

Exploring Teachers' and Students' Perceptions of the Implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in Indonesia represents a major shift toward student-centered learning, emphasizing flexibility, project-based instruction, and competency-based assessment. Despite its nationwide adoption, empirical research examining how the curriculum is perceived by key stakeholders remains limited, particularly in private junior high school contexts. This study explores teachers' and students' perceptions of the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in two private junior high schools in Jakarta. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers and students and analyzed thematically. The findings indicate that both teachers and students generally perceived the curriculum as conceptually beneficial, especially in promoting active learning, contextual understanding, and student engagement. However, several challenges were also perceived, including limited access to technological resources, increased administrative demands, uneven participation in group work, and the need for more practical and continuous teacher training. These findings highlight that participants' perceptions of the curriculum were strongly shaped by contextual and institutional factors rather than by the curriculum design itself. The study underscores the importance of adequate infrastructure, professional support, and clear implementation strategies to support positive perceptions and effective enactment of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. The results offer practical insights for educators and policymakers in strengthening curriculum implementation through perception-informed support systems.

Keywords: Merdeka Belajar Curriculum; Teacher and Students' Perceptions; Independent Learning

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Indonesia's education system has experienced substantial transformation through the introduction of the Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) Curriculum. This reform represents a shift from a predominantly teacher-centered model toward a student-centered learning approach that emphasizes autonomy, project-based learning, and flexibility in instructional design (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset dan Teknologi, 2022). Within this framework, English language education is expected to play a strategic role in developing students' communicative competence, critical thinking skills, and readiness to engage in global contexts. However, the effectiveness of curriculum reform does not depend solely on policy design, but largely on how it is understood, interpreted, and implemented by teachers and students in classroom settings.

Although the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum aligns with broader 21st-century learning goals, its implementation presents practical challenges. Teachers are expected to redesign lesson plans, adopt facilitative roles, and integrate interdisciplinary and project-based activities into their teaching. At the same time, students are encouraged to become more independent learners who actively participate in constructing knowledge. These expectations, however, are not always supported by sufficient training, infrastructure, or consistent institutional guidance. In private junior high schools, variations in school readiness, technological resources, and professional development opportunities further shape how the curriculum is enacted in practice (Miladiah et al., 2023; Sunarni & Karyono, 2023; Rohmah et al., 2023). As a result, teachers and students may develop different interpretations of the curriculum's goals, processes, and demands.

Education remains a fundamental pillar of national development, particularly in a rapidly changing global environment. Indonesia's diverse sociocultural context and wide range of student backgrounds require an education system that goes beyond content transmission and instead fosters creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication. The Merdeka Belajar Curriculum was introduced to respond to these needs by granting schools, teachers, and students greater flexibility in learning pathways and instructional strategies. By prioritizing essential competencies and meaningful learning experiences, the curriculum seeks to support students' holistic development and lifelong learning skills (Saputra & Hadi, 2022). Nevertheless, the success of this approach depends on how its principles are perceived and translated into everyday teaching and learning practices.

Teachers play a central role in shaping curriculum implementation, as they act as interpreters of policy at the classroom level. Under the Merdeka Belajar framework, teachers are no longer positioned solely as knowledge transmitters, but as facilitators who guide inquiry, support collaboration, and design learning activities relevant to students' contexts. This shift requires not only pedagogical adjustment but also a clear understanding of the curriculum's philosophy and objectives. Teachers' perceptions of curriculum flexibility, workload, assessment practices, and available resources significantly influence how they apply curriculum guidelines in practice (Rudiawan & Asmaroini, 2022). Without adequate understanding and support, the intended goals of the curriculum may be interpreted inconsistently across schools and classrooms.

Students' experiences are equally important in evaluating curriculum implementation. In English language learning contexts, students' perceptions of learning activities, assessment methods, and classroom interaction shape how they engage with the curriculum. Project-based learning, collaborative tasks, and the use of digital tools may be perceived as engaging and meaningful by some students, while others may experience confusion or difficulty adapting to new learning expectations. Understanding how students interpret these changes is essential, as their perceptions influence classroom participation, learning strategies, and overall learning experiences.

Previous studies on the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum have largely focused on teacher readiness, institutional challenges, or curriculum design. Research by Saputra and Hadi (2022), Rudiawan and Asmaroini (2022), as well as Jamilah et al. (2023), Bastian et al. (2023), and Febrianningsih and Ramadan (2023), suggests that many teachers demonstrate readiness to implement the curriculum, although challenges related to infrastructure, assessment, and training persist. Despite this growing body of research, relatively little attention has been given to exploring both teachers' and students' perceptions of curriculum implementation simultaneously, particularly in private junior high school contexts in urban areas such as Jakarta.

Given this gap, the present study aims to explore how teachers and students perceive the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in private junior high schools in Jakarta. By examining their perceptions, this study seeks to provide a more contextualized understanding of how curriculum reform is experienced at the classroom level and what factors shape these experiences. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are teachers' perceptions toward the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in junior high schools in Jakarta?
2. What are students' perceptions toward the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in junior high schools in Jakarta?
3. What factors shape teachers' and students' perceptions of the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Merdeka Belajar Curriculum was introduced as a national response to Indonesia's learning crisis and the growing concern over learning loss, particularly following prolonged disruptions to formal schooling. This curriculum represents a shift from content-heavy instruction toward a more flexible and student-centered learning framework. According to Idhartono et al. (2022), the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum emphasizes project-based learning through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project, which aims to develop students' character, creativity, collaboration skills, and critical thinking. In addition, the curriculum prioritizes essential learning content, allowing students sufficient time to master fundamental competencies, especially literacy and numeracy. By reducing content overload, the curriculum seeks to create deeper and more meaningful learning experiences.

Another key feature of the Merdeka Belajar framework is its adaptive nature. Teachers are given greater autonomy to adjust instructional strategies based on students' learning needs, classroom contexts, and local conditions (Saraswati et al., 2022). This flexibility is intended to empower schools and teachers to design learning activities that are

more relevant and responsive, rather than strictly following centralized prescriptions. However, such autonomy also requires teachers to reinterpret their professional roles, shift instructional practices, and make pedagogical decisions independently, which may influence how they perceive the feasibility and effectiveness of the curriculum in everyday classroom practice.

From a curricular perspective, the existence of a curriculum is a fundamental requirement for designing learning plans that align with educational goals. Nation and Macalister (2010) define a curriculum as a set of organized principles and guidelines that shape learning programs. In this regard, the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum can be viewed as an effort to redefine these guiding principles by emphasizing flexibility, contextual learning, and competency development. While this approach offers opportunities for innovation, it also demands a higher level of curriculum understanding and instructional readiness from teachers. Consequently, teachers' perceptions of the curriculum play a crucial role in determining how these principles are translated into classroom practice.

Several studies have examined the early implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum across different educational settings. Angga et al. (2022), in their comparative study between the 2013 Curriculum and the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, found that implementation in Sekolah Penggerak schools began positively during the first year and showed gradual improvement over time. Teachers in these schools reported increased flexibility in teaching and greater opportunities to design student-centered learning activities. However, the study also noted variations in implementation quality, suggesting that contextual factors strongly influence how the curriculum is enacted.

Other research highlights that not all schools experience the same level of success in implementing the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. Arief et al. (2023) reported that some schools continue to face challenges related to infrastructure limitations, teacher readiness, and insufficient understanding of curriculum components. These challenges may affect how teachers and students perceive the curriculum, particularly in terms of its practicality and sustainability. When schools lack adequate resources or professional support, the curriculum's intended benefits may not be fully realized, potentially leading to mixed or negative perceptions among its users.

The Merdeka Belajar Curriculum also aims to provide equitable and high-quality education for all Indonesian students by encouraging exploration, creativity, and innovation in the classroom (Saleh, 2020). For students, this shift often involves greater participation in project-based activities, collaborative learning, and real-world problem solving. While these approaches are designed to enhance engagement and relevance, they may also require students to adapt to new learning expectations, such as increased independence and responsibility. As a result, students' perceptions of the curriculum are shaped not only by its goals but also by their everyday learning experiences and the support systems available to them.

Overall, previous studies suggest that the successful implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum depends not only on policy design but also on how it is perceived and interpreted by teachers and students at the classroom level. Differences in school context, resource availability, and instructional readiness contribute to varying perceptions of the curriculum's effectiveness and challenges. Therefore, exploring teachers' and students' perceptions is essential to understanding how the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum functions in practice and how its implementation can be improved to better support meaningful learning experiences.

Perception

Perception is a cognitive process through which individuals interpret, organize, and assign meaning to information and experiences encountered in their environment. Huffman and Vernoy (2000) define perception as the process of selecting, organizing, and interpreting sensory input to understand the surrounding world. Similarly, Worchel and Shebilske (1989) describe perception as the mechanism by which individuals construct meaning from incoming information. In educational contexts, perception plays a central role in shaping how teachers and students understand, evaluate, and respond to curriculum reforms. Rather than reacting solely to policy texts, individuals interpret reforms based on how they experience changes in classroom practices, expectations, and learning environments.

Perception is particularly relevant in the context of large-scale educational change such as the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. Teachers and students do not encounter curriculum reform as a neutral or abstract policy; instead, they perceive it through daily teaching and learning experiences. These perceptions influence how the curriculum is enacted in practice, including decisions about instructional strategies, classroom interaction, and learning engagement. As a result, understanding perception provides deeper insight into how curriculum policies are translated from formal design into lived classroom realities.

One influential theoretical framework for understanding perception is Predictive Processing Theory proposed by Friston (2010). This theory suggests that perception is not a passive reception of information but an active process in which the brain continuously generates predictions based on prior knowledge and updates them when encountering new experiences.

In the context of curriculum reform, teachers and students form perceptions of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum based on their previous experiences with earlier curricula, such as the 2013 Curriculum, as well as their expectations about teaching and learning. When the new curriculum aligns with these existing mental models, it is more likely to be perceived as coherent and effective. Conversely, when classroom realities differ from expectations, perceptions may become less favorable, even if the policy objectives are well intentioned.

Another relevant theoretical perspective is Embodied Cognition Theory, which emphasizes that perception and cognition are shaped through bodily interaction and real-world experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Barsalou, 1999). According to this theory, cognitive processes are deeply rooted in physical engagement with tasks and environments rather than confined to abstract mental activity. This perspective is particularly relevant to the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, which emphasizes project-based learning, experiential activities, and contextual learning. Teachers' and students' direct engagement with hands-on projects, collaborative tasks, and real-life problem solving influences how they perceive the curriculum's practicality and relevance. Teachers who are familiar with student-centered pedagogies may perceive the curriculum as supportive and meaningful, while those accustomed to more rigid instructional structures may perceive it as demanding or difficult to manage.

In addition, Social Constructivist Theory, as proposed by Vygotsky (1978), highlights that perception is socially constructed through interaction and cultural context. Learning and perception are shaped through engagement with more knowledgeable others, such as teachers, peers, and mentors. In the context of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, teachers' perceptions are influenced by professional development activities, collaboration with colleagues, school leadership, and institutional support. Similarly, students' perceptions are shaped by peer interaction, classroom culture, and the guidance provided by teachers. This perspective emphasizes that perceptions of curriculum reform do not develop in isolation but are embedded within broader social and institutional environments.

Together, these theoretical perspectives illustrate that perception is a dynamic and multifaceted process shaped by cognitive expectations, experiential engagement, and social interaction. Teachers' and students' perceptions of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum are influenced not only by policy intentions but also by how the curriculum is experienced in everyday classroom practice. Understanding perception through these lenses provides a comprehensive framework for examining how curriculum reform is interpreted, evaluated, and enacted at the school level. This theoretical foundation supports the present study's focus on exploring teachers' and students' perceptions as a key lens for understanding the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in junior high school contexts.

The role of bottom-up and top-down processing in perception formation

Perception plays a central role in how individuals interpret and understand new information, particularly in educational contexts involving curriculum reform such as the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. Two major cognitive processing theories—Bottom-Up Processing and Top-Down Processing—explain how teachers and students perceive and make sense of curricular changes. Bottom-Up Processing suggests that perception begins with direct sensory input, in which individuals interpret new stimuli based primarily on observable experiences rather than prior knowledge or expectations (Goldstein, 2014). In the context of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, teachers and students who encounter the curriculum for the first time may form their perceptions through concrete classroom experiences, including learning activities, instructional materials, assessment practices, and patterns of student engagement. Their understanding of the curriculum is shaped by what they directly observe and experience during the teaching and learning process.

In contrast, Top-Down Processing emphasizes the role of prior knowledge, experiences, and expectations in shaping perception (Goldstein, 2014). Teachers and students who have previously experienced other curricula, such as the 2013 Curriculum, may interpret the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum by comparing it with earlier instructional frameworks. Their perceptions are influenced by how the new curriculum aligns with or diverges from their existing mental models of teaching, learning, and assessment. When the curriculum corresponds with prior expectations, it may be perceived as familiar and manageable; when it differs significantly, it may be perceived as complex or demanding.

Together, these processing mechanisms illustrate that perception is a dynamic and adaptive cognitive process that integrates both direct experience and prior knowledge. Understanding how Bottom-Up and Top-Down Processing operate in curriculum interpretation provides valuable insight into how teachers and students construct meaning from educational reform. This understanding can inform more effective curriculum implementation strategies by ensuring that new policies are introduced with clear guidance, contextual support, and opportunities for experiential engagement.

The role of perception in understanding curriculum implementation

Perception is a central psychological construct that shapes how individuals interpret and make sense of new experiences, including educational reforms such as the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. Perception refers to the cognitive process through

which individuals organize, interpret, and give meaning to information and experiences encountered in their environment (Schacter et al., 2020). In the context of this study, teachers' and students' perceptions of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum influence how they understand its objectives, flexibility, instructional demands, and overall impact on teaching and learning processes.

Teachers' and students' perceptions are formed through their direct experiences with curriculum implementation, such as classroom practices, learning activities, assessment methods, and institutional support. When the curriculum is perceived as clear, supportive, and aligned with learners' needs, it is understood as facilitating meaningful and student-centered learning. Conversely, when it is perceived as complex, demanding, or insufficiently supported, it may be interpreted as challenging to implement effectively. These perceptions shape how the curriculum is cognitively framed by both teachers and students in everyday classroom contexts.

Perception is also influenced by contextual and experiential factors, including workload, adaptability of instructional materials, availability of resources, and prior exposure to earlier curricula. Teachers and students interpret the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum by comparing it with their previous learning and teaching experiences. When the curriculum aligns with their expectations and prior knowledge, it is more likely to be perceived as practical and manageable. However, when there is a perceived mismatch between curriculum demands and classroom realities, it may be interpreted as burdensome or difficult to sustain.

This perspective highlights the importance of communication, professional development, and institutional support in shaping constructive perceptions of curriculum reform. Clear guidance, continuous training, and adequate resources help teachers and students develop a more comprehensive understanding of the curriculum's goals and implementation strategies. By strengthening these supporting factors, schools can facilitate more informed and positive perceptions, which are essential for effective and sustainable curriculum implementation.

Teachers' perceptions of educational change

A growing body of research has examined teachers' perceptions of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum across various educational contexts in Indonesia. Bulqis (2023), for instance, explored teachers' perceptions of curriculum implementation in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) and Budi Pekerti subjects. The findings indicated that teachers generally perceived the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum positively, particularly in relation to its potential to support character development among both teachers and students. Institutional leadership was also perceived as an important enabling factor, as support from school principals and vice principals contributed to a more conducive environment for curriculum implementation.

Similarly, Febrianningsih and Ramadan (2023) investigated teachers' perceptions of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in elementary schools and found that teachers perceived themselves as having a basic understanding of the curriculum. However, their perceptions were also shaped by several contextual challenges, including limited infrastructure, insufficient parental understanding, and uneven dissemination of curriculum-related information. These findings suggest that teachers' perceptions of curriculum feasibility are not formed solely by policy content but are strongly influenced by institutional and environmental conditions.

Further insight is provided by Susilowati (2022), who examined teachers' perceptions of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in the context of character education within Islamic Religious Education classrooms. The study revealed that although implementation had begun, teachers perceived multiple difficulties, such as limited conceptual understanding of the curriculum, continued reliance on lecture-based instruction, challenges in developing teaching modules, and incompatibility between curriculum demands and existing learning platforms. Assessment and evaluation procedures were also perceived as complex, shaping teachers' interpretations of the curriculum's practicality and sustainability.

Beyond curriculum-specific factors, teachers' perceptions of educational change are closely linked to their broader understanding of the role of education in national development. Nurmala et al. (2017) argue that education is widely perceived as a key means of preparing future generations to contribute to societal progress. Within this framework, teachers are perceived as central agents who translate policy into classroom practice. Efferi (2017) similarly emphasizes that curriculum reform is largely shaped by how teachers interpret and enact policy in daily teaching activities.

Teacher-student interaction further influences teachers' perceptions of curriculum implementation. According to Nurmala et al. (2017), teachers' instructional strategies, classroom management, and guidance shape how learning objectives are understood and achieved. Supporting this view, Syaefudin and Budisantoso (2007) found that most elementary school teachers in Semarang perceived curriculum changes as acceptable, although levels of openness varied. This finding aligns with Herwani (2022), who emphasizes that teachers act as key drivers of educational change through their perceptions and responses to policy reforms.

Despite increasing scholarly attention to the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, research that simultaneously examines both teachers' and students' perceptions remains limited, particularly in private junior high schools in urban settings. Most existing studies focus primarily on teachers' perceptions or institutional challenges in isolation. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by exploring both teachers' and students' perceptions of the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. By examining how cognitive expectations, classroom experiences, and social contexts shape these perceptions, the study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of curriculum reform at the level of everyday classroom practice.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design, which is suitable for the in-depth exploration of complex phenomena within real-life contexts (Yin, 2018). The purpose of this study was to investigate how teachers and students perceive the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in two private junior high schools in Jakarta. A case study approach was selected to enable a detailed and contextualized examination of participants' experiences and perceptions within their natural school settings. Following Creswell and Creswell (2018), this design facilitated a comprehensive exploration of social and pedagogical dynamics related to curriculum implementation in each school.

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of eight individuals: four English language teachers and four Grade 8 students from two private junior high schools in East Jakarta. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that all participants had direct and relevant experience with the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, particularly in bilingual and project-based learning contexts.

The inclusion criteria for teachers were: (1) having at least one year of experience implementing the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, and (2) actively teaching English under the curriculum framework. For students, the criteria included: (1) enrollment in Grade 8, and (2) active participation in English language learning under the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. To protect confidentiality, all participants were assigned pseudonyms. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants and school administrators through formal permission letters and signed consent forms.

Data collection

Data were collected over a six-month period, from July to December 2023, using multiple qualitative techniques to enhance the richness and credibility of the findings. The primary method of data collection was semi-structured, in-depth interviews (Seidman, 2006), with each interview lasting approximately 30–45 minutes. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in locations chosen by the participants to ensure comfort and openness during the conversation.

The interview protocols were developed based on the research questions and relevant literature on perception in educational change. To ensure the authenticity and accuracy of participants' responses, all interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission. Member checking was employed to enhance trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), allowing participants to review their interview transcripts and confirm the accuracy of the recorded data.

Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-step framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis process involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and read multiple times to ensure data immersion.

Initial coding was conducted manually and subsequently organized into broader categories based on conceptual similarity. Themes were developed through constant comparison and iterative refinement. To enhance credibility, data triangulation was applied by comparing perspectives from teachers and students. In addition, reflexive journaling was used throughout the analysis process to document analytic decisions and minimize researcher bias.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the study based on interview data from teachers and students, organized according to key themes related to perceptions of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum.

Teachers' perceptions

Familiarity with the Merdeka Belajar curriculum

Teachers across Nusantara JHS and Garuda JHS demonstrated varying levels of familiarity with the Merdeka Curriculum. At Nusantara JHS, teachers reported being generally familiar with the curriculum, having been introduced to its key concepts and structure through training and seminars. However, there was still a sense of needing to adapt to the new terminologies and teaching methods, as expressed by

Mr. A: *"The Independent Learning Curriculum is something we've been doing in parts, but the names and new program elements are what we are still getting used to."*

This indicates that while the curriculum is not entirely new to them, the formal implementation and specific frameworks like learning outcomes require further acclimatization.

At Garuda JHS, teachers echoed similar sentiments. They felt knowledgeable about the curriculum but acknowledged that continuous learning and adaptation were necessary. Mr. C highlighted that the curriculum was well understood at a basic level, but the shift in educational philosophy required deeper engagement and ongoing professional development to fully internalize and implement the curriculum's principles.

Effectiveness of teaching with the Merdeka Belajar curriculum

The Merdeka Curriculum has had a mixed impact on teaching practices across these schools. Teachers at Nusantara JHS appreciated the curriculum's focus on student-centered learning, which allowed them to facilitate rather than dictate classroom activities.

Ms. B remarked, *"The curriculum encourages us to guide students more than teach them directly, making them more responsible for their learning."*

This shift towards a facilitative role was seen as positive, though it also presented challenges in ensuring all students remained engaged and productive.

At Garuda JHS, teachers noted that the curriculum's flexibility allowed them to introduce more creative and contextually relevant learning activities. However, the increased administrative load was a significant drawback.

As Mr. C mentioned, *"While the Merdeka Curriculum is great in concept, the amount of paperwork and planning involved can be overwhelming, taking away from actual teaching time."*

In Nusantara JHS, the effectiveness of the curriculum was largely contingent on the availability of resources. Ms. B pointed out that the lack of adequate facilities, such as language labs and technological tools, hindered their ability to implement the curriculum fully. Despite these challenges, the curriculum's focus on practical, real-world learning was seen as beneficial for students' overall development.

Advantages and disadvantages

The *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum's advantages, as perceived by teachers, largely revolved around its flexibility and student-centered approach. Teachers at Nusantara JHS found that the curriculum allowed for more creative lesson planning and provided students with opportunities to engage in hands-on learning. However, the disadvantages were also significant. The curriculum's demand for continuous assessment and adaptation was seen as a double-edged sword, providing opportunities for personalized learning but also increasing the workload for teachers.

At Garuda JHS, the emphasis on practical learning and local wisdom was praised. Ms. D cited an example where students learned about herbal medicine, which not only engaged them but also connected their learning to their cultural context. However, the need for frequent adaptation and the pressure to meet new benchmarks were seen as drawbacks, particularly for teachers who were still getting used to the curriculum.

In Nusantara JHS, the primary advantage noted was the curriculum's ability to engage students in active learning. However, the lack of resources was a persistent issue.

Mr. A noted, *"The curriculum is wonderful in theory, but without the necessary tools, it's difficult to bring its full potential to life."*

This highlights the critical role that infrastructure and resources play in the successful implementation of any educational reform.

Challenges in implementation

The implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum has not been without challenges. Across all schools, teachers identified the administrative burden as a significant issue. At Nusantara JHS, the curriculum's requirement for detailed lesson plans, continuous assessments, and regular reporting added to the teachers' workload, often leaving them with less time to focus on actual teaching.

As Ms. B explained, *"We spend so much time preparing documents that it sometimes feels like there's little time left to engage with the students."*

At Garuda JHS, the challenge was more about adaptation. Teachers needed to continually update their teaching methods and materials to align with the new curriculum, which was time-consuming and, at times, frustrating.

Ms. D mentioned, *"It's a lot to keep up with, and while the curriculum's flexibility is great, it also means we're constantly changing our approach, which can be exhausting."*

In Nusantara JHS, the primary challenge was the lack of resources. Without sufficient technological tools and facilities, teachers found it difficult to implement the curriculum as intended.

Mr. A noted, *"We try to make do with what we have, but it's clear that without the right resources, we're not able to fully realize the curriculum's goals."*

Students' perceptions

Familiarity with the Merdeka Belajar curriculum

Across both schools, students displayed a range of familiarity with the Merdeka Curriculum. At Nusantara JHS, students generally felt acquainted with the curriculum but acknowledged the challenges in adapting to its new structure, which emphasizes group work and experiential learning. For example,

S1 mentioned, *"The curriculum is not entirely new, but it feels different because we are now focusing more on projects and group work rather than just individual assignments."*

Similarly, at Garuda JHS, students echoed these sentiments, with S3 noting that while the curriculum felt more modern, it also demanded more collaboration, which was a shift from previous learning methods. Meanwhile, students like S2 and S4 had mixed responses, with some finding it engaging while others struggled with the new learning style.

Effectiveness of learning with the Merdeka Belajar curriculum

Students across the board expressed mixed feelings about the effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum. At Nusantara JHS, students appreciated the curriculum's focus on project-based learning, which allowed them to engage more deeply with the material. However, some students struggled with the increased workload and the need to manage group dynamics. For instance,

S2 stated, *"Group work is great because it helps us learn from each other, but it's also frustrating when not everyone contributes equally."*

This sentiment was mirrored at Garuda JHS, where S3 and S4 noted that the curriculum made learning more challenging but also more rewarding as it required them to think critically and seek answers beyond the textbook.

Challenges and dislikes

Despite the positive aspects, students also identified several challenges. Across all schools, the issue of unequal participation in group work was a recurring theme. At Nusantara JHS,

S1 pointed out, *"It's really frustrating when some group members don't do their share of the work, but we all get the same grade."*

This was echoed by

S4 at Garuda JHS, who added, *"Sometimes, people in the group can become lazy, especially when they already know what they want to do in 11th grade, so they don't put in as much effort."*

At Garuda JHS, the lack of technological resources, such as laptops and Wi-Fi, was another significant challenge, as noted by S3 and S4, who mentioned that accessing learning materials online was difficult without adequate technology.

Factors Influencing Teachers' and Students' Perceptions of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum

Analysis of the interview data revealed that teachers' and students' perceptions of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum were shaped by several interrelated contextual and experiential factors. These factors did not stand alone but interacted to influence how participants interpreted, understood, and responded to the curriculum in their daily learning experiences. The major factors identified include institutional support, teacher training and curriculum understanding, learning facilities and technological access, workload and classroom management, as well as parental and peer support.

Institutional support emerged as a significant factor influencing teachers' perceptions. Teachers who perceived clear guidance and encouragement from school leadership tended to view the curriculum more positively.

One teacher from Garuda Junior High School stated, *"The school gives us freedom to design projects, but sometimes we still need clearer examples and direction."*

This indicates that while autonomy was appreciated, limited structural guidance influenced how teachers perceived the practicality of the curriculum.

Teacher training and prior understanding of the curriculum also played an important role. Several teachers reported that insufficient or overly theoretical training affected their perception of the curriculum's readiness for classroom application.

A teacher noted, *"The training explained the concept, but when we applied it in class, many things were still unclear."*

This suggests that perceptions were shaped not only by policy intentions but also by teachers' lived experiences during implementation.

From the students' perspective, access to learning facilities and technology strongly influenced how they perceived the curriculum. Students who faced limited internet access or inadequate devices expressed difficulty engaging fully in project-based activities.

A student from Nusantara Junior High School explained, *"Sometimes it's hard to do projects because not everyone has good internet at home."*

Such conditions shaped students' perceptions of the curriculum as challenging rather than empowering. Parental and peer support also influenced students' perceptions. While many students reported limited parental understanding of the curriculum, peer collaboration helped compensate for this gap.

One student shared, *"My parents don't really understand the new curriculum, but my friends help each other, so it's okay."*

Similarly, teachers observed that students with supportive learning environments adapted more easily to the curriculum.

Overall, these findings indicate that teachers' and students' perceptions of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum were not formed solely by curriculum content but were strongly influenced by contextual, social, and institutional factors surrounding its implementation.

DISCUSSION

This section discusses the findings in relation to the research questions, with particular attention to teachers' and students' perceptions of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum.

Teachers' perceptions

The introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum at Nusantara Junior High School and Garuda Junior High School has highlighted both its potential benefits and the challenges that must be addressed for effective implementation. The curriculum's emphasis on student-centered learning and real-world applications is a progressive shift in Indonesia's education system (Kemendikbud, 2022). However, ensuring its success requires adequate resources, professional development, and adjustments in teaching practices.

Resource limitations and administrative burden

One of the most significant challenges reported by teachers was the lack of resources, particularly at Nusantara JHS.

Mr. A noted, *"Without sufficient technological tools, such as laptops and language labs, implementing the curriculum to its full potential is difficult."*

The lack of infrastructure poses a critical barrier to the curriculum's effectiveness, as highlighted in previous research indicating that resource availability directly impacts the success of student-centered learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2021). Additionally, the increased administrative workload was another major concern. Teachers expressed that the extensive documentation and continuous assessment requirements consumed a significant portion of their time, reducing direct engagement with students.

Ms. B from Nusantara JHS stated, *"We spend so much time on paperwork that it sometimes takes away from actual teaching."*

This aligns with studies suggesting that excessive administrative duties can lead to teacher burnout and reduce instructional quality (Ingersoll & Collins, 2018).

Teacher adaptation and professional development

The transition to the Merdeka Curriculum also necessitated continuous professional development. While Mr. C from Garuda JHS felt relatively comfortable with the curriculum,

he admitted, *"Understanding the theoretical framework is one thing, but applying it effectively in a classroom setting requires ongoing learning."*

Ms. D, a Social Studies teacher at Garuda JHS, echoed this sentiment: *"I appreciate the flexibility, but it requires constant adjustment, which can be overwhelming."*

These perspectives align with studies emphasizing the importance of professional development in curriculum implementation (Guskey, 2002).

At Nusantara JHS, teachers indicated that additional training was needed to align their teaching methods with the curriculum's principles.

Ms. B pointed out, *"We've received training, but practical application remains a challenge."*

Research supports this view, highlighting that while professional development workshops provide foundational knowledge, sustained mentorship and peer collaboration are necessary for long-term effectiveness (Desimone, 2009).

Student-centered learning and practical applications

Despite the challenges, teachers recognized the benefits of the curriculum's student-centered approach.

Mr. A observed that students were becoming more active learners: *"The curriculum encourages them to think critically rather than just memorize information."*

Similarly, Mr. C appreciated the flexibility it provided, stating, *"We can integrate local culture and real-world issues into lessons, making learning more relevant."*

This aligns with constructivist learning theories, which suggest that active participation enhances student comprehension and engagement (Vygotsky, 1978).

However, the effectiveness of these approaches was contingent on classroom conditions and resource availability. Without proper infrastructure, teachers found it challenging to implement hands-on learning effectively. As previous research suggests, student-centered learning requires not only pedagogical shifts but also institutional support (Reigeluth, 2016).

Students' perceptions

The *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum has introduced significant changes in students' learning experiences, with both positive and challenging aspects. While students appreciated the shift toward interactive and project-based learning, issues related to group dynamics and resource constraints affected their overall experience.

Challenges with group dynamics and resources

A recurring challenge among students was the issue of group work. While collaborative learning is a key component of the curriculum, ensuring equal participation proved difficult.

S1 from Nusantara JHS shared, "*Group work helps us learn from each other, but it's frustrating when some members don't contribute equally.*"

Similarly, S3 from Garuda JHS noted, "*It's unfair when some people do most of the work, but we all get the same grade.*"

These concerns align with research on cooperative learning, which highlights the need for structured group work strategies to ensure equitable participation (Slavin, 1995).

The lack of technological resources further exacerbated learning challenges. At Nusantara JHS, S2 stated,

"We're supposed to do our tasks online, but not everyone has access to a laptop or Wi-Fi."

Miah (2023) emphasizes that students from lower-income backgrounds often experience technological barriers that hinder their ability to participate in digital learning environments. Limited access to essential digital tools not only affects individual performance but also disrupts collaborative learning efforts, as some students struggle to contribute effectively in group-based assignments. This disparity in technological access creates an uneven learning environment, further disadvantaging students who lack reliable internet access or personal devices.

Student engagement and curriculum effectiveness

Despite these challenges, students acknowledged the curriculum's effectiveness in making learning more engaging.

S4 from Garuda JHS noted, "*I like that we're not just memorizing facts but actually applying what we learn to real situations.*"

This reflects research findings that experiential learning improves knowledge retention and critical thinking skills (Kolb, 1984).

Technology integration was another well-received aspect of the curriculum.

S2 mentioned, "*Creating digital presentations and videos makes learning more interactive and fun.*"

This perspective aligns with studies showing that incorporating multimedia in education enhances student motivation and comprehension (Mayer, 2009). Similarly, students with access to technology tend to have higher academic performance and engagement (Miah, 2023).

Support systems

Parental and peer support played a crucial role in students' adaptation to the new curriculum. Many students reported that their parents encouraged them to embrace the new learning methods despite initial concerns.

S1 stated, "*My parents were worried about off-campus activities, but they trust the school's safety measures.*"

Similarly, peer support was essential in navigating group-based assignments.

S3 noted, “*We help each other with projects, especially when someone is struggling with technology.*”

These findings align with research emphasizing the importance of social support in student success (Wentzel, 1998).

Factors Influencing Teachers’ and Students’ Perceptions of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum

The analysis revealed several factors that shaped how teachers and students perceived the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. One of the most influential factors was resource availability. Limited access to digital tools and learning facilities affected participants’ interpretation of the curriculum’s feasibility and effectiveness.

A student from Nusantara JHS explained, “*We don’t have enough computers or internet access at school, so it’s really hard to complete digital-based assignments.*”

Similarly, a teacher stated, “*Without proper teaching aids, it feels difficult to apply the curriculum as intended.*”

These experiences influenced how both teachers and students understood the practicality of the curriculum in real classroom settings.

Another factor influencing perception was professional development and institutional support. Teachers who had participated in structured training perceived the curriculum as clearer and more applicable.

Mr. C from Garuda JHS shared, “*After attending training, I understood better how project-based learning should work.*”

In contrast, teachers with limited training reported uncertainty in interpreting curriculum guidelines, leading to varied perceptions among staff members regarding implementation readiness.

Workload and administrative demands also shaped teachers’ perceptions of the curriculum. The extensive documentation and assessment requirements led teachers to perceive the curriculum as administratively demanding.

One teacher noted, “*We spend a lot of time preparing reports, which affects how we manage classroom activities.*”

Students were also aware of these conditions,

as one remarked, “*Teachers seem busier with documents, so sometimes explanations are shorter.*”

These observations indicate that classroom interactions influenced students’ perceptions of teaching quality under the new curriculum.

From the students’ perspective, collaboration in group-based learning influenced how they perceived the curriculum. While project-based learning was viewed as engaging, unequal participation affected students’ interpretation of fairness and effectiveness.

A student stated, “*Group work is interesting, but it becomes difficult when not everyone contributes equally.*”

Teachers similarly perceived challenges in evaluating individual contributions within group tasks, which shaped their understanding of assessment practices under the curriculum.

Overall, these findings show that teachers’ and students’ perceptions of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum were shaped by material conditions, training experiences, administrative structures, and classroom interactions rather than by curriculum design alone.

Finally, parental and peer support played a vital role in shaping students’ attitudes toward the curriculum. Students who received strong encouragement from their parents and had supportive peer networks adapted more positively to the new learning system.

A student from Nusantara JHS described their experience, stating, “*My parents don’t fully understand the new curriculum, so they can’t really help me with schoolwork. But my friends and I support each other, which makes learning easier.*”

Similarly, a teacher at Garuda JHS observed, “*Some students struggle because their parents don’t know much about the curriculum changes. The ones with more supportive families adapt better.*”

These accounts indicate that teachers and students perceive parental understanding and peer support as important external factors that shape how the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum is experienced in daily learning practices. This finding aligns with Dewi and Setiadi (2018), who highlight the role of external support systems, particularly family and peers, in influencing students’ learning experiences and engagement.

Overall, participants perceived that curriculum implementation is shaped by multiple contextual factors, including resource availability, teacher preparedness, workload, peer collaboration, and family support. While the curriculum is viewed as promoting student-centered and engaging learning, ongoing challenges related to group work and technological access remain. Addressing these factors is perceived as essential for sustaining effective implementation.

The findings of this study also demonstrate that teachers’ and students’ perceptions of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum are shaped by a complex interaction of cognitive, experiential, and social factors. These results support the view that perception is not a passive reception of policy but an active interpretative process influenced by prior experiences and contextual conditions.

From the perspective of Predictive Processing Theory (Friston, 2010), participants formed perceptions of the curriculum by continuously comparing their expectations with actual classroom experiences. Teachers who expected clear operational guidance but encountered abstract training sessions experienced a mismatch between prediction and reality, leading to perceptions of uncertainty and difficulty. Conversely, when classroom experiences aligned with expectations—such as increased student engagement—teachers perceived the curriculum more positively.

The influence of hands-on classroom experience and material conditions aligns with Embodied Cognition Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Barsalou, 1999). Students’ perceptions were strongly shaped by their physical engagement with learning activities and access to technological resources. Limited infrastructure constrained meaningful participation in project-based learning, leading students to perceive the curriculum as demanding rather than flexible. This finding underscores that perception is grounded in lived, bodily, and environmental experiences rather than abstract policy ideals.

Furthermore, the role of institutional, parental, and peer support highlights the relevance of Social Constructivist Theory (Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers’ perceptions were influenced by collaboration with colleagues and support from school leadership, while students’ perceptions were shaped through peer interaction and family understanding. These findings reinforce the idea that perceptions of curriculum reform are socially constructed within broader institutional and cultural contexts, rather than formed individually.

Consistent with previous studies (Bulqis, 2023; Febrianningsih & Ramadan, 2023), this study confirms that contextual challenges such as limited training and infrastructure shape how educators interpret curriculum reform. However, this study extends existing literature by integrating both teachers’ and students’ perspectives within a single analytical framework, demonstrating how shared environmental factors influence perception across different stakeholder groups.

Overall, the discussion suggests that improving perceptions of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum requires more than curriculum design changes. Systematic professional development, adequate learning facilities, and stronger communication among schools, teachers, students, and parents are essential to support positive perception formation and meaningful curriculum implementation.

CONCLUSION

This study explored teachers’ and students’ perceptions of the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in private junior high schools in Jakarta. The findings indicate that both teachers and students generally perceived the curriculum positively, particularly in terms of its flexibility and emphasis on student-centered learning. However, participants also perceived several challenges that influenced how the curriculum was experienced and implemented in classroom practice. Teachers perceived difficulties related to adapting instructional strategies, conducting assessments, and managing limited resources, while students perceived challenges associated with learning discipline, access to learning materials, and technological constraints.

The study contributes theoretically by enriching the discussion on curriculum reform through a perception-based lens, demonstrating how teachers’ and students’ interpretations of curriculum policy shape classroom implementation. Rather than focusing on affective responses, this study highlights how cognitive understanding, prior experience, and contextual factors influence how the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum is perceived at the school level. Practically, the findings suggest that successful curriculum implementation requires clear guidance, continuous professional development for teachers,

adequate infrastructure, and consistent institutional support to foster more positive and shared perceptions among stakeholders.

Despite these contributions, this study has limitations. It involved a small number of participants from two private junior high schools in one urban area, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research is encouraged to involve a wider range of schools, combine qualitative and quantitative approaches, and include additional stakeholders such as parents and school leaders to provide a more comprehensive understanding of curriculum perceptions. Longitudinal studies may also offer deeper insights into how perceptions evolve over time. Overall, while the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum is perceived as a promising educational reform, its effective implementation depends on addressing contextual challenges and supporting teachers and students in making sense of the curriculum in practice.

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