



## Teaching at the Margins: Navigating Curriculum Reform in Indonesia's Remote Primary Schools

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### ABSTRACT

Curriculum reform research increasingly emphasizes the importance of understanding how teachers experience and respond to educational change, particularly in underserved regions. In Indonesia, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum has presented new challenges and expectations for teachers in 3T (frontier, remote, and disadvantaged) areas. However, little is known about how these teachers make sense of their experiences under such conditions, raising the question: How do educators in 3T regions interpret and adapt to the demands of curriculum reform? This study applies an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of elementary school teachers implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in 3T settings. Data were collected over a four-month period through semi-structured interviews with twelve teachers. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with twelve teachers and analyzed thematically to identify patterns of meaning. The findings revealed four key themes: infrastructural constraints, professional identity transformation, localized pedagogical adaptations, and emotional commitment. These themes illustrate how teachers construct meaning amid systemic limitations and contribute to a deeper understanding of professional agency in marginalized contexts. The study enhances our comprehension of how educational reform is experienced on the ground and suggests the value of context-sensitive, human-centered policy design.



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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, global shifts in educational reform have emphasized the need for learner-centered pedagogies and localized curriculum development, particularly in diverse and decentralized educational systems. Indonesia's implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum marks a significant step in this direction, aiming to foster student autonomy, contextual learning, and teacher innovation (Meng dkk., 2019). However, the adoption of such reform across heterogeneous socio-geographical regions has highlighted deep disparities in educational access and implementation capacity—especially in 3T areas (frontier, remote, and disadvantaged regions), where infrastructural limitations and professional isolation often prevail.

Curriculum reform, by its nature, is not merely a technical adjustment but a profound transformation of pedagogical identity, practice, and values. For teachers, especially those in remote contexts, the shift involves reinterpreting their roles, responsibilities, and relationships with learners, often without sufficient systemic support. This phenomenon intersects not only with educational policy but also with the sociocultural realities of marginalization, resource scarcity, and the evolving identity of the teaching profession.

Understanding such experiences requires more than statistical indicators of reform success; it necessitates an exploration of the human dimension—the meanings teachers attach to their work, the challenges they internalize, and the adaptive strategies they develop (Pesovski dkk., 2024). These

subjective experiences carry significant weight in shaping how educational reform is enacted and sustained in practice. Yet, such lived realities often remain absent from policy discourse and academic literature, which tend to privilege generalized outcomes over individual meaning-making.

There is, therefore, a compelling need to explore the experiential dimension of curriculum implementation in remote and under-resourced settings. A phenomenological approach offers the means to access these inner worlds, illuminating how educators in 3T areas live through, interpret, and give meaning to curricular change. Such exploration is crucial not only for understanding the implementation process in context but also for informing culturally responsive and context-sensitive educational policy development.

The exploration of teachers' lived experiences in curriculum implementation has emerged as a significant domain within educational research, particularly in contexts marked by systemic disparities and policy-driven transformations (Prystupa dkk., 2020). This line of inquiry seeks to understand not just what teachers do, but how they perceive, interpret, and assign meaning to their practices within specific socio-cultural and institutional landscapes. In the case of Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum, such experiential inquiry becomes vital, especially in underserved regions where the conditions of teaching diverge starkly from urban educational environments.

Despite the recognized importance of understanding these subjective experiences, much of the existing literature remains anchored in quantitative frameworks or macro-level policy analysis. These approaches, while valuable for measuring outcomes and identifying trends, often fall short in capturing the nuanced realities and internal meaning-making processes of educators. For instance, previous studies have relied heavily on surveys or performance indicators, which may obscure the depth and complexity of teachers' emotional, professional, and cultural engagements with curriculum reform (Rahman dkk., 2023).

Moreover, methodological challenges persist in accessing the deeper layers of experience that shape how individuals embody and respond to systemic change. Traditional data collection tools frequently fail to penetrate the inner lifeworlds of participants, particularly when dealing with phenomena that are contextually situated and personally interpreted. As a result, existing research often overlooks the lived dimensions of curriculum enactment—dimensions that are especially salient in remote settings where educators operate under constrained conditions with limited institutional support.

This methodological gap underscores the inadequacy of prior approaches in fully grasping the essence of teachers' experiences in 3T regions. It calls for a research design capable of revealing the interpretative and emotional textures of educational work, grounded in the voices and perspectives of those most directly affected. Phenomenology, with its commitment to meaning-centered inquiry, presents a powerful alternative for addressing this need.

In response to challenges associated with curriculum implementation in remote regions, most practical solutions have centered on standardized training modules, administrative interventions, and outcome-based performance metrics. These strategies, while offering structural support, tend to overlook the subjective dimensions of teaching, particularly the emotional and cognitive processes through which educators internalize and respond to reform policies. Consequently, such approaches often fail to capture the richness of individual meaning-making, especially in socio-educational landscapes shaped by systemic marginalization.

Existing studies have largely adopted positivist methodologies that prioritize measurable indicators over experiential narratives. While useful for evaluating broad trends, these methods are limited in their ability to reveal the nuanced, contextualized realities faced by teachers in 3T areas. For example, survey-based research may identify that teachers lack resources or training, but it rarely uncovers how these limitations are lived, interpreted, or resisted by the educators themselves (Tang & Tang, 2024).

This gap highlights a critical limitation in current educational research: the insufficient attention to the lived, interpretive dimensions of teaching within under-resourced settings. What remains underexplored is how teachers in such contexts make sense of their professional identity,

navigate curricular change, and develop adaptive strategies in response to systemic constraints. These experiential insights are essential for designing responsive and sustainable policy interventions that resonate with the realities on the ground.

A phenomenological approach offers a compelling alternative by foregrounding the voices and experiences of those directly involved in the phenomenon. It allows for a deeper, more holistic understanding of how teachers experience curriculum reform—not simply as a policy directive, but as a lived process that reshapes their identities, practices, and sense of purpose. Such insight is indispensable for informing education reform efforts that are both contextually grounded and human-centered.

Previous studies have examined the implementation of curriculum reform in various settings, yet most have focused on structural outcomes or policy analysis. Research by (Vega dkk., 2023) highlighted the challenges faced by rural teachers, but offered limited insight into their lived experiences and personal meanings. Other investigations have utilized thematic analysis or narrative accounts, often lacking the depth provided by a phenomenological lens. The subjective realities of educators in remote areas, especially regarding how they interpret and adapt to the Merdeka Curriculum, remain underexplored. This study addresses that gap by centering the voices of teachers in 3T regions.

This research adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore how teachers experience and make sense of curriculum reform in challenging contexts. This method was selected for its ability to uncover rich, detailed insights into personal meaning-making. It allows for a deeper understanding of how teachers construct their professional identity and respond emotionally and practically to policy changes. Through this approach, the study answers the central question: How do teachers in 3T areas experience the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum? The findings are grounded in direct experiences and offer perspectives that are often absent in policy-driven literature.

This article is structured as follows: The introduction outlines the problem and research gap. The next section describes the context of the Merdeka Curriculum and the conditions in 3T educational settings (Vogelzang dkk., 2019). The methodology section explains the phenomenological framework, data collection, and analysis procedures. This is followed by a detailed presentation of results, organized by emerging themes. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings and suggestions for policy and practice.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of elementary school teachers implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in 3T (frontier, remote, and disadvantaged) regions of Indonesia. The IPA framework was chosen due to its emphasis on capturing the depth of meaning embedded in participants' subjective experiences. This design allows for a nuanced understanding of how individuals interpret and make sense of significant events within their social and cultural contexts (Wang dkk., 2024). In this study, IPA facilitated the interpretation of professional, emotional, and contextual meanings ascribed by teachers to their roles in curriculum implementation. The interpretative nature of this approach acknowledges the co-construction of meaning between the participant and the researcher and emphasizes the hermeneutic cycle in understanding the phenomena.

### **Participants**

Participants consisted of twelve elementary school teachers (7 female, 5 male) working in rural and remote schools categorized within Indonesia's 3T classification. The purposive sampling technique was used to ensure participants had direct, relevant, and sustained experience with implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Inclusion criteria required participants to have a minimum of two years of teaching experience in a 3T area and direct involvement in curriculum implementation

activities. Teachers undergoing administrative roles without classroom teaching responsibilities were excluded. The average age of participants was 36 years, with a teaching experience range of 5 to 20 years, reflecting a broad spectrum of professional maturity and context-specific insight.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted in person over a period of three months. Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and was held in a private space within the school environment to ensure participant comfort and confidentiality. An interview protocol was designed to guide discussions around key areas such as instructional adaptation, perceived professional identity, emotional challenges, and contextual innovations. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and supported by field notes (Yang & Hsu, 2020). The protocol was developed based on principles of phenomenological inquiry and was reviewed by two qualitative research experts prior to data collection.

### **Data Analysis**

Interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The analytic process involved iterative readings of transcripts, identification of emergent meaning units, and clustering of these into thematic categories. Each transcript was examined individually before identifying patterns across cases. NVivo 12 software was used to assist in coding and theme development, although analytic decisions were grounded in the philosophical tenets of IPA. This process enabled the development of rich, descriptive themes that reflected the participants' perspectives and conveyed the essential structure of their lived experiences.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained from a recognized institutional ethics review board prior to data collection (Zhang dkk., 2023). Written informed consent was provided by all participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the study by assigning pseudonyms and securely storing all digital and physical data. The research adhered to internationally accepted ethical guidelines for human subject research, including respect for autonomy, non-maleficence, and justice.

## **RESULTS**

### **Navigating Curricular Change Amid Infrastructural Constraints**

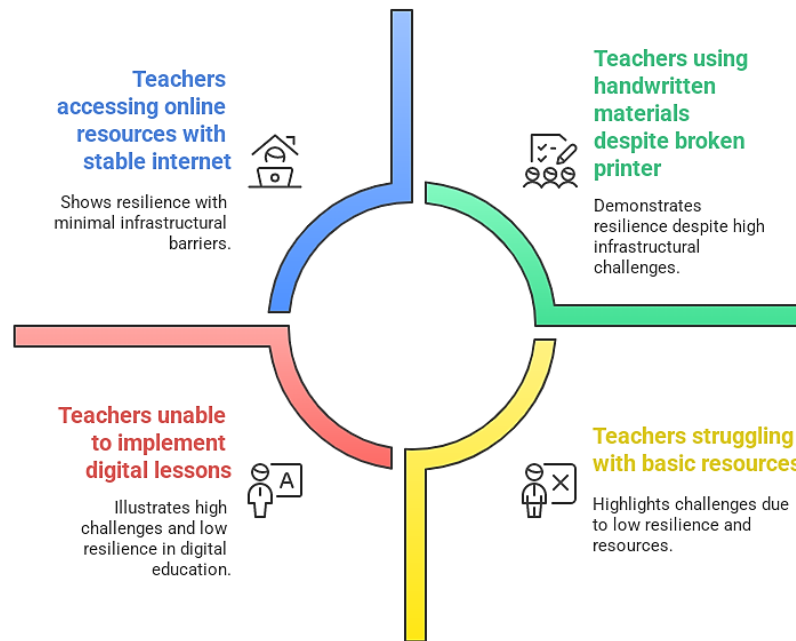
Teachers in 3T areas consistently described significant physical and logistical barriers that affected their ability to implement the Merdeka Curriculum. Limited access to internet, outdated teaching materials, and inadequate school facilities were recurrent challenges. Despite these constraints, teachers demonstrated a strong sense of resilience.

“Sometimes the electricity doesn't come for days. How can I play educational videos for my students or access the lesson plans online?” (P2)

“We share one printer with three schools, and it's broken more than it works. I often have to write everything by hand for the students.” (P6)

These infrastructural challenges were not merely technical limitations but were deeply embedded in the teachers' lived experiences of feeling excluded from national reforms.

### **Challenges and Resilience in Curriculum Implementation**



### The Struggle for Professional Identity in Marginalized Settings

Implementing a new curriculum was perceived by participants as a moment of professional testing and transformation. Several teachers expressed an initial sense of inadequacy due to lack of training or support, but over time, many developed a renewed professional identity.

“I didn’t understand what ‘project-based learning’ meant at first. I felt like a student again, lost and unsure. But I slowly figured it out—by experimenting and sharing ideas with colleagues.” (P4)

“When I see my students excited to lead their own projects, it reminds me why I became a teacher. It gives meaning to my work in this remote area.” (P9)

The Merdeka Curriculum acted both as a source of confusion and a catalyst for personal and professional growth, reshaping how teachers saw themselves within the educational system.

### Adaptive Strategies and Localized Innovation

Participants shared various adaptive strategies to bridge the gap between the curriculum’s demands and the contextual realities of their teaching environments. Innovation was often improvised and resource-driven, grounded in local culture and environmental knowledge.

“We created our own learning materials using local stories and traditional games. It made the lessons more relatable for the children.” (P3)

“Since there is no internet, we record our lessons on a loudspeaker and play them for the whole class—at least that way, no one is left behind.” (P7)

These adaptations illustrate the teachers' agency in shaping curriculum delivery, emphasizing pedagogical creativity in under-resourced settings.

### Emotional Burden and Moral Commitment

Teachers described the emotional labor involved in trying to meet the curriculum’s expectations while working in isolation and facing community skepticism. Yet, their narratives were consistently underpinned by a strong moral commitment to student development.

“Sometimes I cry at night. It’s hard to stay motivated when you feel forgotten. But my students are my hope, and I won’t give up on them.” (P1)

“They say teaching in the city is better, but I feel that being here, where the students need me most, is my calling.” (P8)

This theme captures the emotional complexity of their roles, marked by fatigue, hope, and a deep sense of responsibility.

The findings reveal a multilayered experience of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in 3T regions: navigating systemic limitations, redefining professional identity, crafting context-responsive strategies, and enduring emotional strain. These themes illuminate how curriculum reform is not merely a policy event, but a deeply personal and situated process shaped by teachers’ lived realities.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study reveal that elementary school teachers in 3T regions experience curriculum reform as a deeply personal and emotional journey shaped by structural limitations, adaptive resilience, and a redefined sense of professional identity (Al Shloul dkk., 2024). These lived experiences directly address the core research question regarding how teachers make meaning of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in marginalized contexts.

The study contributes uniquely to answering this question by illuminating not only the practical challenges teachers face but also the existential and affective dimensions of their roles. Teachers did not passively receive curriculum mandates; instead, they actively negotiated their meanings through acts of improvisation, emotional commitment, and cultural adaptation. Their narratives reflect a process of internal transformation, wherein curricular change is experienced not simply as policy compliance, but as a re-articulation of identity and purpose. These insights provide a textured, humanized understanding of curriculum implementation—an area previously dominated by metrics and generalizations.

In relation to prior research, these findings align with the interpretive dimensions emphasized in the work of (Bhuttah dkk., 2024), who also noted the importance of understanding curriculum reform through the lens of teacher subjectivity. However, unlike studies that stop at identifying barriers (Bohari dkk., 2024), this research extends the discourse by offering insight into how meaning is constructed in the face of adversity. The data affirm theoretical positions within interpretative phenomenology (Chen dkk., 2024), which view human experience as always situated and meaning-laden. In this regard, the teachers’ strategies and emotional labor not only reinforce but enrich the theoretical understanding of professional agency in low-resource educational contexts.

### **Implications of the Findings**

The findings of this study hold significant implications for educational policy and teacher development, particularly in contexts marked by geographical isolation and limited resources. From a phenomenological standpoint, the emotional labor and adaptive ingenuity of teachers in 3T areas reflect not only their professional dedication but also the socio-cultural narratives of resilience and marginality. These experiences point to the urgent need for policy frameworks that acknowledge the lived realities of educators and offer flexible, context-sensitive implementation strategies. More broadly, the study suggests that meaningful curriculum reform must go beyond structural alignment and actively engage with the identities, values, and local knowledge systems of the teaching workforce. Recognizing these dimensions is essential for building inclusive educational systems that resonate with the communities they serve.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study is bounded by several limitations that may influence the transferability of its findings. The research was conducted in a specific socio-geographic context—Indonesia’s 3T regions—which presents unique structural and cultural dynamics. While the purposive sampling method ensured rich, experience-based data, the small sample size typical of phenomenological studies limits the generalizability of results. Additionally, as with all interpretative research, the

meanings derived are shaped through the lens of both participant and researcher subjectivity. These limitations do not undermine the study's validity but rather frame its findings as contextually grounded insights that invite deeper exploration, rather than universal conclusions.

### **Future Research Directions**

Building on the present findings, future studies may expand this line of inquiry by examining the experiences of teachers across different regional or institutional contexts, allowing for comparative phenomenological analyses. Investigations could also explore how policy makers and school leaders interpret and mediate curriculum reforms, offering a multi-perspective understanding of implementation processes. Longitudinal phenomenological research may further reveal how teachers' perceptions evolve over time as they continue to adapt to educational change. Ultimately, the study paves the way for a more empathetic and participatory discourse in curriculum studies—one that places lived experience at the heart of educational transformation.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study explored the lived experiences of elementary school teachers implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia's 3T regions, focusing on how they interpret and respond to educational reform within marginalized contexts. The findings revealed that teachers face structural challenges, yet actively construct meaning through emotional resilience, professional identity negotiation, and localized pedagogical adaptations. These insights highlight the limitations of conventional reform approaches that overlook subjective experiences and contextual realities. By applying an interpretative phenomenological approach, this study contributes a deeper, human-centered understanding of curriculum implementation in under-resourced settings. It addresses existing research gaps by emphasizing the internal processes and agency of teachers as central to policy enactment. Future studies may extend this work by exploring comparative experiences across diverse regions or involving multiple stakeholders in the curriculum reform ecosystem.

### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. All opinions, interpretations, and conclusions expressed are solely those of the authors and are presented with academic independence. The funding sponsor had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analysis, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

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