenth-grade history teachers at SMA Negeri 12 Semarang perceive the Merdeka Curriculum in history instruction? (2) How do these teachers implement the Merdeka Curriculum in their history classrooms? (3) What specific challenges do teachers encounter during implementation? (4) What strategies do teachers employ to address these challenges?

By examining teacher challenges through a critical lens, this research contributes to international scholarship on curriculum reform implementation in post-colonial educational contexts. It extends beyond descriptive accounts of obstacles to analyze how teacher agency, institutional support, and systemic constraints interact in shaping reform outcomes. The findings offer insights for educational policymakers, teacher educators, and school leaders seeking to support teachers through curriculum transitions, while contributing to broader theoretical conversations about the politics of educational change in the Global South.

Theoretical Framework

Curriculum Reform and Teacher Agency in Post-Colonial Contexts

Curriculum reform in post-colonial societies operates within complex historical, political, and cultural dynamics that distinguish such contexts from educational change in Western settings. Sapto et al. (2022) argue that curriculum is never neutral but embodies particular configurations of power, knowledge, and interest. In Indonesia, curriculum reforms have historically reflected struggles over national identity, cultural values, and the purpose of education in a diverse, archipelagic nation (Alhamuddin, 2019). The transition from centralized, prescriptive curricula toward more flexible frameworks like the Merdeka

Curriculum represents not merely technical adjustment but fundamental reorientation of educational philosophy.

Teacher agency the capacity of teachers to act purposefully and constructively in shaping their work and its conditions emerges as critical in understanding curriculum implementation (Golledge, 2024b; Smith et al., 2025c). Rather than passive recipients of policy directives, teachers actively interpret, adapt, and sometimes resist curricular changes based on their professional knowledge, beliefs, and contextual constraints. This ecological perspective on teacher agency recognizes that teachers' capacity to enact reform is shaped by interplay between individual factors (experience, beliefs, skills) and contextual factors (resources, support, policy coherence).

In post-colonial educational systems, teacher agency operates within what Dozono (2023) terms the "post-colonial condition" characterized by legacies of colonial educational structures, ongoing negotiations between global educational discourses and local knowledge traditions, and persistent resource constraints. Indonesian teachers implementing the Merdeka Curriculum navigate tensions between internationally circulating pedagogical concepts (student-centered learning, differentiation, formative assessment) and locally grounded understandings of teaching, learning, and disciplinary knowledge.

Differentiated Instruction as Pedagogical Innovation

The Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on accommodating student diversity through differentiated instruction reflects broader international trends in pedagogical reform. Tomlinson (2014), a leading theorist of differentiated instruction, conceptualizes it as a philosophical framework requiring teachers to proactively modify curricula, teaching methods, resources, learning activities, and student products to address diverse learner needs. Differentiated instruction rests on the premise that students differ in their readiness, interests, and learning profiles, and that effective teaching responds to these differences rather than treating all students identically.

Implementing differentiated instruction demands significant teacher capacity: teachers must know their students deeply, design multiple pathways to learning objectives, flexibly group students, and continuously assess progress to inform instructional decisions (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013). In history education specifically, differentiation involves adapting how students engage with historical sources, construct historical narratives, and demonstrate historical understanding while maintaining disciplinary rigor (Claravall & Irej, 2022).

International research on differentiated instruction implementation reveals consistent challenges. Teachers struggle to balance differentiation with curriculum coverage demands, lack adequate preparation and ongoing support, and find differentiation particularly challenging in large, diverse classes (de Jager, 2023; Gibbs, 2023). These challenges are amplified in resource-constrained contexts where class sizes are large, materials are limited, and professional development opportunities are scarce.

Historical Thinking and Disciplinary Literacy in Curriculum Reform

History education internationally has undergone significant reconceptualization over recent decades, moving from emphasis on transmission of national narratives toward cultivation of historical thinking competencies. Wineburg (2001) famously characterized historical thinking as an “unnatural act” requiring students to navigate the epistemological challenges of engaging with fragmentary, contradictory evidence from the past. Seixas and Morton (2013) identify six historical thinking concepts: historical significance, evidence, continuity and change, cause and consequence, historical perspective-taking, and ethical dimension of history.

The Merdeka Curriculum’s flexible framework creates both opportunities and challenges for developing historical thinking. On one hand, reduced prescription allows teachers to design learning experiences that engage students with historical sources, multiple perspectives, and inquiry-based approaches. On the other hand, teachers accustomed to textbook-centered, content-coverage approaches may lack the pedagogical content knowledge necessary to foster historical thinking (Claravall & Irey, 2022; Tirado-Olivares et al., 2024). As Reisman and Jay (2024) argue, progression in historical understanding requires careful scaffolding that many teachers are unprepared to provide.

In post-colonial contexts, historical thinking education involves additional complexities around whose histories are taught, how colonial experiences are represented, and what historical narratives contribute to nation-building (Dulay & Ko, 2025). Indonesian history teachers implementing the Merdeka Curriculum must navigate these complexities while developing students’ capacity for critical engagement with the past.

Teacher Professional Learning and Curriculum Implementation

Research consistently demonstrates that successful curriculum reform depends on sustained, context-sensitive professional learning opportunities (Rutten et al., 2024). Effective professional development is content-focused, incorporates active learning, supports collaboration, uses models of effective practice, provides coaching and expert support, offers feedback and reflection opportunities, and is of sustained duration (Reisman & Jay, 2024b). However, professional development in many post-colonial contexts remains characterized by one-off workshops, limited follow-up support, and disconnection from teachers’ daily practice (Hadjeris, 2025).

Teacher learning communities, including subject-specific teacher working groups (*Musyawarah Guru Mata Pelajaran* or MGMP), offer potential sites for collaborative professional learning (Nguyen et al., 2024a). In Indonesia, MGMPs bring together teachers of the same subject from multiple schools to share resources, discuss challenges, and develop instructional materials. However, their effectiveness varies widely depending on facilitation, resources, and member commitment.

The concept of “implementation fidelity” versus “adaptation” captures tensions in how teachers enact curriculum reform. Freedman et al. (2024) distinguish between fidelity approaches emphasizing adherence to prescribed models and adaptation approaches

recognizing that teachers must adjust innovations to local contexts. The Merdeka Curriculum's philosophy explicitly embraces teacher adaptation, yet teachers need sufficient understanding of underlying principles to adapt productively rather than superficially.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to investigate the challenges encountered by history teachers implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at SMA Negeri 12 Semarang. The qualitative approach was selected for its capacity to explore complex social phenomena within their natural contexts and to capture the meanings participants assign to their experiences (Moleong, 2017; Sugiyono, 2013). Unlike quantitative approaches that might measure predetermined variables across large samples, qualitative methodology enables deep, contextualized understanding of how teachers perceive, experience, and respond to curriculum reform.

The case study design, specifically an instrumental case study (Stake, 2005), positions SMA Negeri 12 Semarang not as intrinsically unique but as an illustrative case offering insights into broader patterns of curriculum implementation challenges in Indonesian secondary schools. This design allows for rich description of the case while generating theoretical insights transferable to similar contexts. The research adopted an interpretive orientation, recognizing that teacher challenges are not objective facts awaiting discovery but are constructed through participants' interpretations of their circumstances and experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The study's qualitative orientation aligns with its focus on process and meaning: understanding how teachers navigate curriculum reform requires attending to their perspectives, the contextual factors shaping their practice, and the strategies they develop in response to challenges. As Denzin and Lincoln (2018) emphasize, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world, studying phenomena in their natural settings and attempting to make sense of them in terms of the meanings people bring.

Data and Sources of Data

The research was conducted at SMA Negeri 12 Semarang, located on Jalan Raya Gunungpati, Palangan Village, Gunungpati District, Semarang City, Central Java. Established in 1985 through Minister of Education and Culture Decree Number 31756/A2.1.2/KP, the school initially occupied SMP 22's building before moving to its current location. The school environment features numerous trees creating a cool atmosphere and several gazebos supporting outdoor learning activities. Strategically positioned along the main Gunungpati road, the school sits near the Gunungpati District Office. SMA Negeri 12 Semarang implemented the Merdeka Curriculum beginning in the 2022/2023 academic year for tenth and eleventh grades, while twelfth grade continued using

Curriculum 2013, making it an appropriate site for examining early-stage curriculum implementation.

Research participants comprised two tenth-grade history teachers purposively selected as primary informants: Mr. Nastain, S.Pd., and Mrs. Siti Juariah, S.Pd. Both teachers were directly responsible for implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in their history classrooms and possessed direct experience with the challenges under investigation. Purposive sampling ensured selection of information-rich participants capable of providing detailed insights into the research questions (Patton, 2015).

Data sources encompassed three categories essential for comprehensive understanding. First, informants provided verbal accounts of their experiences, perceptions, and practices through in-depth interviews. Second, learning activities were observed directly, enabling the researcher to witness how curriculum implementation unfolded in classroom settings. Observations focused on history instruction in classes X-6 (taught by Mr. Nastain) and X-9 (taught by Mrs. Siti Juariah) on November 13-14, 2023, during lessons on "The Origins of Early Humans." Third, documents including teaching modules, assessment records, textbooks, and student worksheets provided material evidence of planning and implementation practices. This multi-source approach enabled triangulation across different types of data, strengthening the study's credibility.

Data Collection

Data collection employed three complementary techniques designed to capture different dimensions of the phenomenon under investigation. Each technique was selected for its capacity to generate particular types of data, and their combination enabled comprehensive understanding of teacher challenges.

In-depth interviews served as the primary data collection technique, allowing exploration of teacher perspectives, experiences, and interpretations in their own words. Interview guides were developed based on the research questions, covering four main areas: teacher perceptions of the Merdeka Curriculum, implementation practices, specific challenges encountered, and strategies for addressing challenges. Interviews were conducted face-to-face at the school, each lasting approximately 60-90 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility to pursue emergent themes while maintaining focus on research questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Classroom observations were conducted to witness implementation practices directly rather than relying solely on teacher self-reports. Observations followed a structured protocol documenting teacher activities, student engagement, instructional methods, and classroom interactions. Two observation sessions were conducted: November 13, 2023, in class X-9 (Mrs. Siti Juariah) and November 14, 2023, in class X-6 (Mr. Nastain), both focusing on the same topic, "The Origins of Early Humans." Observational data provided concrete evidence of how curriculum principles translated into classroom practice and revealed challenges that might not emerge in interviews.

Document analysis examined teaching modules (*modul ajar*) developed by both teachers for the observed lessons, assessment documents, textbooks, and student worksheets. Documents were analyzed to assess alignment between planned instruction, implemented instruction, and curriculum requirements. Document analysis also provided insight into teachers' understanding of curriculum expectations and their capacity to translate those expectations into concrete learning materials.

Trustworthiness of Data

Establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research requires systematic attention to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This study employed triangulation as the primary strategy for enhancing credibility. Triangulation of sources involved comparing information obtained from the two teacher participants, enabling identification of both common patterns and individual variations in their experiences. Triangulation of techniques cross-verified findings from interviews, observations, and document analysis, ensuring that conclusions were not artifacts of a single data collection method. For example, teachers' interview accounts of implementation practices were compared with observational evidence and document analysis to assess consistency.

Member checking was conducted by summarizing key findings and interpretations and presenting them to participants for verification. Both teachers confirmed that the researcher's interpretations accurately reflected their experiences and perspectives, enhancing confidence in the findings' credibility (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Thick description of the research context, participants, and processes supports transferability by enabling readers to assess the applicability of findings to other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While qualitative research does not aim for statistical generalization, rich contextual detail allows readers to make informed judgments about transferability to similar contexts.

Dependability and confirmability were addressed through maintaining a detailed research audit trail documenting all data collection and analysis decisions. This trail enables external review of the research process and assessment of the logical relationship between data and conclusions.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2020) interactive model, comprising three concurrent activities: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Analysis was conducted iteratively throughout the research process, with emerging findings informing subsequent data collection.

Data condensation involved selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming raw data from interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents. Initial coding identified segments relevant to the research questions, using both deductive codes derived from the theoretical framework (e.g., "teacher perception,"

"implementation practice," "challenge," "strategy") and inductive codes emerging from the data (e.g., "collegial sharing," "self-directed learning"). Coded segments were organized into categories and subcategories through constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), refining the coding scheme as analysis progressed.

Data display involved organizing condensed data into accessible formats facilitating analysis and conclusion drawing. Thematic matrices were developed to compare findings across participants and data sources, while narrative displays presented coherent accounts of each major theme. Displays enabled systematic examination of patterns, relationships, and variations within the data.

Conclusion drawing and verification involved interpreting patterns, proposing explanations, and testing them against the data. Preliminary conclusions were formulated as analysis proceeded, then systematically verified by returning to the data to confirm supporting evidence, identify counter-examples, and assess alternative interpretations. This iterative process continued until data saturation was achieved, with no new insights emerging from additional analysis.

Results

Teacher Perceptions of the Merdeka Curriculum in History Education

Both teacher participants expressed generally positive perceptions of the Merdeka Curriculum while acknowledging significant implementation challenges. Their understanding of the curriculum's philosophical foundations aligned with official descriptions emphasizing flexibility, student-centered learning, and accommodation of diverse student interests and talents.

Mr. Nastain characterized the Merdeka Curriculum as providing greater teaching autonomy compared to Curriculum 2013. He explained: "In the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers have flexibility to choose teaching materials and methods based on student needs. It's not as rigid as before. We can adjust to student conditions." This perception of enhanced professional autonomy resonated with the curriculum's stated aims of liberating teachers from overly prescriptive requirements.

Mrs. Siti Juariah similarly emphasized the curriculum's student-centered orientation: "The Merdeka Curriculum focuses more on student needs. We don't pressure students but facilitate their learning according to their talents and interests. Students have more freedom to express themselves and develop their potential." Her characterization reflected understanding of the curriculum's philosophical shift from teacher-directed to student-centered instruction.

Both teachers noted similarities and differences between the Merdeka Curriculum and its predecessor. Mr. Nastain observed: "Actually, the essence is similar to Curriculum 2013, but there are many new terms. In Curriculum 2013 we prepared lesson plans (RPP), annual programs, semester programs, syllabi. In Merdeka Curriculum, it's simpler we prepare teaching modules (*modul ajar*) with three main components: Learning Outcomes (CP), Learning Objectives (TP), and Flow of Learning Objectives (ATP)." This comment revealed that teachers perceived the curriculum change partly as terminological and procedural reorganization rather than fundamental pedagogical transformation.

However, teachers also identified challenges in understanding and implementing the new curriculum. Mrs. Siti Juariah noted: "This curriculum is still new, so we're still learning. Sometimes we're confused about how to implement certain components, especially differentiated instruction. We need more training and socialization." This acknowledgment of ongoing learning needs suggested that positive perceptions coexisted with recognition of implementation gaps.

Both teachers expressed strong support for the curriculum's emphasis on developing student potential. Mr. Nastain stated: "I fully support this curriculum because students can develop according to their interests. The learning is more enjoyable, and students can explore their abilities." Mrs. Siti Juariah added: "The Merdeka Curriculum is good for students because they're not forced to learn everything the same way. They can learn in ways that suit them." Despite implementation challenges, teachers maintained commitment to the curriculum's underlying values.

Implementation of Merdeka Curriculum in History Classrooms

Classroom observations and document analysis revealed how teachers translated curriculum principles into practice. Both teachers had developed teaching modules for the observed lessons on "The Origins of Early Humans," though the modules varied in detail and alignment with differentiated instruction principles.

In class X-6, Mr. Nastain's lesson followed a structured sequence: opening with student readiness checks and motivational activities, presenting core content through lecture and discussion, assigning group work for students to analyze early human types, facilitating presentations, and concluding with reflection and summary. Student engagement appeared moderate, with some students actively participating while others remained passive. Mr. Nastain incorporated visual media showing early human reconstructions and archaeological sites, attempting to make content more concrete for students.

In class X-9, Mrs. Siti Juariah's lesson employed similar structure but with greater emphasis on student discussion. She posed guiding questions to stimulate thinking about human origins, organized small-group discussions, and had students present their findings. Her approach reflected attempts at differentiated instruction, though she acknowledged challenges: "I try to accommodate different learning styles, but with 36 students in one class, it's difficult to really differentiate for each student. I do what I can."

Document analysis revealed that both teachers had developed teaching modules meeting minimum administrative requirements. Modules included learning outcomes, learning objectives, activity sequences, and assessment plans. However, the modules demonstrated limited evidence of systematic differentiation for diverse learner needs. Assessment plans focused primarily on written tests and product-based tasks rather than varied assessment modes addressing different learning preferences.

Implementation of differentiated instruction emerged as a particular challenge. Both teachers expressed understanding of differentiation conceptually but struggled to operationalize it in daily practice. Mr. Nastain explained: "Differentiation means adjusting to student needs, but honestly, it's not easy. Students are very diverse learning styles, interests, readiness levels. Sometimes I don't know where to start." Mrs. Siti Juariah added: "I try to vary my methods lecture, discussion, group work, assignments but I'm not sure if this really counts as differentiated instruction."

Assessment practices reflected similar patterns. Teachers conducted diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments as required, but diagnostic assessment remained superficial. Mr. Nastain described his diagnostic approach: "At the beginning of the lesson, I ask questions to see what students already know. That's diagnostic assessment, but it's not very systematic." Formative assessment occurred through observation and questioning during lessons, while summative assessment relied primarily on end-of-topic tests.

Implementation Challenges

Analysis revealed multiple challenges spanning planning, execution, student factors, and resource constraints. These challenges were interconnected, with each reinforcing others to create complex implementation difficulties.

Planning Challenges. Both teachers reported difficulties in planning differentiated instruction responsive to diverse student needs. Mrs. Siti Juariah elaborated: "The hardest part is analyzing student needs and then designing learning that matches those needs. Students are so different, and we have limited time. How do we plan for 36 individuals?" This challenge reflected broader international findings that differentiation requires sophisticated planning capacities that many teachers lack (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013).

Teachers also struggled with selecting appropriate teaching methods and resources. Mr. Nastain explained: "Choosing the right method for each topic is difficult. What works for one topic may not work for another. And finding good resources is challenging. The history textbooks aligned with Merdeka Curriculum are still limited." Resource limitations compounded planning difficulties, as teachers lacked adequate materials to support varied instructional approaches.

Implementation Challenges. During classroom implementation, teachers faced difficulties maintaining student engagement and managing diverse learning needs simultaneously. Mrs. Siti Juariah observed: "Some students are very enthusiastic, but others seem uninterested. Getting all students engaged is hard, especially when the class is large and students have different learning preferences." This challenge was particularly acute in history, which some students perceived as less relevant to their interests or future plans.

Teachers also struggled with time management, attempting to balance content coverage with student-centered activities. Mr. Nastain noted: "The curriculum says we should give students freedom to explore, but we also have to cover the material. Sometimes I feel rushed and end up lecturing more than I'd like." This tension between curriculum philosophy and practical constraints represents a common implementation challenge across educational contexts (Lu et al., 2024).

Student-Related Challenges. Students' prior learning experiences complicated implementation. Entering tenth grade from junior secondary schools still using Curriculum 2013, students lacked familiarity with the Merdeka Curriculum's student-centered expectations. Mrs. Siti Juariah explained: "Students are used to being told what to do. When we give them freedom, they're confused. They need time to adjust." This transition challenge suggests that curriculum reform requires not only teacher preparation but also student orientation to new learning expectations.

Student motivation and engagement varied significantly. Some students actively participated and demonstrated curiosity about historical topics, while others remained passive or disengaged. Mr. Nastain observed: "Getting students interested in history is sometimes difficult. They think history is just memorizing facts and dates. Changing this perception takes time." **This finding aligns with international research documenting students' perceptions of history as irrelevant or boring** (Cairns & Garrard, 2024; Miles et al., 2024)

Resource Constraints. Limited learning resources emerged as a significant constraint. Both teachers reported that textbooks aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum were insufficient in quantity and quality. Mrs. Siti Juariah explained: "The history textbooks for Merdeka Curriculum are still limited. We don't have enough for each student. Students have to share or borrow from the library. Sometimes we have to photocopy materials." This resource scarcity limited teachers' ability to provide varied learning materials essential for differentiated instruction.

Beyond textbooks, teachers lacked access to diverse historical sources, multimedia resources, and supplementary materials that could enrich history instruction. Mr. Nastain noted: "Good history teaching needs varied sources primary sources, images, videos, artifacts. But we don't have these resources. We rely on textbooks and whatever we can find online." Resource constraints reflect broader challenges facing schools in post-colonial contexts, where educational infrastructure remains under-resourced (Mukingam-beho et al., 2025).

Professional Development Gaps. Teachers consistently identified inadequate professional development as a key constraint. While both teachers had attended some socialization sessions about the Merdeka Curriculum, they characterized these as insufficient for developing deep understanding and practical skills. Mrs. Siti Juariah stated: "We've had some training, but it's mostly general information. We need more practical guidance on how to actually implement differentiated instruction in history classes. How do we design lessons? How do we assess? What does it look like in practice?"

Mr. Nastain similarly expressed need for sustained, subject-specific professional learning: "The training we get is usually for all subjects together. But history has its own characteristics. We need history-specific workshops where we can discuss challenges and share strategies with other history teachers." This finding resonates with research emphasizing that effective professional development must be content-focused and context-sensitive (Moser & Zimmermann, 2025; Reisman & Jay, 2024c).

Teacher Strategies for Addressing Challenges

Despite significant challenges, teachers developed various strategies to navigate implementation difficulties. These strategies emerged from individual initiative and collegial collaboration rather than systematic institutional support.

Self-Directed Learning. Both teachers engaged in self-directed learning to deepen their understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum and develop implementation skills. Mr. Nastain explained: "I read whatever I can find about the Merdeka Curriculum online, join social media groups for teachers, watch videos about differentiated instruction. I try to learn on my own." This proactive approach reflected teacher commitment to professional growth despite limited formal support.

Mrs. Siti Juariah similarly pursued independent learning: "I look for examples of teaching modules online, see how other teachers design their lessons, then adapt them for my classes. I experiment with different methods and see what works." This experimentation-oriented approach enabled gradual development of implementation capacity through trial and error.

Collegial Sharing and Collaboration. Teachers relied heavily on informal collaboration with colleagues to address challenges. Mr. Nastain described: "When I have problems, I ask other teachers, not just history teachers. Sometimes math teachers have good ideas about classroom management that I can adapt. We share experiences and solutions." This cross-subject collaboration provided practical insights that formal training did not offer.

Subject-specific collaboration occurred through MGMP activities, though both teachers noted that MGMP meetings varied in quality and frequency. Mrs. Siti Juariah explained: "We have MGMP meetings occasionally, and they're helpful for sharing resources and discussing challenges. But they don't happen as often as we'd like. More regular meetings would be better." Despite limitations, MGMPs provided valuable opportunities for collegial learning that supplemented individual efforts.

Gradual Experimentation with Differentiated Instruction. Teachers approached differentiated instruction gradually, experimenting with small changes rather than attempting wholesale transformation. Mr. Nastain described his approach: "I started by varying my teaching methods sometimes lecture, sometimes discussion, sometimes group work. Then I began offering students choices in assignments. Small steps." This incremental approach allowed teachers to build confidence and competence without becoming overwhelmed.

Mrs. Siti Juariah similarly emphasized gradual implementation: "I try to get to know my students better, learn about their interests and learning preferences. Then I adjust my teaching based on what I learn. It's not perfect, but it's getting better." This student-centered orientation reflected growing alignment with curriculum philosophy, even as practical implementation remained incomplete.

Resource Development and Adaptation. Teachers developed and adapted learning resources to compensate for limited materials. Mr. Nastain created his own PowerPoint presentations, compiled images from internet sources, and developed worksheets for student activities. Mrs. Siti Juariah similarly developed supplementary materials: "I can't rely on textbooks alone, so I create my own materials. I search for videos online, find relevant articles, make my own worksheets. It takes time, but it helps."

This resource development work, while necessary, added to teacher workload. Mrs. Siti Juariah noted: "Creating materials takes a lot of time, especially when you're still learning the curriculum. Sometimes I stay late or work on weekends. But there's no choice if we want to implement the curriculum well." Teachers' willingness to invest additional time reflected their commitment to quality implementation despite systemic constraints.

Discussion

Teacher Perceptions and the Politics of Curriculum Reform

The positive perceptions expressed by teachers at SMA Negeri 12 Semarang reflect broader patterns in how Indonesian educators respond to centrally mandated curriculum reform. Despite implementation challenges, teachers articulated support for the Merdeka Curriculum's philosophical orientation toward flexibility, student-centeredness, and attention to individual differences. This contrasts with international studies highlighting teachers' principled resistance to overly prescriptive curricular reforms (Huddleston et al., 2025) and suggests that Indonesian teachers may be particularly receptive to curriculum innovations promising enhanced professional autonomy.

However, critical analysis reveals tensions beneath surface-level acceptance. Teachers' characterization of the Merdeka Curriculum as "similar to Curriculum 2013 but with new terms" raises questions about depth of understanding. If teachers perceive curriculum change primarily as terminological and procedural reorganization rather than fundamental pedagogical transformation, implementation may remain superficial. This pattern echoes what Cuban (1993) terms "first-order changes" adjustments to structures and procedures rather than "second-order changes" transforming core beliefs and practices.

The persistence of Curriculum 2013 thinking patterns among teachers warrants attention. Mrs. Siti Juariah's acknowledgment that teachers "are still influenced by the previous curriculum" suggests cognitive residue that shapes how new curriculum ideas are interpreted and enacted. Robinson (2024) explains that teachers understand policy messages through existing cognitive frameworks, potentially leading to implementation that aligns with prior understandings rather than reform intentions. For the Merdeka Curriculum to achieve its transformative potential, teachers must develop new frameworks for understanding teaching, learning, and their roles.

This finding has implications beyond Indonesia. Across post-colonial educational systems implementing student-centered curriculum reforms, teacher perceptions shaped by prior experiences with teacher-centered, examination-oriented instruction may constrain implementation depth (Chimbunde et al., 2024; Chimbunde & Moreeng, 2025; Ndomondo et al., 2022). Reformers must attend not only to providing information about new curricula but to supporting conceptual change among teachers.

The Challenge of Differentiated Instruction in Resource-Constrained Contexts

Teachers' difficulties implementing differentiated instruction illustrate broader tensions in translating globally circulating pedagogical concepts into locally situated practice. Differentiated instruction, as theorized by Tomlinson (2014) and widely promoted in Western educational contexts, assumes certain enabling conditions: manageable class sizes, adequate learning resources, supportive school structures, and teachers with deep knowledge of both content and students. These conditions are rarely fully present in Indonesian secondary schools, where large classes, limited resources, and multiple demands on teacher time are normative.

The gap between differentiation ideals and implementation realities at SMA Negeri 12 Semarang reflects what Anderson-Levitt (2003) terms the "local meanings" of globally traveling educational ideas. When concepts like differentiated instruction move across

contexts, they are reinterpreted and adapted in ways that may diverge significantly from original formulations. Mr. Nastain's approach to differentiation "varying methods sometimes lecture, sometimes discussion, sometimes group work" represents a pragmatic adaptation shaped by contextual constraints rather than full implementation of Tomlinson's framework.

This adaptation is not necessarily problematic. Ndomondo (2024) argues that learner-centered education must be contextually appropriate to be effective, and that rigid adherence to imported models may be counterproductive. However, the risk is that adaptation becomes dilution, with the substantive principles of differentiation replaced by superficial technique-switching that fails to address diverse learner needs. Mrs. Siti Juariah's uncertainty about whether her varied methods "really count as differentiated instruction" suggests awareness of this gap between aspiration and achievement.

Comparative international research reveals similar patterns. In Tanzanian secondary schools, history teachers struggled to move beyond traditional transmission methods in implementing the competency-based curriculum, as large classes and acute shortages of instructional resources limited opportunities for student-centered and individualized history learning (Ndomondo, 2024). In Singapore, teachers attempting to implement learner-centred feedback faced tensions between progressive, student-involved pedagogy and the demands of an exam-oriented system that reinforced traditional error-focused practices (To et al., 2023). These parallels suggest that the challenges at SMA Negeri 12 Semarang are not merely local anomalies but manifestations of systemic issues facing educational reform across the Global South.

Teacher Agency and Informal Learning Networks

Teachers' reliance on self-directed learning and collegial collaboration despite limited formal professional development illuminates the operation of teacher agency within constrained circumstances. Rather than passively awaiting institutional support, teachers actively constructed learning opportunities through independent research, social media engagement, and informal collegial sharing. This finding aligns with Smith et al.'s (2025) ecological conceptualization of teacher agency as achieved through interplay of individual capacities and contextual resources.

The role of informal collegial networks in supporting implementation deserves particular attention. Teachers' descriptions of learning from colleagues across subjects and through MGMP meetings suggest that peer learning communities, even when irregularly organized, provide valuable implementation support. This finding resonates with international research emphasizing the importance of professional learning communities for sustaining reform (Hudson, 2024). However, reliance on informal networks also raises concerns about equity and quality. Not all teachers have equally strong collegial networks, and informal learning may transmit incomplete or inaccurate understandings.

MGMPs, Indonesia's subject-specific teacher working groups, occupy an ambiguous position in the professional learning landscape. While they offer potential for collaborative, subject-focused professional development, their effectiveness depends on facilitation quality, member commitment, and institutional support. Bjork (2005) documented considerable variation in MGMP functioning across Indonesian schools, with some

groups providing rich learning opportunities while others remain nominal. Strengthening MGMPs as sites for sustained, practice-focused professional learning could address teachers' expressed needs for subject-specific implementation support.

The incremental, experimental approach teachers adopted toward differentiated instruction gradual implementation of small changes rather than wholesale transformation reflects what Leger et al. (2023) term "improvement science" principles. Teachers learned by doing, adapting based on experience, and building competence through successive approximations. While this approach is pragmatically necessary given implementation complexity and limited support, it also risks slow progress and perpetuation of less effective practices.

Implications for Teacher Professional Development

Teachers' expressed need for practical, subject-specific professional development aligns with international evidence on effective teacher learning. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) synthesis of research identifies key features of effective professional development: content focus, active learning, collaboration, use of models and modeling, coaching and expert support, feedback and reflection, and sustained duration. The training teachers had received at SMA Negeri 12 Semarang general information sessions about the Merdeka Curriculum lacked most of these features.

Designing professional development responsive to teacher needs requires understanding what teachers actually do when implementing new curricula. Mr. Nastain's request for "history-specific workshops where we can discuss challenges and share strategies" points to the value of subject-focused professional learning communities. In such settings, teachers can examine how curriculum principles apply to historical content, develop and critique lesson plans, analyze student work, and collectively solve implementation problems. This approach to professional learning has demonstrated effectiveness across multiple contexts (Nguyen et al., 2024b).

The resource constraints teachers faced also suggest professional development needs extending beyond pedagogical skills. Teachers need support in developing and adapting learning materials, locating and evaluating historical sources, and integrating technology into instruction when available. Professional development addressing these practical needs could enhance teachers' capacity to provide varied, engaging learning experiences despite limited institutional resources.

Policymakers should also consider the sustainability demands of curriculum reform. Teachers' reports of working evenings and weekends to develop materials indicate that current implementation expectations may be unsustainable without adequate institutional support. Curriculum reform requires not only initial training but ongoing resource provision, time for collaborative planning, and recognition of the intensive labor involved in transforming practice.

Situating Findings in Global Context

The challenges documented at SMA Negeri 12 Semarang resonate with international patterns while reflecting distinctive features of Indonesia's educational context. Research on curriculum implementation consistently identifies teacher capacity, resource

availability, and professional support as critical determinants of reform success (Dang et al., 2023). Teachers' difficulties with differentiated instruction echo findings from diverse settings where teachers struggle to implement student-centered pedagogies without adequate preparation and support (Schweisfurth, 2013).

However, Indonesia's post-colonial context adds particular dimensions. The Merdeka Curriculum represents not merely technical reform but political assertion of educational sovereignty, positioning Indonesian education within global discourses while affirming local values and priorities. Teachers implementing this curriculum navigate tensions between internationally circulating pedagogical concepts and locally grounded understandings of teaching and learning. Their adaptations of differentiated instruction reflect this negotiation between global and local.

The resource constraints teachers face limited textbooks, inadequate learning materials, large classes are characteristic of educational systems across the Global South (Chuene & Teane, 2024). Addressing these constraints requires not only pedagogical training but systemic investment in educational infrastructure. Curriculum reform without corresponding resource allocation risks creating expectations that cannot be fulfilled, potentially deepening inequalities between well-resourced and under-resourced schools.

Teachers' reliance on informal learning networks reflects both cultural patterns of collegiality and systemic gaps in formal professional development provision. Strengthening these networks through structured support could enhance their effectiveness while maintaining their responsive, teacher-driven character. This approach aligns with international trends toward professional learning communities as vehicles for sustained, collaborative teacher development (Çopur & Demirel, 2022).

The incremental, experimental approach teachers adopted toward reform implementation suggests that meaningful curriculum change requires time and patience. Recent literature on educational change confirms that meaningful curriculum reform is a gradual process that typically requires three to five years of sustained effort and support to move from initial adoption to deep institutionalization (Aldridge & McLure, 2024). The Merdeka Curriculum remains in early implementation stages at SMA Negeri 12 Semarang, with teachers still developing understanding and competence. Realistic expectations about implementation timelines, combined with sustained support, are essential for reform success.

Conclusion and Limitation

This study examined the challenges encountered by tenth-grade history teachers at SMA Negeri 12 Semarang in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, revealing a complex picture of teacher commitment coexisting with significant implementation difficulties. Teachers expressed positive perceptions of the curriculum's philosophical orientation toward flexibility and student-centeredness while struggling to translate these principles into classroom practice. Implementation challenges spanned planning (difficulty designing differentiated instruction), execution (managing diverse student needs, time constraints), student factors (adjustment to new expectations, variable engagement), resource limitations (inadequate textbooks and materials), and professional development gaps (insufficient practical, subject-specific training).

Despite these challenges, teachers demonstrated agency through self-directed learning, collegial collaboration, gradual experimentation with new approaches, and resource development. Their strategies, while insufficient to fully realize curriculum aspirations, reflect professional commitment and pragmatic adaptation to constrained circumstances. The findings highlight the gap between policy intentions and implementation realities that characterizes curriculum reform across diverse contexts.

The study contributes to international scholarship on curriculum implementation by illuminating how Indonesian history teachers navigate reform in a post-colonial, resource-constrained setting. It extends understanding of teacher agency within constrained contexts, the challenges of translating globally circulating pedagogical concepts into local practice, and the critical importance of sustained, context-sensitive professional support. For policymakers and teacher educators, the findings underscore that curriculum reform requires not only policy articulation but systematic investment in teacher learning, resource provision, and implementation support over extended timeframes.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study focused on a single school with two teacher participants, limiting generalizability to other settings. While the case provides rich contextual understanding, patterns may differ in schools with varying resources, leadership, and teacher characteristics. The research captured early implementation stages; longitudinal research would illuminate how teacher practices and perceptions evolve over time. Data collection relied primarily on self-report through interviews, supplemented by limited observations; more extensive observation across multiple lessons would provide fuller picture of implementation patterns. Finally, student perspectives were not directly investigated; understanding how students experience curriculum change would enrich understanding of implementation processes.

Future research should examine Merdeka Curriculum implementation across diverse Indonesian schools, investigating how school context, leadership, and resource availability shape teacher experiences and practices. Comparative studies examining implementation across different subjects would illuminate discipline-specific challenges and supports. Longitudinal research tracking teacher development over multiple years would reveal how implementation capacity builds and how challenges evolve. Student-focused research examining how learners experience and respond to curriculum change would provide essential perspective. International comparative studies situating Indonesian experiences within broader patterns of curriculum reform across post-colonial contexts would generate theoretical insights with global relevance.

The Merdeka Curriculum represents an ambitious effort to transform Indonesian education toward more flexible, student-centered, and empowering learning. Realizing this vision requires not only policy articulation but sustained commitment to supporting teachers as they navigate the complex journey from aspiration to practice. The teachers at SMA Negeri 12 Semarang, with their positive attitudes, willingness to learn, and pragmatic adaptations, embody both the promise and the challenge of educational transformation in post-colonial Indonesia.

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