



Perceptions of Christian Religious Education Teachers on Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Ambon High Schools

Agusthina Siahaya¹, Prilly Manuputy², Jenri Ambarita^{3✉}

^{1,2}Institut Agama Kristen Negeri Ambon, Indonesia, ³Christian Education, Hoseo University, South Korea

ABSTRACT

The implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* represents a major reform in Indonesian education, emphasizing flexible, student-centered learning to develop the *Pancasila Student Profile*. This study addresses the perceptions of PAK teachers regarding the challenges and opportunities of implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* in Ambon's high schools. Adopting a qualitative descriptive approach, data were gathered through interviews, observations, and document analysis with PAK teachers from three high schools. The findings reveal diverse perceptions: some teachers regard the curriculum as an opportunity to foster creativity and student participation, while others encounter obstacles such as limited resources, technological constraints, and difficulties in developing contextualized learning modules. Theoretically, this study expands curriculum reform discourse in religious education beyond Islamic contexts, demonstrating how Christian character-building can be integrated into national reforms. From a policy perspective, the results provide valuable insights for professional development and institutional support tailored to religious education teachers in pluralistic settings. Overall, this research underscores the importance of aligning national curriculum reforms with local religious education practices to achieve effective and equitable implementation.

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ABSTRAK

Implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka merepresentasikan sebuah reformasi besar dalam pendidikan Indonesia, dengan penekanan pada pembelajaran yang fleksibel dan berpusat pada siswa untuk mengembangkan *Profil Pelajar Pancasila*. Penelitian ini mengkaji persepsi guru PAK mengenai tantangan dan peluang implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka di sekolah-sekolah menengah atas di Ambon. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara, observasi, dan analisis dokumen bersama guru PAK dari tiga sekolah menengah atas. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan adanya keragaman persepsi: sebagian guru memandang kurikulum ini sebagai peluang untuk mendorong kreativitas dan partisipasi siswa, sementara yang lain menghadapi kendala seperti keterbatasan sumber daya, hambatan teknologi, serta kesulitan dalam mengembangkan modul pembelajaran yang kontekstual. Secara teoretis, penelitian ini memperluas wacana reformasi kurikulum dalam pendidikan agama di luar konteks Islam, dengan menunjukkan bagaimana pembentukan karakter Kristen dapat diintegrasikan ke dalam reformasi nasional. Dari perspektif kebijakan, hasil penelitian memberikan wawasan penting bagi pengembangan profesional guru serta dukungan institusional yang disesuaikan dengan kebutuhan guru pendidikan agama dalam konteks plural. Secara keseluruhan, penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya penyelarasan reformasi kurikulum nasional

Email Corresponding: ✉jenriambarita7@gmail.com

dengan praktik pendidikan agama lokal agar implementasi berjalan efektif dan adil.

INTRODUCTION

Education is the foundation of nation-building, as mandated by the 1945 Constitution and Law No. 20/2003 on the National Education System. Its purpose is to cultivate learners who are healthy, knowledgeable, skilled, creative, independent, democratic, and responsible. Muslimin and Ruswandi (2022) emphasize that education should humanize learners and enhance individual capacities. In the era of rapid technological advancement, educational reform has become urgent, requiring systematic management. The government has responded by periodically updating curricula to maintain quality and relevance; without effective management, however, the goals of education remain difficult to achieve.

The curriculum, as a central component of the education system, determines the direction, objectives, and strategies of learning. A well-structured curriculum ensures education remains relevant, comprehensive, and future-oriented (Wingsi Anggila, 2022). Law No. 20/2003 defines it as a set of plans and arrangements encompassing goals, content, and strategies for achieving learning outcomes (Putro et al., 2019). Teachers, as frontline implementers, play a pivotal role in ensuring its success (Arfandi & Samsudin, 2021). Historically, Indonesia has revised its curriculum multiple times, from the 1947 curriculum through the Competency-Based Curriculum (2004), KTSP (2006), and the 2013 Curriculum, reflecting continuous government efforts to align education with evolving societal needs (Ima Frima Fatimah, 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated change, forcing a shift to online learning under Ministry Circulars No. 2, 3, and 4 of 2020 and the Decree of the Minister of Religious Affairs No. 4 of 2020. Challenges included unequal access to devices, limited internet quotas, and teacher adaptation to digital platforms (Fitriyah & Wardani, 2022; Hasim, 2020). To address this crisis, Decree No. 56/M/2022 introduced the Merdeka Curriculum, emphasizing flexibility and alignment with the Pancasila Student Profile (Hartoyo & Rahmadayanti, 2022). Key reforms include eliminating the National Examination and simplifying lesson plans (Agustina & Mustika, 2023; Indahwati et al., 2023).

Nonetheless, implementation faces obstacles, particularly in aligning the perceptions of policymakers and teachers (Middleton, 1999). For Christian Religious Education (PAK), teachers bear the responsibility of shaping students' character and faith. Government Regulation No. 55/2007 on Religious Education underscores that religious education aims to form students' attitudes, personalities, and skills to practice their faith. To fulfill this mandate, PAK teachers must be active, innovative, and creative in designing learning materials and media (Siahaya & Ambarita, 2021).

In Ambon City, PAK teachers are organized through the MGMP forum with 40 members, but implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum remains uneven. YPPKM Ambon Christian High School, for instance, has applied it across grades 10–12, while SMA Negeri 1 Ambon has only adopted it in grade 10, continuing the 2013 Curriculum in other levels. Teachers report both opportunities and barriers: greater student participation alongside challenges in module development, technological adaptation, and pedagogical shifts (Amanda, 2022; Wingsi Anggila, 2022). These dynamics underscore the centrality of teacher perceptions in shaping the effectiveness of curriculum implementation.

Most existing studies on the Merdeka Curriculum focus on Islamic Education (PAI) or general subjects, with little attention paid to PAK. Ambon provides a particularly important context, as its plural religious environment positions Christian education in a

unique role for character formation within national reforms. This underexplored intersection between curriculum innovation, religious education policy, and local pluralism warrants deeper investigation.

This study offers novelty in three areas. First, it examines the experiences of Christian Religious Education teachers in Ambon City, a group rarely considered in research on curriculum reform. Second, it situates implementation within a plural context, highlighting how interfaith dynamics influence educational practice. Third, it provides both theoretical and practical contributions: theoretically enriching discourse on religious education and curriculum policy, and practically informing teacher professional development and local policy strategies.

Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods approach with a concurrent embedded design, in which qualitative and quantitative data were collected simultaneously but assigned different weights. Consistent with Sugiyono (2013), the qualitative strand served as the dominant approach, while the quantitative strand functioned as a supporting component to strengthen interpretation. Thus, although quantitative data were gathered through questionnaires and presented in diagrams, the analysis remained primarily qualitative. The quantitative findings were used to triangulate and reinforce qualitative insights rather than to stand as an independent analysis.

The research was conducted with 23 Christian Religious Education (PAK) teachers at the senior high school level in Ambon City, who were purposively selected as key informants. Data collection employed three complementary techniques. First, in-depth interviews were carried out to capture teachers' perceptions of the Merdeka Curriculum and its implementation challenges. Second, documentation was examined to contextualize findings with relevant policies and institutional records. Third, questionnaires were administered to generate supporting quantitative evidence on teacher perceptions.

The main research instruments included an interview guide and a questionnaire, both of which were developed with reference to the study objectives and relevant literature. Data analysis followed three stages. At the data reduction stage, interview transcripts were coded and categorized, while questionnaire responses were tabulated. During data presentation, thematic patterns were organized and supplemented with diagrams derived from the questionnaire results. Finally, in the conclusion drawing and verification stage, qualitative patterns were consolidated and supported with quantitative percentages or frequencies. In this way, qualitative insights formed the core of the analysis, while quantitative evidence strengthened validity and offered an additional layer of interpretation.

Results and Discussion

Results

Teachers are individuals who devote themselves to teaching, educating, guiding, directing, and training students in understanding the knowledge taught. The role of teachers is not only limited to the delivery of academic material, but also covers various aspects of student development, including moral, emotional, and social. Teachers have a major influence on the success of student learning, so whether or not student success is

determined by the teacher. Likewise, the curriculum, the success or failure of curriculum implementation is also influenced by teachers, which is basically influenced by teaching experience, educational background, and training attended by teachers (Octavia, 2021).

Teachers' teaching experience

Teaching experience is often assumed to shape teachers' perceptions and professional competence. Gordon's theory of teacher perception suggests that prior teaching experience influences how educators interpret and respond to curriculum reforms, as they rely on accumulated practices and habits in the classroom. Similarly, Sujanto emphasized that length of service is a key determinant of teacher professionalism (Susanto, 2009). However, the findings of this study indicate otherwise.

Although 95.65% of the Christian Religious Education (PAK) teachers surveyed had more than ten years of teaching experience, their understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum varied considerably: some demonstrated strong comprehension, while others struggled. Conversely, even the teacher with only three years of experience was able to grasp the curriculum well. This challenges the assumption that longer teaching experience necessarily leads to better curriculum implementation. Romauli's argument that experience does not always improve teacher quality (Nainggolan, 2016) resonates with these findings.

From the perspective of policy implementation theory, this discrepancy suggests that curriculum reform requires more than accumulated teaching years—it demands adaptive learning and structured professional development. For PAK teachers, the issue is not merely the quantity of experience, but how training enables them to reinterpret their experience in light of new curriculum demands while integrating faith-based values. In this sense, the findings highlight that experience without targeted training does not prepare teachers to translate the Merdeka Curriculum into classroom practices that foster both academic learning and Christian character formation.

Teachers' educational background

Teachers' educational background is often assumed to play a decisive role in shaping their views on the Merdeka Curriculum. Theoretically, the higher the education level, the broader the teacher's insight into learning theories, curriculum concepts, and pedagogical approaches (Wijaya Saputra & Sofian Hadi, 2022).

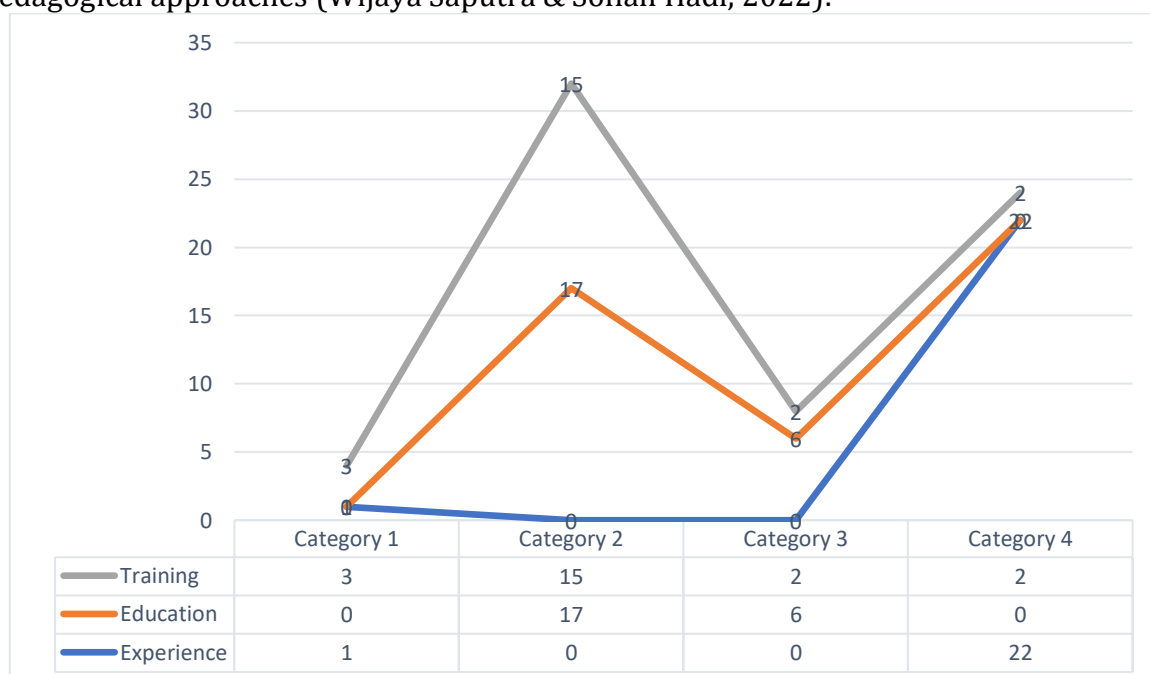


Figure 1. Teaching experience, educational background, and training attended by teachers

Based on Figure 1, of the 23 informants, 17 (73.91%) held a bachelor's degree (S1) and 6 (26.09%) held a master's degree (S2). Interestingly, the findings show that not all teachers with master's degrees demonstrated a good understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum, while some with S1 degrees showed more nuanced comprehension. This suggests that formal education level alone does not consistently determine teachers' perceptions and practices of the new curriculum.

This fact contradicts several earlier studies which emphasized a linear relationship between higher education and professionalism (Shubchan & Rossa, 2021). From the perspective of Gordon's theory of teacher perception, teachers interpret curriculum reforms not merely through formal qualifications but through personal meaning-making processes shaped by training, institutional culture, and spiritual commitments. In Christian Religious Education (PAK), this has an important implication: curriculum understanding is less about academic titles and more about how teachers integrate curriculum policies with their calling to form students' Christian character.

Thus, the novelty of this finding lies in showing that professional training and spiritual formation—not just degree level—are decisive in how PAK teachers perceive and implement the Merdeka Curriculum as a tool for character building grounded in faith.

Training attended by teachers

The quality and quantity of training attended by teachers significantly shape their framework and perceptions of the Merdeka Curriculum (Fatmiyati, 2022). Figure 1 shows that of the 23 informants who filled out the questionnaire, 15 people (65.21%) had attended training 1–3 times, 2 people (8.70%) attended 4–6 times, 2 people (8.70%) attended 7–10 times, 1 person (4.35%) attended more than 10 times, and 3 people (13.04%) had never attended Merdeka Curriculum training.

While these numbers illustrate the distribution of training participation, the key analytical point is how training translates into teachers' perceptions and practices. Interviews revealed that teachers who attended multiple training sessions not only reported higher confidence in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum but also interpreted the curriculum through the lens of Christian character education. This suggests that training does not merely transfer technical knowledge; it equips religious education teachers with frameworks for integrating faith-based values with curriculum reform.

This aligns with Gordon's perspective on teacher perception, which emphasizes that professional learning experiences influence how teachers interpret and enact policy changes. In this case, training enabled teachers of Christian Religious Education to see the Merdeka Curriculum not just as a structural reform but as an opportunity to strengthen students' spiritual formation and moral integrity. Therefore, the novelty of this finding lies in showing how training impacts teachers' dual role—as curriculum implementers and as formators of Christian character.

Discussion

Teacher perception is a critical factor in the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. In this study, teacher perception is divided into two main aspects based on Gordon's concept (B. Gordon et al., 2013; H. R. Gordon & Lawshe, 1982), which was also developed by Fokjar, namely the understanding and ability of the teacher, in this case the PAK teacher, in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum (Fojkar & Rozmanič, 2021). However, this study focuses on the teachers' understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum. In addition, the researcher collected data to identify the difficulties experienced by teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Based on the data

collected through interviews and questionnaires with PAK teachers in Ambon City, the findings of this study can be explained as follows figure 2.

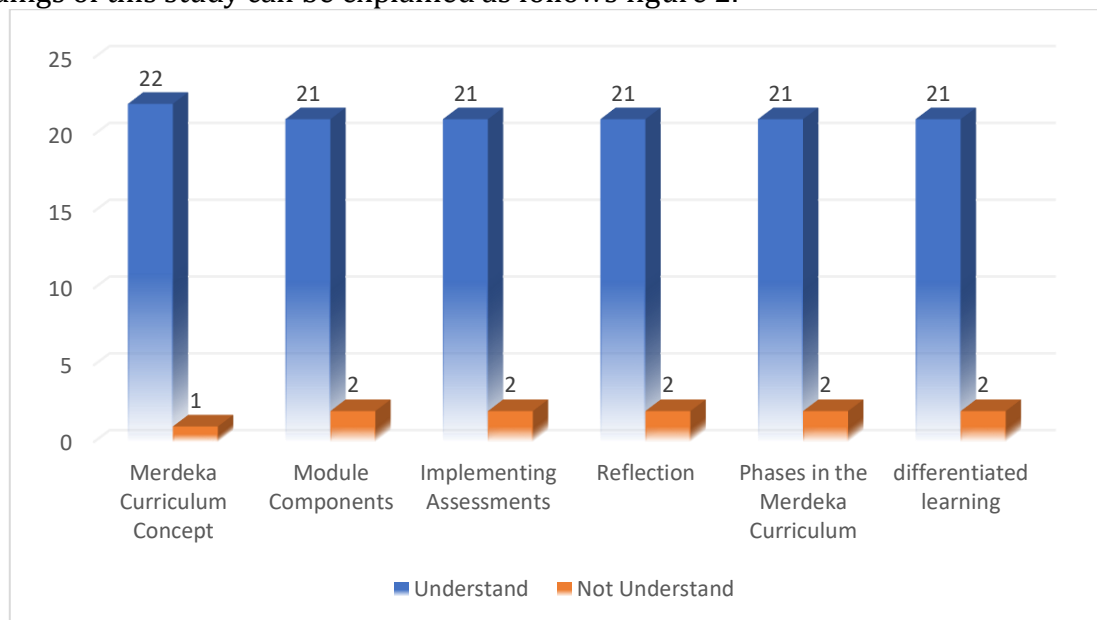


Figure2. Teachers' understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum

Teacher Understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum

The understanding of Christian Religious Education (PAK) teachers at the high school level in Ambon City affects the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in learning. The following are the aspects that will be discussed: 1) The level of teacher understanding of the basic concepts of the Merdeka Curriculum. 2) Teachers' understanding of the various components in the teaching module. 3) Teachers' knowledge in conducting diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments. 4) Teachers' understanding of the importance of reflection in the learning process. 5) Teachers' understanding of the phases in the Merdeka Curriculum. 6) Teachers' understanding of the concepts and practices of differentiated learning. this is considered a new thing or a part that has developed from the previous curriculum (Azzahra et al., 2022). In addition, the results also show that teachers experience difficulties in the above components are also an obstacle for many teachers (Lestari, 2023), teachers in Ambon City are no exception (Hehakaya & Pollatu, 2022).

Teachers' Understanding of the Independent Curriculum Concept

The results of interviews with Christian Religious Education (PAK) teachers in high schools in Ambon City indicate a strong understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly its emphasis on student autonomy in learning. One teacher stated, "The Independent Curriculum provides freedom for students in learning." This aligns with the principle of the Merdeka Curriculum, which prioritizes fun and student-centered learning tailored to learners' characteristics (Kemdikbud, 2020). The finding resonates with John Dewey's experiential learning theory, which emphasizes learning through direct experience and active participation (Haubert, 2021; Lagueux, 2021; Placides & Costa, 2021).

Teachers highlighted the importance of holistic assessment, noting that previous evaluations often focused only on final results, neglecting formative aspects such as process, creativity, and socio-emotional development. This concern aligns with recent studies emphasizing formative assessment as essential for comprehensive measurement of student learning (Boström & Palm, 2023; Clarke-Midura et al., 2023; Ghazali & Tyas,

2022; Talanquer, 2015; Zhai & Nehm, 2023). In the context of Christian Religious Education, such holistic assessment allows teachers to integrate character formation and moral development alongside cognitive skills, in accordance with the Merdeka Curriculum's goal of addressing students' diverse learning styles and needs (Ambarita & Simanullang, 2023; Gloria & Sudarmin, 2018; Simanjuntak et al., 2019).

Inclusive learning also emerged as a key theme, with teachers noting special attention for students with special needs. This reflects the broader educational value of inclusion, which guarantees equal access to learning for every individual (Sudiarni et al., 2023). In Christian pedagogy, inclusive practices also support the cultivation of empathy and respect for all students, echoing the moral dimensions of PAK.

Teachers further emphasized attention to non-cognitive aspects, such as mood, concentration, and motivation. Use of songs or games at the beginning of lessons was cited as a strategy to enhance enthusiasm and engagement, supporting prior research on affective and motivational components of learning (Boman, 2023; Chang et al., 2023). This aligns with constructivist approaches, where teachers scaffold both cognitive and socio-emotional growth in students.

Collaboration was another recurring theme. Teachers recognized that professional collaboration among peers is crucial for continuous professional development and overall education quality (Kalinowski et al., 2022; Rahmadani & Kamaluddin, 2023). Moreover, the curriculum encourages engagement with parents, extending collaboration beyond the classroom (Skouteris et al., 2016). In the PAK context, such collaboration supports faith-based character development by aligning home and school values.

Quantitative data from the questionnaires confirm these findings: 22 out of 23 teachers (95.65%) demonstrated strong understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum, while only 1 teacher (4.35%) reported limited understanding. This high level of comprehension indicates that PAK teachers in Ambon City not only grasp the principles of the curriculum but are also prepared to apply effective pedagogical strategies that integrate student autonomy, holistic assessment, inclusion, and Christian character formation.

The integration of qualitative interviews with quantitative support demonstrates that teacher understanding is multi-dimensional, encompassing theoretical knowledge, practical strategies, and moral-pedagogical application. While previous studies often focus on general education, this research highlights how teacher training and perception specifically shape the integration of faith and character development within the Merdeka Curriculum, providing a nuanced understanding relevant to both national policy and religious pedagogy.

Teachers' Understanding of Teaching Modules in the Context of the Merdeka Curriculum

The teaching modules in the Merdeka Curriculum comprise objectives, subject matter, methods, strategies, learning models, and evaluation (Goliah et al., 2022). This approach contrasts with Curriculum 2013, which primarily emphasizes standardized lesson plans (Sumarni, 2017). The Merdeka Curriculum further encourages differentiated learning, emotional processing, and ice-breaking techniques (Kusumardi, 2024), providing more flexibility compared to the uniform approach of the previous curriculum.

Flexibility also extends to assessment, as learners are allowed to complete tasks in diverse forms (Nisa, 2023). This principle requires teachers, including Christian Religious Education (PAK) teachers to design modules that accommodate varied assignments and holistic evaluation, rather than relying solely on conventional academic grading (Hjukse et al., 2020; Suprpto, 2018). Prior studies emphasize the value of variety in instructional design to enhance learning effectiveness (Ayuningtyas & Suwastini, 2022; Monica Oloo & Muteheli. Florence, 2023; Suizo et al., 2023). Accordingly, PAK teachers are positioned to

integrate faith-based character formation into evaluation, aligning academic outcomes with moral and spiritual development (Sitorus et al., 2023).

Teacher perception theory suggests that understanding and confidence in using curriculum tools significantly influence implementation fidelity (Gordon, 1999). In line with this, questionnaire data reveal that 21 out of 23 teachers (91.30%) demonstrate good understanding of the teaching modules, while 2 teachers (8.70%) report limited understanding. This indicates that while most teachers are well-prepared, adequate training and resource support remain critical to ensure uniform competency (Sholeh, 2023).

From an analytical perspective, strong teacher comprehension of teaching modules facilitates holistic learning and adaptive instruction, which are essential for integrating Christian values into a flexible, student-centered curriculum. Conversely, gaps in understanding may hinder effective implementation and reduce the curriculum's capacity to support character formation. Thus, professional development and access to teaching resources are strategic priorities for optimizing Merdeka Curriculum outcomes in the PAK context (Primayana, 2022; Siregar et al., 2022).

Teachers' Understanding of Assessment in the Context of the Merdeka Curriculum

Teachers must understand the importance of assessment in the Merdeka Curriculum as a tool to evaluate students' abilities in learning. Sadler said, the intended assessment must be varied, not just one form of assessment (Sadler & Reimann, 2018). This understanding includes the application of relevant assessment principles, which enable accurate and meaningful measurement (Wisniewski et al., 2020). The Merdeka Curriculum provides flexible and independent learning freedom, supporting the optimal development of students' abilities and potential (If-08). This flexible assessment approach can improve learning outcomes.

The Merdeka curriculum accommodates children with special needs with differentiated learning. This inclusive principle ensures that all students have access to quality education (Tomlinson, 2012). Assessment in the Merdeka Curriculum includes non-cognitive aspects, such as students' values and needs. This approach provides a holistic picture of student progress (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

The Merdeka Curriculum facilitates collaboration between teachers in the preparation of materials, which supports the improvement of learning quality (Hatarani et al., 2022). There are many different learning models such as project-based learning that are also emphasized as a form of final assessment, giving students the opportunity to apply the knowledge they have gained in the classroom in a real context (Köllen, 2021). Merdeka Curriculum includes three stages: independent freedom, freedom to change, and freedom to share. This approach is holistic, supporting student development throughout the learning process (Dantas & Cunha, 2020; Gibson et al., 2023).

Teachers have a good understanding of assessment in the Merdeka Curriculum, reflecting a holistic and inclusive approach in assessing students' abilities. Questionnaire data shows that 91.30% of teachers understand this concept, while 8.70% still lack understanding. Thus, teachers' understanding of assessment in the Merdeka Curriculum is important to ensure that student evaluations cover both cognitive and non-cognitive aspects, and support inclusive and differentiated learning.

Teachers' Understanding of Reflection

Reflection is a critical component of both the learning process and teacher professional development. Safitri highlights that reflective practices improve learning quality (Safitri, 2019), while Miftah stress teacher-initiated reflection as essential for professional growth (Miftah et al., 2024). Titus & Muttungal add that reflection on

thinking processes is necessary to shift perspectives and enhance decision-making (Titus & Muttungal, 2024).

Interviews reveal that teachers recognize the importance of reflection at multiple stages, from the end of a lesson to the end of the semester, for evaluating and improving subsequent learning (If-07, If-08). However, actual implementation remains limited. Theoretical perspectives support this: Gardner defines reflection as critical evaluation of experience to improve future actions (Gardner, 1999), while Simonovic emphasize reflection as a tool for uncovering assumptions and gaining insight for professional enhancement (Simonovic et al., 2023).

Questionnaire data indicate that 21 of 23 teachers (91.30%) understand the importance of reflection, with 2 teachers (8.70%) showing less understanding. While most teachers acknowledge its significance, the gap between recognition and implementation highlights the need for structured reflective practices, particularly within the Merdeka Curriculum framework, where reflection aligns with continuous improvement and Christian pedagogical values that emphasize self-awareness and moral growth (Vebrianto et al., 2024).

Teachers' Understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum Phases

Understanding the phases of the Merdeka Curriculum is essential for designing learning experiences that match student development. Interviews show that the curriculum consists of six phases: three for primary school (A–C), one for junior high (D), and two for senior high (E–F) (If-06).

Theoretical support comes from Piaget's cognitive development theory, which emphasizes tailoring instruction to developmental stages (Pakpahan & Saragih, 2022), and Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, which highlights the need for scaffolding learning according to students' actual capabilities (Newman & Latifi, 2021). Anderson & Krathwohl (2016) further note that effective learning integrates diverse teaching strategies aligned with cognitive development.

Questionnaire data show that 21 of 23 teachers (91.30%) understand these phases, with 2 teachers (8.70%) lacking full comprehension. This demonstrates that most teachers can design developmentally appropriate lessons that support both cognitive and moral growth, which is crucial for implementing a curriculum that integrates student-centered learning with Christian character formation. Continuous training is recommended to ensure all teachers maintain a deep understanding of curriculum phases.

Teachers' Understanding of Differentiated Learning

Differentiated learning recognizes individual differences in students' interests, talents, and learning styles, creating more personalized and meaningful learning experiences (Barros et al., 2022; Musdi et al., 2024; Salgado-Orellana et al., 2019; Tupiño et al., 2023). While teachers understand the concept, its practical implementation faces challenges.

A major obstacle is insufficient understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum, making adaptation of differentiated learning difficult. Similar difficulties were reported in other regions (Dirgantoro & Soesanto, 2023; Hakim et al., 2022). Teachers also face challenges in identifying and addressing auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learning styles (Wardhani & Sartika, 2024). Technology can facilitate differentiated learning, but many teachers, particularly senior staff, struggle to adopt new tools and require support from tech-savvy colleagues (Ambarita & Siahaya, 2023; Sari et al., 2023).

Theoretical perspectives support the need for skillful differentiation. Tomlinson emphasizes understanding students' unique needs and designing responsive learning

(Tomlinson, 2012), while Carranza highlights school support and enabling policies as crucial for effective implementation (Carranza, 2021). Questionnaire results show that 21 of 23 teachers (91.30%) understand differentiated learning, while 2 teachers (8.70%) do not, confirming that support from schools and policymakers is essential.

From a Christian pedagogy perspective, differentiated learning allows teachers to nurture both cognitive and spiritual development, providing an inclusive environment that respects individual abilities and promotes moral growth. Targeted professional development and resource support are therefore vital to ensure that PAK teachers can implement differentiated learning effectively, bridging theory with practice.

Teachers' Challenges in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

One of the main challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum is the lack of adequate socialisation. Effective socialisation is crucial to ensure teachers fully understand curriculum objectives and teaching modules. Interviews revealed that many teachers, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, had limited exposure to structured training, which affected their ability to apply the curriculum effectively in the classroom. This gap contributed to students' low enthusiasm and disengagement. Gupta et al. (2022) argue that structured socialisation deepens teachers' understanding and supports practical application. For Christian Religious Education (PAK) teachers, socialisation is especially important, as it ensures that curriculum goals are aligned with faith-based character formation and the development of the Pancasila student profile.

Another difficulty faced by teachers relates to differentiated learning. The Merdeka Curriculum encourages inclusivity by accommodating diverse learning styles, such as auditory, visual, and kinesthetic preferences. However, many teachers reported difficulties in identifying and addressing these differences. Similar findings have been highlighted by Estari (2020) and Toyama & Yamazaki (2021), who stress the importance of teacher flexibility and responsiveness. For PAK teachers, differentiated learning carries an additional moral and spiritual dimension, as it fosters respect for individuality and nurtures an inclusive faith-based learning community.

Teachers' limited mastery of technology also poses a significant obstacle, particularly in the context of the Industrial Revolution 4.0. Senior teachers nearing retirement expressed challenges in integrating digital tools into their teaching, often resulting in monotonous and less engaging lessons. Prior research shows that effective use of technology can significantly enhance student engagement and academic performance (Abdullah & Jasmi, 2014; Kasuk & Virkus, 2024). In the context of PAK, technology is not only a tool for engagement but also an opportunity to design innovative approaches for integrating religious content and promoting interactive moral formation activities.

Supporting infrastructure plays a key role in curriculum implementation, yet many schools struggle with inadequate facilities. Problems such as unstable electricity and broken equipment were reported as recurring barriers. Masela and Subekti (2021) highlight that teachers' limited facility utilisation and innovation directly affect teaching quality and student outcomes. In the case of PAK, inadequate infrastructure restricts the use of interactive media and collaborative tools that are needed to integrate faith-based learning activities within the Merdeka Curriculum framework.

In addition to infrastructure, teachers also face challenges in motivating learners. Informants noted that students often displayed indifference, requiring teachers to make extra efforts to foster intrinsic motivation. Research by Loloangin (2023) and Tulyakul et al. (2022) confirms that teachers' ability to inspire and provide personal attention plays a vital role in enhancing student engagement. In Christian Religious Education,

motivational strategies not only encourage participation but also reinforce spiritual values and character development, making them central to the success of the curriculum.

Time management further complicates curriculum delivery. Teachers reported difficulties in balancing lesson schedules and ensuring effective allocation of time across different learning objectives. Surur and Nadhirin (2020) emphasise that effective goal-setting, prioritisation, and structured scheduling are essential for improving learning outcomes. For PAK teachers, managing time is particularly important to ensure that religious and character-based content is integrated without neglecting core academic objectives.

Finally, many teachers face limitations in developing teaching modules that align with the Merdeka Curriculum. The process requires a detailed analysis of learning outcomes and the ability to adapt materials to diverse student needs, which becomes more challenging in large classes. Magdalena et al. (2023) argue that effective module development depends on teachers' strong grasp of curriculum principles. For PAK teachers, this task is even more complex, as the modules must not only address academic goals but also integrate spiritual and character formation into the learning process.

Conclusion

This study examined the perceptions of Christian Religious Education (PAK) teachers regarding the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in high schools in Ambon City, with particular attention to how teaching experience, educational background, and professional training shaped their understanding and practice. The findings indicate that neither teaching experience nor higher academic qualifications consistently influenced teachers' comprehension or classroom application of the curriculum. Instead, professional training emerged as the most significant factor, underscoring the vital role of continuous professional development in enabling teachers to effectively internalize and apply curriculum principles. While most teachers demonstrated sound knowledge of curriculum concepts, teaching modules, and assessment methods, areas such as reflective practice and differentiated learning remained underdeveloped and in need of further support.

Teachers also encountered several practical challenges in applying the Merdeka Curriculum. These included limited socialisation and guidance, difficulties in implementing differentiated instruction, insufficient technological proficiency, inadequate infrastructure, problems in motivating students, time management constraints, and the complexity of designing teaching modules for large classes. Addressing these barriers requires targeted interventions such as continuous professional training, improved infrastructure and technological resources, strategies for enhancing student motivation, structured guidance in module development, and institutional support for collaborative time management practices.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the literature on curriculum reform by providing empirical evidence of how professional development shapes the capacity of PAK teachers to integrate Christian character-building within a national curriculum framework. It fills a gap in scholarship on religious education in plural contexts, such as Ambon, where curriculum implementation must balance national policy with local religious values. Practically, the findings highlight actionable strategies for schools and teacher training institutions, particularly the prioritization of sustained professional development, enhanced technology integration, and reflective and differentiated pedagogical practices. From a policy perspective, the study offers important insights for curriculum designers and policymakers, emphasizing the need for tailored training

programs, equitable resource allocation, and infrastructure support to ensure that reforms are effectively contextualized for faith-based education.

This study, however, is not without limitations. Its scope was restricted to high schools in Ambon City, and its reliance on teachers' self-reported perceptions limits the breadth of its conclusions. Future research should expand to include classroom observations, longitudinal investigations of training program outcomes, and explorations of student learning achievements under the Merdeka Curriculum. Such studies would provide a more comprehensive assessment of the curriculum's effectiveness across diverse regions and educational contexts in Indonesia.

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