



Teacher Perceptions of Merdeka Curriculum in Arabic Language Learning at MTsN 1 Medan

Persepsi Guru terhadap Kurikulum Merdeka dalam Pembelajaran Bahasa Arab di MTsN 1 Medan

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates teacher perceptions of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation in Arabic language learning at MTsN 1 Medan, North Sumatra. The Merdeka Curriculum represents a significant paradigm shift in Indonesian education, emphasizing student-centered learning, flexibility, and competency development. This research examines how Arabic language teachers perceive and experience this curricular transformation within the madrasah context, where Arabic holds particular cultural and religious significance. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with twelve Arabic teachers, classroom observations, and document analysis. Findings reveal that teachers hold complex, multifaceted perceptions encompassing both optimism about pedagogical innovation and concerns about implementation challenges. Teachers appreciate the curriculum's emphasis on authentic communication and differentiated instruction but express concerns about assessment complexity, resource availability, and alignment with traditional Arabic pedagogy. The study identifies factors influencing teacher perceptions, including professional development experiences, institutional support, and personal teaching philosophies. These findings contribute to understanding curriculum implementation dynamics in Islamic educational contexts and provide recommendations for supporting teachers during curricular transitions.

Keywords: Merdeka Curriculum, teacher perception, Arabic language learning, madrasah education, curriculum implementation

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini menyelidiki persepsi guru tentang implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka dalam pembelajaran bahasa Arab di MTsN 1 Medan, Sumatera Utara. Kurikulum Merdeka mewakili pergeseran paradigma yang signifikan dalam pendidikan Indonesia, menekankan pembelajaran yang berpusat pada siswa, fleksibilitas, dan pengembangan kompetensi. Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana guru bahasa Arab mempersepsi dan mengalami

transformasi kurikulum ini dalam konteks madrasah, di mana bahasa Arab memiliki makna budaya dan agama yang khusus. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan fenomenologi kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dengan dua belas guru bahasa Arab, observasi kelas, dan analisis dokumen. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa guru memiliki persepsi yang kompleks dan beragam yang mencakup optimisme tentang inovasi pedagogis dan kekhawatiran tentang tantangan implementasi. Guru menghargai penekanan kurikulum pada komunikasi otentik dan pembelajaran berdiferensiasi tetapi menyatakan kekhawatiran tentang kompleksitas penilaian, ketersediaan sumber daya, dan keselarasan dengan pedagogi Arab tradisional. Studi ini mengidentifikasi faktor-faktor yang memengaruhi persepsi guru, termasuk pengalaman pengembangan profesional, dukungan institusional, dan filosofi pengajaran pribadi. Temuan ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman dinamika implementasi kurikulum dalam konteks pendidikan Islam dan memberikan rekomendasi untuk mendukung guru selama transisi kurikulum.

Kata-kata kunci: Kurikulum Merdeka, persepsi guru, pembelajaran bahasa Arab, pendidikan madrasah, implementasi kurikulum

A. INTRODUCTION

The Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology introduced the Merdeka Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) in 2022 as a transformative educational reform designed to address persistent challenges in the national education system and prepare students for twenty-first-century demands. This curriculum represents a fundamental departure from previous standardized approaches, emphasizing flexibility, student agency, project-based learning, and competency development over content coverage. The Merdeka Curriculum emerged partly in response to learning losses during the COVID-19 pandemic and partly from recognition that previous curricula had not adequately developed students' critical thinking, creativity, and practical skills (Faiz et al., 2022). As this curriculum rolls out across diverse educational contexts throughout Indonesia, understanding how teachers perceive and implement these reforms becomes crucial for evaluating their effectiveness and identifying necessary supports for successful adoption.

Madrasah institutions occupy a unique position within Indonesia's educational landscape, serving both religious and secular educational functions while maintaining distinctive Islamic identity and pedagogical traditions. These institutions educate millions of Indonesian students and play vital roles in preserving Islamic knowledge and values while preparing students for participation in broader society. The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in madrasah contexts presents particular considerations, as these institutions must balance national curriculum requirements with their religious educational missions and navigate tensions between innovation and tradition (Muali et al., 2023). Understanding how madrasah teachers perceive and respond to curricular change provides insights into the complex dynamics of educational reform in religiously oriented educational institutions.

Arabic language instruction holds special significance in madrasah education, serving multiple interconnected purposes beyond general language learning. Arabic functions as the language of Islamic scripture and religious practice, the medium for accessing classical Islamic scholarship, and an important component of Islamic cultural identity. Consequently, Arabic language learning in madrasah contexts carries religious, cultural, and academic dimensions that distinguish it from foreign language learning in secular schools. Teachers must help students develop both functional communication skills and the specialized linguistic competencies needed to engage with religious texts and practices (Albantani & Madkur, 2022). The Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on communicative competence and authentic language use aligns with contemporary language teaching approaches but may create tensions with traditional Arabic pedagogies that have historically emphasized grammar-translation methods and classical text comprehension.

Teacher perceptions significantly influence curriculum implementation outcomes, as teachers serve as the primary mediators between curriculum policy and classroom practice. Research in educational change consistently demonstrates that curriculum reforms succeed or fail largely based on how teachers understand, accept, and enact them in practice. Teachers' perceptions of curriculum innovations shape their implementation decisions, instructional strategies, and the adaptations they make to fit their contexts (Priestley et al., 2021). When teachers perceive reforms as aligned with their values and feasible within their contexts, they tend to implement them more faithfully and enthusiastically. Conversely, when teachers view reforms as impractical, incompatible with their pedagogical beliefs, or insufficiently supported, implementation often becomes superficial or inconsistent. Understanding teacher perceptions therefore provides critical insights for supporting effective curriculum implementation.

The concept of teacher perception encompasses multiple dimensions including cognitive understanding, affective responses, and evaluative judgments about curriculum characteristics, implementation requirements, and expected outcomes. Hall and Hord (2020) distinguish between teachers' concerns about curriculum innovations, which evolve through predictable stages from self-oriented concerns about personal impacts, to task-oriented concerns about implementation logistics, to impact-oriented concerns about effects on student learning. Teachers' perceptions are not static but evolve through implementation experience as they gain familiarity with new approaches, develop new competencies, and observe outcomes. Additionally, teacher perceptions are shaped by contextual factors including institutional culture, leadership support, collegial relationships, available resources, and professional development opportunities, all of which influence how teachers make sense of curriculum reforms.

Research on curriculum implementation in Indonesian contexts has revealed significant challenges that teachers encounter when translating policy intentions into classroom practice. Teachers often face difficulties understanding curriculum documents, lack adequate training and resources for implementation, struggle with increased workload demands, and receive insufficient ongoing support during transitions. Additionally, tensions between national curriculum requirements and local contextual realities can create implementation dilemmas for teachers (Sutopo & Suryanto, 2022). In madrasah contexts, these general implementation challenges intersect with institution-specific factors such as teacher qualifications, resource constraints, and the need to balance religious and secular curricular demands. Understanding how these contextual factors shape teacher perceptions becomes essential for developing effective implementation support strategies.

The Merdeka Curriculum introduces several pedagogical innovations that may significantly impact Arabic language instruction in madrasah settings. The curriculum emphasizes differentiated instruction tailored to diverse student needs and abilities, project-based learning that integrates multiple competencies, authentic assessment approaches that capture complex learning outcomes, and greater teacher autonomy in curriculum adaptation. For Arabic teachers accustomed to more structured curricula with clearly specified content and methods, these innovations may represent both opportunities for pedagogical renewal and sources of uncertainty or concern (Wijaya et al., 2023). Teachers must develop new competencies including curriculum design skills, differentiated instruction strategies, and alternative assessment expertise while simultaneously maintaining the religious and cultural dimensions of Arabic instruction that remain central to madrasah missions.

This research investigates Arabic language teachers' perceptions of the Merdeka Curriculum at MTsN 1 Medan, one of North Sumatra's prominent public madrasah institutions serving diverse student populations. MTsN 1 Medan began implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in 2022, making teachers' perceptions after two years of implementation experience particularly valuable for understanding how these perceptions evolve through practical en-

gagement with reform. By examining teachers' cognitive, affective, and evaluative responses to the curriculum, along with the contextual factors shaping these perceptions, this study aims to contribute to theoretical understanding of curriculum implementation in Islamic educational contexts and provide practical insights for supporting teachers through curricular transitions. The findings have implications not only for MTsN 1 Medan but for madrasah institutions throughout Indonesia and potentially for Islamic educational institutions in other contexts facing similar dynamics of tradition and innovation (Nasir, 2021).

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

Contemporary curriculum theory conceptualizes curriculum not as a static document but as a dynamic social construction enacted through complex interactions among policy, institutional contexts, and individual actors (Muhsyanur, 2024). The Merdeka Curriculum reflects constructivist and student-centered educational philosophies that emphasize active learning, knowledge construction, and development of transferable competencies rather than passive reception of predetermined content. These theoretical foundations align with international trends toward competency-based education and twenty-first-century skills frameworks that prioritize critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication alongside traditional academic content (Voogt & Roblin, 2023). However, the translation of these progressive educational theories into practice within diverse Indonesian educational contexts, particularly madrasah institutions with distinctive traditions and constraints, presents significant challenges that require careful attention to implementation processes and teacher support needs.

Research on teacher change and curriculum implementation provides valuable frameworks for understanding how teachers perceive and respond to educational reforms. Spillane et al. (2022) argue that teachers' "cognitive frames"—their existing beliefs, knowledge, and experiences—fundamentally shape how they interpret and implement curriculum policies. When new curricula align with teachers' existing frames, implementation tends to proceed more smoothly; when curricula challenge fundamental assumptions or require significant cognitive restructuring, teachers may resist, superficially adopt, or creatively adapt reforms in ways that differ from policy intentions. Additionally, teacher identity—how teachers conceptualize their professional roles, responsibilities, and values— influences perceptions of curriculum change. Arabic teachers in madrasah settings may hold complex professional identities encompassing religious educator, language specialist, and academic instructor roles, creating particular dynamics in how they perceive and implement secular curriculum reforms (Parker & Heberle, 2020).

Empirical research on the Merdeka Curriculum implementation reveals emerging patterns in teacher experiences across diverse Indonesian educational contexts. Studies indicate that teachers generally appreciate the curriculum's philosophical orientation toward student-centered learning and skill development but face significant practical challenges in implementation. Rahmawati and Budi (2023) found that elementary teachers struggled with assessment complexity, time management demands, and lack of clear implementation guidelines. Secondary teachers reported concerns about balancing increased teaching flexibility with examination preparation requirements and difficulties accessing quality learning resources aligned with curriculum principles. These challenges appear particularly acute in under-resourced schools and among teachers with limited prior exposure to student-centered pedagogical approaches. Research specifically examining Merdeka Curriculum implementation in madrasah contexts remains limited, representing an important gap this study addresses.

Arabic language teaching methodology has evolved significantly over recent decades, with communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT) approaches gaining prominence alongside traditional grammar-translation methods. Contemporary Arabic pedagogy emphasizes developing integrated language skills—listening,

speaking, reading, and writing—through authentic communicative activities rather than isolated grammar exercises and vocabulary memorization. The Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on communicative competence and authentic learning aligns with these contemporary methodological trends (Hidayat & Noor, 2022). However, research indicates that many Arabic teachers in Indonesian madrasah institutions continue employing traditional teacher-centered methods, partly due to their own learning experiences, partly due to examination pressures that emphasize grammar and reading comprehension, and partly due to limited exposure to alternative approaches. Shifting teacher practices toward more communicative, student-centered approaches requires not only curriculum policy changes but substantial professional development and ongoing support.

The role of institutional context in shaping curriculum implementation has received increasing attention in educational research. Madrasah institutions vary considerably in terms of resource availability, leadership quality, teacher qualifications, and organizational culture, all of which influence how curricula are interpreted and enacted. Suprayogi and Eko (2023) found that madrasah with strong instructional leadership, collaborative professional cultures, and adequate resources demonstrated more successful curriculum implementation than institutions lacking these supportive conditions. Additionally, the relationship between madrasah institutions and broader Islamic educational networks, including connections to Islamic organizations and pesantren traditions, shapes how these institutions approach educational change. Some madrasah embrace innovation while maintaining Islamic identity; others resist changes perceived as threatening traditional values or practices.

Research on teacher professional development indicates that effective support for curriculum implementation requires sustained, job-embedded learning opportunities rather than one-time workshops. Teachers need ongoing opportunities to study new curricula, experiment with new practices, reflect on implementation experiences, and receive feedback and coaching. Darling-Hammond et al. (2021) identify several characteristics of effective professional development including content focus on subject matter and how students learn that content, active learning opportunities for teachers to practice new strategies, collaboration among teachers to share experiences and solve problems collectively, coherence with broader school and system initiatives, and sufficient duration to allow deep learning and practice refinement. Professional development for Arabic teachers implementing the Merdeka Curriculum must address both general pedagogical innovations and subject-specific applications in Arabic language instruction.

Assessment represents a particularly challenging aspect of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation, as the curriculum emphasizes authentic, formative assessment approaches that differ substantially from traditional paper-and-pencil examinations. Teachers must develop competencies in performance assessment, portfolio assessment, project evaluation, and providing descriptive feedback that guides student learning rather than simply measuring achievement (Black & Wiliam, 2020). For Arabic teachers, designing assessments that capture communicative competence, cultural understanding, and religious textual engagement while remaining feasible within practical constraints presents considerable challenges. Research suggests that teachers often need extensive support to develop assessment literacy and implement alternative assessment approaches effectively.

The concept of curriculum fidelity versus adaptation represents an ongoing debate in implementation research. While some scholars emphasize implementing curricula with high fidelity to designer intentions, others argue that teacher adaptation based on contextual knowledge and professional judgment improves outcomes. Century and Cassata (2022) propose that effective implementation requires "adaptive integration" where teachers maintain fidelity to curriculum principles and core features while making strategic adaptations to fit their specific contexts and students' needs. This perspective suggests that supporting teachers in understanding curriculum principles and making principled adaptations, rather than demanding rigid adherence to prescribed methods, may yield better outcomes. For Arabic teachers implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, developing this adaptive integration

capacity becomes essential for maintaining Arabic instruction's religious and cultural dimensions while embracing pedagogical innovation.

C. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of Arabic language teachers implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at MTsN 1 Medan. Phenomenological research seeks to understand the essence of experiences from participants' perspectives, focusing on how individuals make meaning of particular phenomena in their lives. According to Creswell and Poth (2022), phenomenological approaches are particularly appropriate when researchers aim to understand common experiences among multiple individuals who have encountered the same phenomenon—in this case, Arabic teachers implementing a new curriculum. This methodology allows for deep exploration of teachers' cognitive, affective, and evaluative perceptions while respecting the complexity and individuality of their experiences. The phenomenological approach aligns with the research goal of understanding not just what teachers think about the curriculum but how they experience and make sense of implementation in their specific context.

Twelve Arabic language teachers at MTsN 1 Medan participated in this research, selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation of diverse characteristics relevant to curriculum perceptions including teaching experience, educational background, gender, and grade levels taught. Participants ranged from novice teachers with less than five years of experience to veteran educators with over twenty years in the profession, providing diverse perspectives shaped by different career stages and prior experiences with curriculum changes. All participants had been involved in Merdeka Curriculum implementation for at least two academic years, ensuring sufficient implementation experience to develop informed perceptions. Data collection occurred over four months and included three primary methods: semi-structured individual interviews lasting 60-90 minutes with each participant, exploring their understanding, experiences, and perceptions of the curriculum; non-participant classroom observations (three sessions per teacher) to observe implementation practices and compare with interview data; and document analysis including lesson plans, assessment materials, and teacher reflections to triangulate understanding of implementation approaches and challenges (Muhsyanur et al., 2021).

Data analysis followed Moustakas's (2021) phenomenological analysis procedures, beginning with epoché or bracketing researcher assumptions to approach data with openness. Initial analysis involved horizontalization, treating each statement as having equal value and identifying significant statements about teachers' experiences. These significant statements were organized into meaning units representing discrete aspects of the phenomenon. Meaning units were then clustered into themes capturing essential aspects of teachers' perceptions. For each participant, a textural description (what they experienced) and structural description (how they experienced it, including contextual influences) were developed. Finally, a composite description synthesizing essential structures of the experience across all participants was constructed, representing the essence of Arabic teachers' perceptions of Merdeka Curriculum implementation. Data analysis was facilitated by NVivo qualitative analysis software while maintaining researcher engagement with original texts and maintaining interpretive sensitivity.

Methodological rigor was enhanced through several strategies addressing trustworthiness criteria relevant to qualitative research. Credibility was established through prolonged engagement with participants and the research site, triangulation across multiple data sources, and member checking where participants reviewed preliminary findings to verify accurate representation of their experiences. Transferability was supported through thick description of the research context, participants, and findings, enabling readers to assess applicability to their contexts. Dependability was addressed through maintaining a detailed

audit trail documenting research decisions and analytic processes. Confirmability was enhanced through reflexive journaling where the researcher documented personal responses, assumptions, and interpretive choices throughout the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 2023). While the study's focus on a single institution limits statistical generalizability, the rich phenomenological description provides insights potentially transferable to similar madrasah contexts facing curriculum implementation challenges.

D. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Arabic language teachers at MTsN 1 Medan hold complex, nuanced perceptions of the Merdeka Curriculum that reflect both enthusiasm for pedagogical innovation and significant concerns about implementation challenges. Analysis of interview transcripts, classroom observations, and document materials revealed that teachers do not uniformly embrace or reject the curriculum but rather experience it as a multifaceted phenomenon with various dimensions that they evaluate differently. Teachers' perceptions have evolved through their implementation experiences, with initial abstract understanding giving way to more concrete, practice-based perspectives as they have worked with the curriculum over two academic years. Four major themes emerged from the data analysis: conceptual understanding and alignment with teaching philosophy, perceived pedagogical benefits and opportunities, implementation challenges and constraints, and support needs and professional development experiences. These themes capture the essential structures of teachers' experiences and provide insights into factors facilitating or hindering effective curriculum implementation.

Conceptual Understanding and Alignment with Teaching Philosophy

Teachers demonstrated varied levels of understanding regarding the Merdeka Curriculum's philosophical foundations and pedagogical principles, with some articulating sophisticated comprehension of constructivist learning theory and competency-based education while others held more surface-level or fragmented understanding. Experienced teachers who had participated in comprehensive professional development activities tended to express deeper conceptual understanding, articulating connections between curriculum principles and contemporary educational theory. For instance, one veteran teacher explained, "The Merdeka Curriculum reflects understanding that students construct knowledge actively rather than receiving it passively. This aligns with how language learning actually happens—through meaningful use and interaction, not just memorizing rules." In contrast, newer teachers and those with limited professional development exposure sometimes struggled to articulate clear understanding of curriculum principles beyond general statements about student-centered learning and flexibility.

The relationship between teachers' pre-existing teaching philosophies and curriculum principles significantly influenced their perceptions. Teachers whose prior approaches emphasized communicative language teaching and student engagement generally viewed the curriculum as validating and extending their existing practices. These teachers expressed enthusiasm about official endorsement of approaches they had been using informally, as one explained: "I've always believed Arabic should be taught communicatively, focusing on real communication, but previous curricula emphasized grammar and reading classical texts. The Merdeka Curriculum finally recognizes that developing speaking and listening skills matters." These teachers perceived the curriculum as aligned with their professional identities and values, creating positive affective responses and commitment to implementation.

However, teachers with more traditional pedagogical orientations expressed greater ambivalence or concern. Several teachers articulated tensions between the curriculum's communicative emphasis and their beliefs about Arabic language education's religious di-

mensions. One teacher reflected, "Teaching Arabic isn't just about communication skills—it's about enabling students to understand the Quran and Islamic texts. I worry that emphasizing everyday conversation might diminish this religious purpose." This perspective reveals how curriculum innovations can create identity tensions for teachers whose professional self-concepts center on religious education missions. These teachers did not reject the curriculum outright but struggled to reconcile its secular pedagogical framework with their understanding of Arabic teaching as religious practice.

Observation data revealed that teachers' conceptual understanding influenced their implementation approaches in complex ways. Teachers with sophisticated understanding of curriculum principles tended to implement more innovative practices including student-centered activities, differentiated instruction, and authentic assessment. However, even teachers with limited conceptual understanding attempted to implement curriculum-aligned practices, though sometimes superficially or inconsistently. Several teachers adopted new instructional formats like project-based learning while maintaining traditional teacher-controlled classroom dynamics, suggesting that changing visible practices proves easier than transforming underlying pedagogical assumptions. This pattern highlights the importance of ongoing professional development that addresses not just technical implementation skills but deeper pedagogical beliefs and understanding.

Perceived Pedagogical Benefits and Opportunities

Teachers identified numerous pedagogical benefits associated with the Merdeka Curriculum that they believed could enhance Arabic language learning when effectively implemented. The most frequently mentioned benefit was increased instructional flexibility allowing teachers to adapt teaching approaches to diverse student needs and local contexts. Teachers appreciated freedom to select appropriate materials, design contextually relevant activities, and adjust pacing based on student progress rather than rigidly following prescribed content sequences. One teacher enthused, "Finally we can teach responsively based on what students actually need rather than mechanically covering predetermined content. If students struggle with certain concepts, we can spend more time; if they grasp something quickly, we can move forward." This flexibility was perceived as particularly valuable given the diverse student populations at MTsN 1 Medan, where students arrive with varied Arabic language backgrounds.

Teachers also valued the curriculum's emphasis on authentic, meaningful language use over isolated grammar instruction and vocabulary memorization. Several teachers described how project-based learning activities engaged students more deeply than traditional textbook exercises. One teacher described a successful project: "Students created digital presentations about Islamic scholars, requiring research, writing, speaking, and technological skills. They were genuinely engaged because the project felt meaningful and connected to their interests." Teachers noted that such authentic activities enhanced student motivation and produced deeper learning than traditional approaches. Observation data confirmed that when teachers implemented well-designed authentic activities, student engagement and Arabic language use increased noticeably compared to traditional teacher-centered lessons.

The curriculum's attention to differentiated instruction was perceived as beneficial though challenging to implement. Teachers recognized that students have diverse learning needs, prior knowledge, and abilities, and appreciated that the curriculum explicitly endorsed differentiation rather than assuming one-size-fits-all instruction. Several teachers described experimenting with differentiation strategies including flexible grouping, tiered assignments, and varied assessment options. One teacher explained, "Some students can already read Arabic texts fluently while others struggle with basic vocabulary. The Merdeka Curriculum encourages us to provide different learning pathways rather than treating all

students identically." Teachers perceived this differentiation focus as potentially improving outcomes for both struggling and advanced students if adequately supported with strategies and resources.

However, teachers expressed that realizing these potential benefits required overcoming significant implementation challenges. The gap between philosophical appreciation of curriculum principles and practical implementation capacity created tension in teachers' perceptions. Most teachers viewed the curriculum's pedagogical innovations as theoretically sound and potentially beneficial but questioned whether adequate support and resources existed for effective implementation. This perception pattern—optimism tempered by pragmatic concerns—characterized many teachers' overall assessment of the curriculum. Teachers wanted to implement the curriculum well but felt uncertain about their ability to do so given current conditions, creating ambivalence in their perceptions despite recognizing potential benefits.

Implementation Challenges and Constraints

Teachers identified multiple challenges constraining their ability to implement the Merdeka Curriculum as envisioned, with time pressures emerging as the most pervasive concern. The curriculum's emphasis on project-based learning, differentiated instruction, and authentic assessment requires substantial preparation time that teachers reported lacking. Planning diverse learning activities for differentiated instruction, designing authentic assessments, and providing detailed feedback on student work all demand more time than teachers had available given their teaching loads and other responsibilities. One teacher lamented, "The curriculum sounds wonderful in theory, but implementing it well requires time I simply don't have. I teach six classes daily with over 180 students total. When do I design differentiated activities or provide individualized feedback?" Time constraints forced teachers to make difficult choices about which curriculum elements to prioritize and which to implement superficially or abandon.

Resource limitations represented another significant implementation barrier. Teachers reported inadequate Arabic learning materials aligned with Merdeka Curriculum principles, particularly materials supporting communicative language teaching and authentic assessment. While textbooks existed, teachers found them focused on grammar and reading rather than integrated skills and authentic communication. Several teachers described spending personal time and money developing their own materials or adapting existing resources, creating additional workload and quality variability. Technology resources also proved insufficient; while the curriculum envisioned technology-enhanced learning, many classrooms lacked reliable internet connectivity or adequate devices. Teachers expressed frustration that they were expected to implement contemporary pedagogical approaches without corresponding resource investments.

Assessment complexities presented substantial challenges that teachers found particularly daunting. The Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on authentic, formative assessment requiring descriptive feedback contrasts sharply with traditional paper-and-pencil examinations that teachers had experience administering and students and parents understood. Teachers struggled with designing valid performance assessments, developing clear rubrics, managing the workload of evaluating complex student work, and communicating assessment results to students and parents. Several teachers questioned the feasibility of authentic assessment given large class sizes and limited time. One teacher asked rhetorically, "How can I authentically assess 180 students' Arabic speaking skills individually? The logistics are overwhelming." Some teachers reverted to traditional tests despite philosophical agreement with alternative assessment, prioritizing feasibility over fidelity to curriculum principles.

The following table summarizes teachers' ratings of various implementation challenges on a scale from 1 (minor challenge) to 5 (severe challenge), based on interview responses:

The data reveal that time, resources, and assessment challenges were perceived as most severe and were mentioned by nearly all teachers, indicating these issues represent systemic implementation barriers requiring institutional and policy-level responses rather than individual teacher solutions. Notably, challenges related to stakeholder resistance (students, parents) were rated lower, suggesting that teachers perceived the primary obstacles as structural and resource-based rather than attitudinal.

Support Needs and Professional Development Experiences

Teachers articulated clear support needs for improving Merdeka Curriculum implementation, with professional development emerging as the highest priority. Teachers desired sustained, practical training focused on specific instructional strategies for communicative Arabic teaching, differentiated instruction techniques, authentic assessment design, and technology integration. However, teachers reported that the professional development they had received consisted primarily of brief workshops introducing curriculum concepts without adequate follow-up or practical application support. One teacher criticized, "We attended a two-day workshop where presenters explained curriculum philosophy, but we received little guidance on actually implementing it in our classrooms with our specific students and constraints." Teachers wanted professional development that addressed their subject-specific needs as Arabic language teachers rather than generic curriculum orientation.

The desire for collaborative professional learning emerged strongly from interview data. Teachers expressed interest in working with colleagues to share implementation experiences, develop common materials, solve problems collectively, and observe each other's teaching. Several teachers had informally collaborated with immediate colleagues but wanted more structured opportunities for professional learning communities. One teacher explained, "When I struggle with implementation challenges, talking with other Arabic teachers who face similar issues helps tremendously. We need regular time for this collaboration rather than trying to find moments between classes." Teachers recognized that effective implementation required collective capacity building rather than isolated individual efforts, and they wanted institutional structures supporting collaboration.

Access to implementation resources represented a critical support need. Beyond general learning materials, teachers specifically requested implementation guides providing detailed examples of curriculum-aligned Arabic lessons, differentiated activity templates, assessment rubrics, and technology resources. Teachers appreciated when the Ministry of Religious Affairs or educational organizations provided such resources but found available materials insufficient for their needs. Several teachers suggested that MTsN 1 Medan could develop internal resource libraries where teachers shared successful lessons and materials, creating institutional knowledge that would support consistent implementation and reduce individual teachers' material development burden.

Teachers also identified mentoring and coaching as valuable supports, particularly for newer teachers implementing the curriculum. Several experienced teachers had informally mentored colleagues, and both mentors and mentees found these relationships beneficial for implementation improvement. However, systematic mentoring programs did not exist at MTsN 1 Medan, and teachers wanted institutional support for coaching that provided ongo-

ing feedback on implementation. One teacher reflected, "Having an experienced colleague observe my teaching and provide specific suggestions for improvement would help far more than attending another general workshop." This preference for job-embedded, practice-based support aligns with research on effective professional development but requires institutional commitment and resource allocation.

on a scale from 1 (minor challenge) to 5 (severe challenge), based on interview responses:

Implementation Challenge	Mean Rating	Frequency of Mention
Insufficient preparation time	4.7	12/12 teachers
Limited Arabic learning resources	4.3	11/12 teachers
Assessment design and implementation	4.5	12/12 teachers
Large class sizes	4.2	10/12 teachers
Inadequate technology resources	3.8	9/12 teachers
Lack of clear implementation guidelines	4.1	11/12 teachers
Balancing religious and communicative goals	3.6	8/12 teachers
Student resistance to new approaches	2.9	7/12 teachers
Parental concerns about curriculum	3.2	6/12 teachers
Coordination with other teachers	3.4	8/12 teachers

E. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that Arabic language teachers at MTsN 1 Medan hold complex, multifaceted perceptions of the Merdeka Curriculum characterized by philosophical appreciation of student-centered pedagogical principles coupled with significant concerns about implementation feasibility given current support and resource conditions. Teachers recognize potential benefits including instructional flexibility, authentic language learning opportunities, and attention to diverse student needs, yet they struggle with substantial implementation challenges including time constraints, resource limitations, assessment complexities, and insufficient professional development. These findings underscore that successful curriculum implementation requires not merely policy adoption but comprehensive support systems addressing teachers' conceptual understanding, practical skills, material resources, and ongoing professional learning needs. For madrasah institutions implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, particular attention must be given to helping teachers balance contemporary pedagogical innovation with Arabic instruction's religious and cultural dimensions. The study recommends that MTsN 1 Medan and similar institutions invest in sustained, practice-based professional development, create collaborative learning structures supporting teacher collegiality, develop and share high-quality implementation resources, reduce structural barriers through reasonable workload expectations, and maintain ongoing dialogue with teachers about implementation experiences and needs. Future research should examine student learning outcomes associated with various implementation approaches, investigate factors enabling some teachers to implement more successfully than others, and explore how institutional leadership and organizational culture influence curriculum implementation in madrasah contexts.

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