

*Exploring the Teachers' Perceptions Towards the Development of National Curriculum:
A Phenomenological Study*

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Abstract

The Indonesian national curriculum has undergone several changes in the last two decades. This phenomenon has various implications for teachers with different backgrounds. Through a phenomenological study, this research examines teachers' experiences in dealing with curriculum changes over the years. The informants in this study were eight teachers from various levels and types of schools and regions. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed by formulating textural and structural descriptions to define the construction of meaning. The results of this study indicate that: First, all informants faced the same phenomenon, but had different experiences due to differences in the level and type of their school; second, diverse experiences produce different meanings, where school conditions and needs, external support, and perspectives on challenges influence the teacher's adaptation process in dealing with the change.

Keywords: Curriculum Change, Teacher's Perception, Phenomenology

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Introduction

The curriculum is defined with a diverse scope, from interpreting the curriculum as lesson plans to official state documents (Gufon, 2017). In Indonesia, the curriculum definition refers to Law No. 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System which states that a “Curriculum is a set of plans and arrangements regarding objectives, content, and learning materials as well as the methods used as guidelines for organizing learning activities to achieve certain educational goals.” Hence, the curriculum has an important role in determining the direction and form of an educational process. Moreover, Westbrook et. al. (2013: 12), represent that “The curriculum is the key reference point for teachers, particularly in developing countries, where it is encoded in the official textbook and teacher guides, often the sole resource used by teachers.”

The curriculum designed by the government based on the National Education Standards and applied nationally is known as the national curriculum. Until 2022, the national curriculum in Indonesia has gone through a series of developments. It was recorded that the development of the national curriculum occurred in 1947, 1952, 1964, 1968, 1975, 1984, 1994, 2004, 2006, 2013, and 2022 (BSKAP, 2022; Hasan, 2019; Ritonga, 2018). It can be concluded that in the last 2 decades (2002-2022), the national curriculum in Indonesia has changed 4 times. However, the implementation of curriculum changes does not always run smoothly in the field and often becomes something complex to do thoroughly (BSKAP, 2022; Fullan, 2007; Tribuzzi, 2017; Westbrook et. al., 2013).

Various studies have been conducted in other countries to examine how teachers respond to the transformation of the national curriculum. A study conducted by Clasquin-Johnson (2016) in South Africa concluded that teachers' reactions to curriculum changes varied, where the effective follow-up to adaptation to change was influenced by the extent to which teachers had a community of practitioners where they shared teaching practices. Another research was conducted by Mellegård & Pettersen (2016) in Norway which examined the differences in perspectives between policymakers and teachers in the field. Curriculum changes that provide an expansion of independence are interpreted by teachers as an expansion of demands, thus showing discrepancies between the perceptions of teachers and the government. Other research conducted by Jenkins (2020) in Australia concluded that the effectiveness of teachers in implementing curriculum changes proved to be highly dependent on school leadership, teacher relationships with leaders and co-workers, school operational practices, school culture, and personal motivation.

In Indonesia, there are also several studies regarding the existence of teachers amid curriculum changes and how they perceive them. A literature study was conducted by Mahmud (2013), with the title "Teachers in the Middle of Curriculum Changes" concluded that any curriculum changes would be meaningless if teachers did not make changes in their classrooms. Meanwhile Setiawati (2022), in her research "Impact of Curriculum Change Policy on Learning in Schools" concluded that the effectiveness of curriculum changes is determined by the teacher's attitude towards these changes, where changes will run optimally if teachers can see challenges as motivation. Then, research conducted by Lubis (2016), entitled "Readiness of Teachers as Curriculum Developers in Responding to Curriculum Changes" concluded that curriculum changes will run optimally if teachers can design and develop curricula at the level of class or school. These articles summarize valuable conclusions, yet they are not field research so it cannot reveal the authentic perceptions of the teachers. Among the few relevant field research, there are studies held by Hidayah et. al.

(2022), who tried to explore the perceptions of elementary school teachers towards curriculum changes through a descriptive survey in Yogyakarta, and Efferi (2017) who explored high school teacher's responses to curriculum changes through a case study at Madrasah Aliyah Negeri 1 Kudus (Public Madrasa). The two studies concluded that the teacher responses to curriculum changes were still not optimal due to various constraints and the teacher has not voluntarily been able to actively understand the changes. However, the topic of research requires further exploration to dig into teacher perceptions more broadly and in-depth, across different types of schools with intensive interviews. Therefore, this research was conducted to explore teachers' perceptions of the development of a national curriculum through a phenomenological approach to fill this research gap.

This study looks at the issue of curriculum change in Indonesia as a phenomenon and makes the teacher experience a research study. Referring to this, the research questions posed are: How is the teacher's experience related to the development of the national curriculum and how do teachers give meaning to their experiences towards the development of the national curriculum. It is hoped that this research can become the input for all stakeholders to narrow the gap between the perceptions of policymakers and policy implementers in the field. As stated by Soto (2015), curriculum development is an ongoing process that requires lots of analysis from curriculum developers.

Methods

This research is a qualitative study. According to Denzin & Lincoln (2018), qualitative research involves an interpretive and naturalistic approach to the world. Qualitative researchers study things in natural settings, where they seek to make sense of or interpret phenomena as meanings by people. Hence, this research was carried out naturally through direct communication between researchers and informants. The method developed in this research is phenomenology. According to Creswell & Potch (2018), phenomenological studies describe the general meaning for some individuals regarding their life experiences related to a concept or phenomenon. Phenomenology looks closely at a person's interpretation of his life experience and tries to understand the objective meanings behind it. Therefore, phenomenological researchers focus on uncovering the essence of human experience in order to truly understand it (Lodico et al., 2010).

The phenomenological analysis follows the step originated from Stevick, Colaizzi, and Keen, which was reformulated by Moustakas and then simplified by Creswell & Potch (2018). Contains 6 steps, which are: 1) Describe the phenomenon under study, 2) Identify the significant statements from the participant, 3) Define the meaning units, 4) Develop textural description, 5) Develop structural description, and 6) Formulate the essence of the experience.

This study was conducted from December 2022 to March 2023. The research informants consisted of 8 teachers from various levels, school types, and locations to provide rich perspectives. The selection of respondents used a purposive sampling technique with the criteria of having taught in the school at least for 10 years.

| Informant | Length of Teaching (Year) | School Level | School Type | Location (City) |
|-----------|---------------------------|--------------|------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1 | 13 | Kindergarten | Private | Semarang, East Java |
| 2 | 19 | Primary | Private, Madrasa | Wonosobo, East Java |
| 3 | 19 | Primary | Public, Special School | Yogyakarta, Yogyakarta Special Region |
| 4 | 12 | Middle | Private | Jakarta, Jakarta Capital Region |
| 5 | 18 | Middle | Public | Pesisir Selatan, West Sumatra |
| 6 | 12 | Middle | Public | Hulu Sungai Tengah, South Kalimantan |
| 7 | 13 | High | Public | Garut, West Java |
| 8 | 18 | High | Public, Vocational | Makassar, South Sulawesi |

Table 1: Participant profile

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured in-depth interviews using a variety of different modes for each informant, including face-to-face, online virtual meetings, telephone, and text messages. The data credibility test was conducted through a process of increasing persistence and triangulation and the dependability test was conducted through the process of auditing all stages and results of research by colleagues (experts).

Result

The results of this study are divided into two parts which were developed from the research focus; *first*, is the textural description related to how the teacher's experience relates to the development of national curriculum; *second*, is a structural description related to how teachers give meaning to their experiences towards the development of national curriculum.

Textural Description: Teachers' Factual Experience on the Development of the National Curriculum

Informants in this study have become teachers in the past 12 to 19 years (by 2022). Therefore, their experience is at least related to the development of national curriculum in 2004. In that year there was a significant development by the national curriculum in terms of shifting curriculum content from previously content-based to competency-based. Therefore, the 2004 Curriculum is referred to as the Competency-Based Curriculum (Kurikulum Berbasis Kompetensi/KBK). Furthermore, in 2006, significant developments in the curriculum occurred in terms of increasing the authority of schools in developing a curriculum that is in accordance with the characteristics of the region, so that the 2006 Curriculum is referred to as the Education Unit Level Curriculum (Kurikulum Tingkat Satuan Pendidikan/KTSP). 7 years later, the 2013 Curriculum emerged which encouraged innovation in learning design by reformulating Competency Standards that were more comprehensive targeting aspects of knowledge, attitudes, and skills. Significant developments then occurred during the pandemic of Covid-19 (2019-2022) when the government provided three curriculum options that could be chosen by the school: The 2013 Curriculum, the Simplified 2013 Curriculum (Emergency Curriculum), and the Prototype Curriculum which was later renamed become the Kurikulum Merdeka.

During the national curriculum development, the background of the informants who came from various levels and types of schools made their experience under various conditions. The conclusions from the interviews conducted with all informants indicate that there are specific conditions in dealing with changes between teachers in Early Childhood Education and elementary-secondary schools, teachers in public and private schools, and teachers in public schools, madrasa, and special schools. The specificity of these conditions is related to how far the national curriculum has an impact on the process of teaching and learning in school (school flexibility to adjust curriculum) and how dynamic the school is in dealing with change. Hence, the participant faced the same phenomena but sometimes had a different assumption according to different teaching contexts. Therefore, there are different meanings which we can see in the structural description.

Structural Description: Teachers' Construct of Meaning Toward the Development of the National Curriculum

The results of interviews with all informants led to 6 units of meaning which could be categorized by the informants' meaning of their experiences. The units of meaning are acceptance, significance, adaptation, challenge, support, and expectation.

Acceptance

The acceptance aspect is related to the teacher's initial response to the issue of curriculum development. In this aspect, the teacher interprets the presence of the new curriculum in various ways (positively, negatively, or both). Positive responses see change as natural, while negative responses see it as something that is too soon to be done. However, overall the portion of positive (optimistic) statements far outweighs the negative (pessimistic) statements. Here are some expressions on this subject:

| Positive phrases | Negative phrases |
|---|--|
| <i>The curriculum must change, indeed, in the sense of development. (Informant 4)</i> | <i>This is my experience and I have seen it from a number of friends, especially those who are seniors, because the changes are really fast, then there aren't many changes. So I thought, ah let the curriculum change as well, later the leaders will change the policies again. (Informant 7)</i> |
| <i>It seems that is true if a minister replacement leads to curriculum replacement, but each minister must have an argument about why the curriculum was changed. (Informant 6)</i> | |
| <i>I see there is an effort for, what is it, to make the national curriculum more adaptive to what is called the needs of the 21st century (Informant 1)</i> | <i>It's just that not everyone wants to accept the change easily. Depending on the individual teacher, not all of them easily accept the changes, especially the senior teachers. Minister change, curriculum change, is really a hassle. (Informant 2)</i> |

Table 2: Informant statement about "Acceptance"

What is noted in the reception response to the issue of curriculum development is the appearance of the statement "Ministers change, curriculum change" whose intensity appears quite often from all informants, both when conveying positive (optimistic) and negative (pessimistic) things. It indicates that this statement is very popular among teachers and has

become the "Top of Mind" when discussing curriculum change policies. However, when explored further, all informants realized that these statements were actually not always accurate considering that the curriculum was not always changed when there was a change of ministers. This statement tends to be used as a justification for teachers who are not always ready to face changes when a change in curriculum occurs.

Significance

The aspect of significance is related to the extent to which the national curriculum has an impact on the implementation of learning in every classroom. Some informants indicated that the national curriculum greatly determines the teaching-learning process in the classroom, while others did not see it that way. Here is an overview of the mapping:

| High significance | Low significance |
|---|---|
| <i>It's quite an impact, sir, like when we teach, we want to explore anything, we have to refer to the curriculum, right? (Informant 2)</i> | <i>It doesn't have much effect in my school - the replacement of curriculum from 2006 to 2013 or to a new curriculum. That is because we usually make some readjustments. (Informant 1)</i> |
| <i>The national curriculum is important as a reference for schools to conduct appropriate learning in the school. (Informant 6)</i> | <i>When 2013 curriculum appeared, I was not exposed to this curriculum. (Informant 4)</i> |

Table 3: Informant statement about "Significance"

| Informant | Length of Teaching (Year) | School Type | Level of significance based on the conclusion of the interview. |
|------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------|--|
| 1 | 13 | Private | Low |
| 2 | 19 | Private, Madrasa | High |
| 3 | 19 | Public, Special School | Low |
| 4 | 12 | Private | Low |
| 5 | 18 | Public | High |
| 6 | 12 | Public | High |
| 7 | 13 | Public | High |
| 8 | 18 | Public, Vocational | High |

Table 4: The significance level of the national curriculum to the informants

This study found a pattern between the background of the informants and the significance level of the national curriculum for their schools. The first category is informants at the kindergarten level, private schools, and special schools who tend to show a low level of significance for the national curriculum because they are used to developing the national curriculum independently according to the characteristics of their schools. While the second category is informants at the primary-secondary, state schools, and madrasa levels tend to show a high level of significance because so far they are used to fully following curriculum directions practically. As a result, informants in the second category felt more serious impacts from changing the curriculum than informants in the first category.

Challenge

The aspect of the challenge is related to the teacher's main obstacle in facing national curriculum development. This study found two obstacles from the informant's experience, that is the mindset and administrative problems.

| Mindset | Administrative |
|---|---|
| <p><i>Soon the curriculum will change again so there's no need to change it first. This view still exists because maybe there are too many replacements in the curriculum. So we don't think we need to rush into following the changes because we're afraid that soon they'll be replaced again. (Informant 7)</i></p> | <p><i>My time in the class was drained a lot to complete such administration. Especially with, for example, various administrations, it has to be this version, right? Anyway, now it has to be like this. So in Sundanese, we say ngagugulung administrasi (too busy with administration), so the children are neglected. (Informant 7)</i></p> |
| <p><i>There are teachers who see administrative changes as a challenge, there are also teachers who see it as a threat. (Informant 5)</i></p> | <p><i>The only difficulty was that earlier, which was about administration, about books, and about report cards. Usually, it's like that, yesterday still used the report card but now digital, right? So you have to make changes again. How do you want this? Not to mention there are several subjects that are merged or omitted. (Informant 2)</i></p> |

Table 5: Informant statement about “Challenge”

When conveying a statement regarding the obstacles to facing change, the informant's focus shifted from himself to fellow teachers in general (other people and including himself). Shows that is a general observation that they get in the field. All informants understood the mindset and administrative constraints as a real problem. Mindset and administration issues are two different challenges but mindsets influence teachers' perceptions of administration. In this case, some informants viewed the change in administration as a logical implication of curriculum changes, while other informants only viewed it as a complication.

Support

The support aspect is related to what things can help teachers deal with the national curriculum development. This study found there are three parties that the informants hope to provide support in dealing with change: Colleagues (including the community or teacher professional organizations), school principals, and the government (referring to the ministry of education and regional education offices).

| Colleagues | School principals | Government (Ministry & Regional education offices) |
|--|--|--|
| <i>During this time I gained a lot of knowledge and learned many new things from the community. ... Those teachers who take the initiative to develop themselves will definitely receive training in certain activities. But if the teachers are passive and just stay at school, they won't get anything. (5)</i> | <i>Within the school scope, the curriculum changes more quickly if the principal is adaptive to change. But if it's just the teacher and not the principal, it will take longer, sir. (Informant 5)</i> | <i>Yes, for me, government support is very helpful. Facilitating with training, technical guidance, and seminars and something like that. (Informant 6)</i> |
| <i>Yes, it's quite good. Because I have several friends to discuss it with, so I can understand quite a bit. (Informant 2)</i> | <i>Structural influence is still very much attached, both from the education department and the school principal. The executive function plays an important role in encouraging changes that often take time to process. (Informant 3)</i> | <i>So if the government wants to make a new curriculum, they have not only introduced the concept, but also ongoing support by accompanying the teacher through the process. (Informant 7)</i> |

Table 6: Informant statement about “Support”

All informants agreed that the school principal has a crucial role in implementing changes in the field. The principal acts as a locomotive that can make teachers move. Meanwhile, the government plays a role in providing adequate training and assistance. In general, differences were found in informants who had community networks or teacher organizations. The more active the teacher is in the community, the more it will help them understand change. However, the more disconnected from the community, the more challenging the efforts to build a comprehensive understanding of change because they only rely on assistance from school principals and the government without carrying out independent initiatives.

Adaptation

The adaptation aspect is related to what extent teachers in the field can adapt curriculum developments. This aspect is directly related to the aspects of acceptance, significance, challenge, and support. Teachers who are used to developing curricula flexibly, who get support from colleagues and school leaders, and who have an open mindset tend to be more optimistic about adaptation. An example of optimism is illustrated by the following statement:

Any curriculum from the government, once it reaches the school, is directly adapted to the conditions and needs in the field. At school, we have implemented the principles of flexibility and student-centeredness in accordance with the current curriculum directives. (Informant 3)

Conceptually understanding the curriculum does not take more than a month. (Informant 8)

The informants' optimism about the adaptation process was built from their experience of dealing with curriculum changes in their schools. A dynamic school environment tends to form a more adaptive awareness of change because it positions the teacher as a curriculum developer, while a less dynamic school environment tends to form a pessimistic awareness of change because it only sees the teacher as a curriculum implementer.

Discussion

Construction of Meaning From Perceptions of Curriculum Development

Informants representing teachers from various backgrounds indicated that they basically agreed with developments. They understand that education is always developing and therefore the national curriculum must also be updated. Controversy arises according to the subjective ideal period. Some teachers believe that changing the curriculum in 10 years is too fast, while others see it as quite ideal. Another thing that forms the teacher's negative perception of curriculum development is a change from a technical-administrative perspective. Changing the curriculum is the same as changing all forms of teaching documents which is quite complicated, accordance to research by Mellegård & Pettersen (2016) who found discrepancies in perceptions between fellow teachers as policy implementers and teachers with the government as policymakers. Amid these conditions, curriculum changes are often closely related to increasing administrative demands.

In the school context, informants have two assumptions: That the national curriculum has a direct impact on the teaching process in schools (high significance) and that the national curriculum does not have a direct impact on the teaching process (low significance). This level of significance is influenced by the condition of the school environment. The higher school's ability to develop its curriculum independently, the lower significance of changes to the national curriculum for teachers. In this case, the mindset of informants is formed by the experience in adapting and socializing with the culture in their respective school environments. However, these findings strengthen the results of literature studies from Setiawati (2022), Lubis (2016), and Mahmud (2013) which indicate that teachers often face all administrative problems and that a positive mindset can help them deal with changes.

Related to the external factors, all informants stated that the school principal has a very crucial role in how teachers begin to respond the development of curriculum, the government has an important role in facilitating and accompanying the teacher's adaptation process to new policies, while colleagues and the community have an important role in providing reinforcement from sharing good practices. Therefore, school principals, government, and colleagues have complementary roles in supporting teachers in dealing with change. This fact is aligned with the relevant research that school principals and co-workers have a significant influence on assistance in adjusting to change (Jenkins, 2020); that adequate teacher training is an important thing that needs to be really considered in the framework of educational change (Fullan, 2007; Soto, 2015; Westbrook et al., 2013), and; that a community of practitioners can help teachers face challenges better (Clasquin-Johnson, 2016).

Acceptance, significance, challenge, and support aspects then influence the adaptation process in dealing with changes. Teachers who perceive themselves as curriculum implementers tend to be pessimistic about the adaptation process while teachers who perceive themselves as curriculum developers have an optimistic view. This is in line with the findings of Soto (2015) that in the midst of curriculum development, an important ability that teachers

must have is the awareness that they are curriculum developers at the classroom and school levels. In this case, the way teachers perceive their role is influenced by their mindset and school environment which are summarized in the aspect of acceptance, significance, challenge, and support that we have discussed.

Conclusion

This study yields two conclusions that refer to the answers of the research questions: *First*, the informants who came from various school and regional backgrounds experienced the same phenomenon of the national curriculum development which took place 2 times in the last 10 year period (2012-2022) and 4 times in the last 20 year period (2002-2022). In that period they faced the same issues but with varied experiences due to differences in background levels and types of schools; *Second*, different experiences in dealing with the phenomenon affect the various meanings for them. Informants perceive the influence of curriculum changes on daily teaching based on their school system, they expected comprehensive support from school principals, the government, and the peer or community, and they agreed that the mindset and administrative issues were the main obstacles but they interpreted it differently as a challenge or a pure problem. Therefore, informants who have a growth mindset and positive environment tend to be more optimistic and ready to adapt compared to other informants. It can be concluded that diverse experiences produce different meanings, where school conditions and needs, external support, and perspectives on challenges influence the teacher's adaptation process in dealing with the change. However, the findings in this study can enrich the field studies that have been conducted by Setiawati (2022) and Efferi (2017) in providing a richer picture of teachers' perceptions of Indonesian curriculum changes in multiple contexts.

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