

# TEACHER READINESS AND CHALLENGES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF MERDEKA CURRICULUM IN ISLAMIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

**Mulabbiyah<sup>1</sup>, Rosa Desmawanti<sup>2</sup>, Rohaya Sulong<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1,2</sup>Universitas Islam Negeri Mataram, <sup>3</sup>Sangkhom Islam Wittaya School

[<sup>1</sup>mulabbiyah@uinmataram.ac.id](mailto:mulabbiyah@uinmataram.ac.id), [<sup>2</sup>rosadesmawanti@uinmataram.ac.id](mailto:rosadesmawanti@uinmataram.ac.id),

[<sup>3</sup>tc20230@sangkhomislam.ac.th](mailto:tc20230@sangkhomislam.ac.th)

## ABSTRACT

Teachers are one of the spearheads of implementing the curriculum at school. With the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, it is important to know the readiness of teachers in implementing it and the challenges they face. This study aims to describe teachers' readiness to implement the Merdeka Curriculum in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Mataram City and identify the challenges faced. This research is qualitative. Data were collected through interviews, observation, and documentation. Furthermore, the data is analyzed interactively through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data validity testing was carried out by increasing diligence, triangulation of sources, and triangulation of methods. The results showed that the teacher's readiness to implement the Merdeka Curriculum in MI Mataram City was quite good, it just needed to be improved. Various challenges faced by teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum both in planning, implementing, and evaluating learning include (1) teachers do not fully understand and can develop Merdeka Curriculum learning tools, (2) it takes a long time to be able to compile all learning tools, especially teaching modules and project modules to strengthen the Pancasila Student Profile, (3) lack of supporting infrastructure, (4) large number of students for each class, (5) inadequate classroom size for differentiated learning, (6) lack of cooperation and parental involvement, (7) teachers have difficulty carrying out diagnostic assessments and preparing varied/different questions for formative assessments and summative assessments according to student learning needs.

Keywords: Teacher Readiness, Teacher Challenges, Implementation of Merdeka Curriculum.

## INTRODUCTION

The Merdeka Curriculum is one of the curriculum options offered by the Government to be implemented starting in the 2022/2023 academic year. Therefore, the Ministry of Religious Affairs through Decree of the Director General of Pendis No. 3811 of 2022 has determined 2471 Madrasah as implementers of the Merdeka Curriculum, starting from the Raudatul Athfal (RA) level to Madrasah Aliyah (MA). The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is carried out in stages, for the 2022/2023 academic year in grades I and IV MI, grade 7 MTs, and grade 10 MA / MAK. The "Introduction" section discusses the background of the problem from the research that has been done; what are the gaps and confusion of the researcher/writer between the facts that happened and what should have happened in the field. In addition, it also

discusses the novelty of research from several previous studies or current theories, so that new things will be produced.

As a "new" curriculum, the Merdeka Curriculum is echoed as having the concept of simplifying the curriculum, providing room for creation and flexibility for education units in managing learning. The Merdeka Curriculum was initially introduced during the transition period of the covid 19 pandemic as a form of improvement to the 2013 curriculum (Saputra & Hadi, 2022) and as one of the solutions to overcome the impact of covid 19 in the world of education that experienced learning loss (Kemendikbud, 2022) and is designed to catch up with Indonesia in literacy and numeracy (Anas et al., 2023).

Teachers, as the frontline and direct implementers of curriculum implementation in schools (Dhani, 2020; Rouf & Lufita, 2018; Zamili, 2020), are required to have the ability to implement the Merdeka Curriculum. Teachers have an important role in improving the quality of learning and the success of implementing this new curriculum is highly dependent on teachers (Suhandi & Robi'ah, 2022; Sunardi & Karyono, 2023). However, because the Merdeka Curriculum is new, there is not much research on this.

To be able to carry out their roles and functions as demanded by the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers must have a progressive, adaptive, and futuristic attitude towards life and changing times (Suhandi & Robi'ah, 2022). Teachers must be aware of technology in the hope that the learning process can be carried out in an in-depth, fun, creative, and innovative manner. Teachers are expected to be able to inspire students to think deeply and be able to analyze thinking so that they can find solutions wisely. His professional competence supports learning in the classroom so that he can be an inspiration for students (Anas et al., 2023).

The Ministry of Religious Affairs has issued guidelines that serve as a reference for madrasahs in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, namely KMA Number 347 of 2022. This guideline aims to provide independence for madrasahs to manage education and learning, and to improve the quality and competitiveness of madrasahs according to the demands of 21st century competencies.

In Mataram City, for the MI level, out of 28 existing MIs, 3 MIs were selected as pilot implementers of the Merdeka Curriculum starting in the 2022/2023 school year, namely MIN 1 Mataram City, MIN 2 Mataram City, and MIN 3 Mataram City. As the first piloting implementation, of course, the madrasah and teachers cannot help but be ready to implement the Merdeka Curriculum with all its challenges.

Therefore, it is necessary to conduct a study to determine the readiness of teachers to implement the Merdeka Curriculum and the challenges faced so that it can be used as reflection material for feedback and improvement, especially for teachers, schools, and policymakers. In addition, the results of this study are expected to be a lesson for other madrasahs that will implement the Merdeka Curriculum to better prepare themselves and anticipate the challenges that exist, with the hope that in the future the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum will be better and as expected. The number of madrasahs that will implement the Merdeka Curriculum will certainly increase in the following years. Therefore, this research is very important to do.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Definition of Independent Curriculum

According to Suhandi and Robiah (2022), the curriculum is a mandatory tool that serves as a guide or guideline in the implementation of education and the learning process at school. The Merdeka Curriculum is an optional curriculum that education units can implement starting in the 2022/2023 academic year (Barlian, et al., 2022). Previously, the Merdeka Curriculum had been implemented on a limited basis in 2,499 education units participating in the driving school program (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021). According to Saputra & Hadi (2022: 32), the Merdeka Curriculum is a new paradigm curriculum that aims to provide a meaningful, happy, and enjoyable learning process for students to prepare a golden generation in 2045 according to the lofty ideals initiated by the Minister of Education Culture Research and Technology. The hallmark of this independent curriculum is to uphold flexibility between schools, teachers, and students in learning.

Referring to the guidelines for curriculum implementation in the context of learning recovery issued by Kemendikbudristek (2022), it is known that the structure of the Merdeka Curriculum is different from the previous curriculum structure (Kurtillas). In the Merdeka Curriculum, the curriculum structure is divided into two main activities, namely intracurricular learning and a project to strengthen the profile of Pancasila students.

### **Teacher Challenges in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum**

As something "new", in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers face various challenges. The results of Nurcahyono & Putra's research (2022) mention various challenges faced by elementary school teachers in West Java in terms of planning, implementing, and evaluating learning. Obstacles in planning include (1) lack of understanding of how to reduce/translate CP into learning objectives; (2) heterogeneity of students in the classroom; (3) lack of references to differentiated learning models; (4) limited infrastructure available at school; (5) limited prior knowledge and subject matter. Barriers to learning implementation include (1) limited understanding of subject matter with relevant knowledge; (2) limited accommodation of open-ended questions; and (3) limited understanding of student psychology. Barriers to learning evaluation include (1) inappropriate paradigm of preliminary assessment; (2) limitations of identifying the learning process; and (3) limited understanding of formative assessment.

Kemendikbudristek (2022) mentioned that some teachers experience challenges in conducting differentiated learning due to limited time to design differentiated learning based on students' individual needs, while others have difficulty grouping students based on readiness due to a large number of learners and limited classroom space. The lack of time allocation for each lesson schedule also impacts the assessment process and the implementation of learning in the classroom (Tanggor, 2023). Even the lack of supporting facilities and diverse learning resources is also said to be a challenge in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum (Ramadani et. al, 2023).

### **METHODOLOGY**

This research includes phenomenological qualitative research. Phenomenological research describes the common meaning of several individuals regarding their various

experiences related to concepts or phenomena (Creswell, 2018). Data were collected through interviews, observation, and documentation. Interviews were conducted with 20 research subjects consisting of 3 madrasah heads, 1 deputy head of curriculum, grade 1 teachers, and grade 4 teachers from MIN 1, MIN 2, and MIN 3 Mataram City. Furthermore, the data were analyzed interactively through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Sugiyono, 2019). Data reduction is done by summarizing and selecting the main things so that a clear picture is obtained related to what is being studied, henceforth presented in the form of a brief description, as material for concluding. Data validity testing was carried out by increasing persistence, triangulating sources, and triangulating methods. The Research Methods section discusses what the description of the research being conducted looks like, where is the location of the research, how is the process of collecting accurate data, and what is the way to process the data to get the appropriate research results, whether this type of research is qualitative, quantitative, or other types of research.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Teacher Readiness to Implement the Merdeka Curriculum

Teachers as the spearhead of implementing education in schools, who are in direct contact with students, have an important role in curriculum implementation, including the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, which is currently being implemented in Indonesia as one of the school's preferred curriculum options. Based on that, it is important to describe teacher readiness in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum.

According to (Muhafid & Retnawati, 2022), teacher readiness in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum is a response to the surrounding environment for changes for the better. In this study, teachers' readiness to implement the Merdeka Curriculum in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Mataram City is described through the following four aspects:

#### 1. Teachers' Understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum Structure

In the Merdeka Curriculum, the curriculum structure is different from the previous curriculum, where the Merdeka Curriculum is divided into two, namely intracurricular learning and a project to strengthen the profile of Pancasila students.

Lesson content organization can be done using subjects or thematically. In addition, in the Merdeka curriculum, the term phase is recognized. In elementary school, there are 3 phases, namely phase A for grade I and grade II, phase B for grades III and IV, and phase C for grade V and grade VI.

Based on the results of the interviews, it is known that all teachers in MI Mataram City are aware of changes in the curriculum structure in the Merdeka Curriculum. All chose to organize the lesson content using subjects and design projects to strengthen Pancasila students in an integrated or simultaneous manner. This understanding of the structure of the Merdeka Curriculum is known by teachers through socialization and technical guidance activities that have been participated in, both at the school level, teacher working groups (KKG), and madrasah working groups (KKM).

So, it can be concluded that teachers in MI Mataram City have a good understanding of the changes in the curriculum structure in the Merdeka Curriculum. A good understanding of the structure of the Merdeka Curriculum is the basic capital for teachers to be able to implement the Merdeka Curriculum. In addition, teachers must have the willingness to make changes according to the existing curriculum structure.

## 2. Lesson Planning Readiness

The learning planning readiness data explored through this research is the understanding of MI teachers in Mataram City regarding learning planning in the Merdeka Curriculum and the availability of learning planning documents. In the Merdeka Curriculum, the process of designing learning activities begins with analyzing learning outcomes, followed by formulating learning objectives, compiling a flow of learning objectives, and designing learning in the form of lesson plans (RPP) or teaching modules.

Based on interviews, through socialization and training/technical activities related to the Merdeka Curriculum that has been attended, teachers in MI Mataram City know the stages of preparing lesson plans. Where the preparation of learning planning begins with looking at the learning outcomes (CP) that have been formulated by the Government through the Decree of the Standards Agency, Curriculum and Educational Assessment of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology, and the

Decree of the Director General of Islamic Education of the Ministry of Religion. Furthermore, based on CP, the Learning Objectives (TP), the flow of learning objectives (ATP), and Teaching Modules are formulated.

However, teachers have not fully developed their own TP, ATP, and Teaching Modules. The teaching modules created by teachers still adapt examples provided by the government and are limited to certain subjects, not covering all subjects taught. This is by the government's direction which states that teachers can use examples of lesson plans and teaching modules provided by the government. Teachers can use and or adapt these examples to the needs of students if they have not designed/developed their own (Kemendikbud, 2022).

### 3. Learning Implementation Readiness

In the Merdeka Curriculum, learning is carried out by providing varied learning materials according to students' understanding. Learning should be carried out according to the stages of student achievement (teaching at the right level). Therefore, the Merdeka curriculum is known as differentiated learning. Differentiated learning is a form of effort in a series of lessons that pays attention to student needs in terms of learning readiness, learning profile, interests, and talents (Ningrum et al., 2023). For this reason, the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes the importance of integrating learning with assessment. Before learning is carried out, it is necessary to conduct an assessment at the beginning of learning to determine students' readiness to learn the material that the teacher has designed. Based on the results of the initial assessment, teachers need to make efforts to adjust learning strategies to suit students' learning needs.

MI teachers in Mataram City admitted that they already knew the concept of differentiated learning, which requires an initial assessment before learning activities, students in the classroom are treated or prepared materials and LKS according to their learning needs, and students are grouped based on the results of the initial assessment and given treatment based on the results of the initial assessment. It's just that in its implementation it is not easy to do because of various obstacles and challenges, this

finding is also in line with what Kemendikbudristek (2022) said that for some teachers doing differentiated learning is not a simple thing, there are many challenges.

There are several skills that teachers must master in implementing differentiated learning, namely 1) teachers must create a learning atmosphere that can stimulate students in learning; 2) teachers have skills in fostering student curiosity; 3) teachers can design and organize a learning environment that is comfortable, safe and able to motivate students in participating in every learning process that is tailored to the learning style, interests, and talents of students (Handayani & Muhtar, 2022).

To meet the diverse learning needs of students, there are at least 3 ways of differentiation that teachers can do, namely content differentiation, process differentiation, and product differentiation. Content differentiation is carried out by teachers by mapping student learning needs on learning profile indicators so that they can provide opportunities for students naturally and efficiently according to the methods needed. Process differentiation includes tiered activities, providing guiding questions, creating an individualized agenda, utilizing the duration of time for students to complete their assignments, developing visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning styles, and creating groups according to the abilities and interests of each student. Product differentiation. Where the product in question is the output of the learning that has been done such as essays, speeches, presentations, and others. This product differentiation aims to make students' understanding broader and to challenge the creativity and expectations of learning that students want (Ningrum et al., 2023).

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#### 4. Learning Assessment Readiness

In the Merdeka Curriculum, the term assessment is known as assessment. Assessment and learning are a unity that should be inseparable. The Merdeka Curriculum recognizes two assessments, namely formative assessment and summative assessment. Formative assessment is carried out at the beginning and during the learning process while summative assessment is carried out at the end of learning to determine the achievement of one or more learning objectives.

Based on the results of interviews, MI Mataram City teachers are aware of the initial assessment, assessment during learning, and final assessment to determine the achievement of learning objectives in the Merdeka Curriculum. Most teachers conduct initial assessments by assessing students' reading skills or conducting literacy assessments. The initial assessment is carried out using the reading ability instrument provided by the resource person during the training. Some conducted the assessment using manual instruments by giving reading texts to students and using instruments in the form of applications. In addition to assessing literacy/reading texts, some teachers also assess the ability to read the Qur'an, especially for grade 1 students.

This initial assessment is important for teachers to know the initial abilities of students which become material for teachers to design learning activities. The initial assessment is formative because it is not part of the assessment of student learning outcomes reported on the report card (Kemendikbudristek, 2022).

Initial assessment is also known as diagnostic assessment. This diagnostic assessment is divided into two, namely cognitive diagnostic assessment and non-cognitive diagnostic assessment. Cognitive assessment aims to identify students' competency achievements while non-cognitive assessment aims to determine students'

learning styles, characters, and interests (Komalawati in Nasution, 2022). Based on this, it can be said that the initial assessment conducted by MI Mataram City teachers is more on cognitive assessment which aims to identify students' initial abilities.

MI Mataram City teachers also conduct assessments in the learning process. This assessment is carried out by preparing student worksheets (LKP) per student learning needs, asking students to come forward to work on the problems given, and asking students to answer verbally the questions given by the teacher. Assessment in the learning process is also included in formative assessment because it is carried out to determine student learning progress and as quick feedback (Kemendikbudristek, 2022).

The final assessment which aims to determine the learning achievement of students, has not been carried out by the teachers of MI Mataram City because the research process was carried out when the new school year was running for about 3 - 4 weeks. However, it was conveyed by the teachers of MIN Kota Mataram that later in time a final assessment will be carried out to determine students' learning achievements, the results of which will be part of the assessment in the report card.

This final assessment is called a summative assessment, which is conducted to ensure the achievement of all learning objectives. This summative assessment can be done at the end of the learning process or it can be done at the same time for two or more learning objectives, according to teacher policy and school policy (Kemendikbudristek, 2022).

Thus it can be concluded that the teachers of MI Mataram City already have the readiness to conduct learning assessments because they already know assessments obtained through training/technical activities that have been followed. However, the implementation still faces various challenges.

### **Teacher Challenges in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum**

In the Big Indonesian Dictionary, challenges are defined as things or objects that need to be overcome; things or objects that arouse determination to improve the ability to overcome problems; and stimulation to work harder. Based on that, in this study, challenges are interpreted as conditions or things faced by teachers in implementing the

Merdeka Curriculum, which need to be overcome for better results. In this study, the challenges faced by teachers in implementation are grouped into 3 challenges, namely as follows:

### 1. Challenges in Learning Planning

The preparation of learning planning in the Merdeka Curriculum begins with analyzing the Learning Outcomes set by the government. Furthermore, based on the Learning Outcomes, learning objectives are formulated. From the learning objectives, the Learning Objectives Flow and the learning plan are prepared in the form of a Learning Implementation Plan (RPP) or Teaching Module. The preparation of the Learning Objectives Flow and Teaching Modules is the authority of the teacher and to be able to compile and develop it is a challenge for teachers, especially in MI Mataram City.

Based on interviews with teachers, the challenges faced include: First, teachers feel that they do not fully understand how to develop learning plans so they need to learn again to understand it better, starting from reducing learning outcomes to learning objectives and how to compile a flow of learning objectives and develop teaching modules. What teachers have understood is limited to the terms used in the Merdeka Curriculum learning tools, which are different from the previous curriculum.

This finding is in line with Nurcahyono & Putra's (2022) findings, which state that teachers' obstacles in lesson planning include a lack of knowledge to reduce learning outcomes to learning objectives, Likewise, Febrianningsih & Ramadhan's (2023) findings state that teachers' lack of understanding is one of the obstacles in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Teachers do not understand the essence of the Merdeka Curriculum learning tools (Tanggur, 2023; Kurniati, L. & Kusumawati, R, 2023).

### 2. Challenges in Learning Implementation

In the Merdeka Curriculum, learning implementation should be carried out by paying attention to students' learning needs. It requires the use of various learning strategies that accommodate students' learning styles. However, in its implementation,

teachers face various challenges. Based on interviews with MI Mataram City teachers, it is known that the challenges faced in differentiated learning are as follows:

First, the large number of students in one class. Ideally, the number of students in a class is 28 students but the number of students in grade 1 and grade IV in MI Mataram City is more than 35 students and some even up to 42 students per class. This causes teachers to find it difficult to give attention based on student ability groups, especially to students who have less ability so teachers often choose to do classical learning. The large number of students also causes teachers to be less able to meet the needs of students who vary and have diverse characteristics. Teachers feel there is a need for a companion teacher in classroom learning.

Secondly, the size of the classroom is inadequate due to the large number of students, causing limited access and mobility of students in the classroom. This makes it difficult for teachers to use various learning strategies that require movement and large spaces. Also, the limited number of classrooms causes the use of classrooms to be alternated, 07.00 - 10.30 is used by class 1, and 10.45 - 15.00 is used by class IV. This causes teachers to be unable to provide additional guidance in the classroom.

The results of this finding are in line with the results of the Kemendikbudristek survey (2022) which states that some teachers experience challenges in conducting differentiated learning due to limited time to design differentiated learning based on individual student needs. Others have difficulty grouping students based on readiness due to the large number of learners and limited classroom space.

Third, the lack of supporting learning infrastructure such as LCDs, learning resources, supporting books, and teacher handbooks is also a challenge for teachers to provide learning that suits student needs. In line with the results of Ramadani et.al's literature review (2023), the lack of supporting facilities such as adequate classrooms, adequate software and hardware, and varied learning resources is one of the challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum.

Fourth, the lack of cooperation and involvement of parents is also a challenge for teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Even though parental support is also

very important in the process of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum both in the form of their presence and attention (Febrianningsih, R. & Ramadan, Z.H., 2023).

### 3. Challenges in Learning Assessment

The Merdeka Curriculum recognizes two assessments, namely, formative assessment and summative assessment. Formative assessment is an assessment carried out at the beginning of learning and during learning. Assessment at the beginning of learning is also known as a diagnostic assessment to identify student learning needs. Assessment during the learning process is used as a reflection on the learning as a whole. Summative assessment is often carried out at the end of the learning process, the end of the school year, or the end of the education level to assess the achievement of student learning outcomes. MI teachers in Mataram City also face challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum assessment, namely:

First, teachers have difficulty conducting diagnostic assessments, given the large number of students so it takes a lot of time to conduct assessments and correct the results. This finding is in line with the findings of Tanggor (2023) which states that the lack of time allocation in each learning schedule has an impact on the diagnostic assessment process and conducting learning activities. In addition, teachers are also still confused about carrying out and compiling diagnostic assessments, which consist of cognitive diagnostic assessments and non-cognitive diagnostic assessments (Ariesta, D. et al, 2023). It takes special time for teachers to prepare diagnostic assessment questions, time for students to work, and time to analyze the results of diagnostic assessments (Kurniati, L. & Kusumawati, R. 2023).

Secondly, teachers need to prepare a variety of different questions according to children's abilities for formative and summative assessments. Based on the results of the diagnostic assessment, it is known that students' abilities, requests, and learning styles are different so teachers need to prepare a diverse package of questions based on students' abilities to conduct formative and summative assessments. Formative assessment is conducted during the learning process as a continuous cycle and

summative assessment focuses more on giving grades to students as an accurate picture of student learning achievement.

## CONCLUSION

Teacher readiness in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in MI Mataram City is quite good because they have participated in socialization and training/technical guidance on implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. MI Mataram City teachers already understand the curriculum structure and know about the concepts of lesson planning, differentiated learning, and assessment in the Merdeka Curriculum. The challenges faced by MI Mataram City teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum include (1) teachers do not fully understand and can develop Merdeka Curriculum learning tools, (2) it takes a long time to be able to compile all Merdeka Curriculum learning tools, especially teaching modules and project modules to strengthen the Pancasila Student Profile, (3) lack of supporting infrastructure, (4) large number of students for each study group, (5) inadequate classroom size for differentiated learning, (6) lack of cooperation and parental involvement, (7) teachers have difficulty carrying out diagnostic assessments, and (8) teachers need to prepare varied/different questions for formative assessments and summative assessments according to student learning needs.

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