



From Compliance to Commitment: Mapping Teachers' Cognitive and Emotional Responses to Curriculum Reform

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Abstract. This study examines educators' cognitive and emotional reactions to curriculum change via a Delphi-based Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with vice principals of senior secondary schools (SLTA level) in Aceh Tengah and Bener Meriah, Indonesia. Despite structural innovations in Indonesia's curriculum reform, including the Merdeka Curriculum and the Deep Learning method, implementation gaps remain at the school level. This study seeks to delineate how educators cognitively comprehend curriculum modifications and emotionally respond to their requirements, and how these reactions affect their commitment to implementation. Data were gathered through organized group discussions and reflective responses in a Delphi panel session, employing a qualitative descriptive methodology. The findings indicate two predominant cognitive orientations: (1) progressive acceptance, perceiving reform as essential and forward-looking, and (2) interpretative ambiguity, signifying challenges in implementing policy within classroom settings. Teachers exhibited a range of emotions, from optimism and a sense of professional vocation to exhaustion, administrative overload, and resistance stemming from established attitudes. The shift from compliance to commitment was significantly shaped by educators' fundamental values, introspective abilities, collaborative environment, and perceived institutional backing. The study presents a belief-centered transformation paradigm that incorporates cognitive clarity, emotional resilience, and professional learning communities as strategic mechanisms for enduring curriculum improvement. These findings enhance the discussion of teacher beliefs as a vital aspect of educational development in emerging areas.

Keywords: Cognitive Response; Curriculum Reform; Emotional Response; Professional Commitment; Teacher Beliefs.

1. THE BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Curriculum reform is widely acknowledged as a complex and multifaceted process that extends beyond policy formulation into classroom enactment. Educational reform literature consistently emphasizes that the success of reform initiatives depends not solely on structural adjustments but also on how teachers interpret, internalize, and respond to change (Fullan, 2007; Kennedy, 2016). Reform policies may offer comprehensive regulatory frameworks; however, their impact ultimately depends on teachers' professional agency and belief systems.

In Indonesia, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum alongside the Deep Learning approach represents a significant national effort to promote flexible, student-centered, and competency-based education aligned with 21st-century demands (Suryaman, 2020). The reform encourages meaningful learning, higher-order thinking skills, character development, and adaptive pedagogy. Nevertheless, rapid curriculum shifts often accompanied by ministerial-level policy transitions have created challenges in ensuring coherent, sustainable implementation at the school level.

Despite structural improvements, implementation gaps remain evident, particularly in regions facing contextual limitations such as uneven digital readiness, disparities in teacher competence, and limited institutional support. Policy enactment studies suggest that teachers do not merely implement policy directives; rather, they actively interpret, negotiate, and reconstruct them within their local contexts (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012; Braun, Ball, Maguire, & Hoskins, 2011). Therefore, understanding teachers' cognitive interpretations and emotional responses becomes central to explaining why reform efforts may succeed or stagnate.

Recent scholarship highlights that curriculum reform is not only a technical process but also an emotional one. Emotional factors—such as anxiety, professional fatigue, optimism, and moral purpose—shape teachers' engagement with change (Hargreaves, 2018; Zembylas, 2015). While existing studies have examined teacher beliefs or emotional responses separately, limited research has integrated both cognitive and emotional dimensions within a dynamic belief-transformation framework, particularly in developing educational contexts. Moreover, few studies have explored how teachers move from administrative compliance—driven by policy obligation—toward authentic professional commitment rooted in internalized belief systems.

This gap is particularly urgent in contexts where curriculum reform is continuous and systemic improvement depends on teachers' sustainable engagement. Without understanding the interplay between cognition, emotion, and belief negotiation, reform risks becoming procedural rather than transformational.

Therefore, this study seeks to map teachers' cognitive and emotional responses to curriculum reform and examine how these responses mediate the transition from compliance to commitment. By employing a Delphi-based Focus Group Discussion involving senior secondary vice principals in Aceh Tengah and Bener Meriah, this research contributes a belief-centered analytical perspective that integrates cognitive clarity, emotional engagement, and collaborative professionalism as strategic elements for sustainable curriculum transformation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Educator Convictions and Curriculum Transformation

Educator beliefs serve as interpretive frameworks that influence instructional choices and reactions to innovation (Fives & Buehl, 2012). Pajares (1992) contended that beliefs serve as robust predictors of conduct, functioning as personal facts that direct actions. In reform environments, beliefs determine whether educators accept, modify, or oppose policy changes

(Liu & Fisher, 2022). Within reform contexts, teacher agency becomes central in determining how policies are enacted and adapted in practice (Priestley et al., 2013; Biesta et al., 2015).

Cognitive Analysis of Policy

The theory of policy enactment holds that educators actively interpret policy documents rather than merely execute them (Ball et al., 2012). Interpretation gaps may arise when educators lack clarity in converting curriculum papers into contextualized practice (Braun et al., 2011; Spillane, 2004; Coburn, 2001).

Affective Aspects of Educational Transformation

Educational reform is fraught with emotional intensity underscores that educators' emotions profoundly influence professional involvement, elucidates that reform measures may incite emotional conflicts, particularly when accountability constraints escalate (Hargreaves, 2018; Zembylas, 2015; Kelchtermans, 2005; Van Veen et al., 2005).

Transitioning from Compliance to Commitment

Compliance signifies obedience motivated by obligation, while commitment denotes an internalized moral goal (Fullan, 2016). Professional learning groups and reflective discussion have demonstrated efficacy in facilitating belief reform and enhancing commitment (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008; Day & Gu, 2007; OECD, 2019).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design using a Delphi-based Focus Group Discussion (FGD) approach. Participants included all Vice Principals for Curriculum Affairs from senior secondary schools (SLTA level) across Aceh Tengah and Bener Meriah.

Data Collection

Data were collected through:

- 1) Structured group reflections based on five guiding questions
- 2) Plenary discussions
- 3) Documented meeting notes and official minutes

The FGD was organized into five groups, each addressing one core reflective question related to curriculum reform.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis involved:

- 1) Data reduction
- 2) Categorization of cognitive and emotional themes
- 3) Interpretation of belief transformation processes

Credibility was strengthened through triangulation across group discussions and plenary responses.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results indicate that educators' cognitive responses align with policy enactment theory, in which interpretation influences implementation (Ball et al., 2012). Participants demonstrated increasing acceptance of curriculum reform, along with evidence that educators acknowledge the necessity for flexible learning models in the digital age (Suryaman, 2020).

Interpretative uncertainty arose, especially about module creation and assessment alignment. This corresponds with Braun et al. (2011), who observe that educators frequently encounter difficulties in converting policy rhetoric into practical application.

Teachers conveyed a dual sentiment of optimism and administrative exhaustion. This corroborates Hargreaves' (2018) claim that reform elicits varied emotional reactions. Participants' reported tendencies associated with a fixed mindset align with Dweck's (2006) notion that belief systems influence adaptability.

The transition from compliance to commitment was facilitated by reflective involvement and collaborative conversation, corroborating Vescio et al.'s (2008) findings that professional learning communities bolster the sustainability of reforms.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study concludes that curricular reform functions as a belief-mediated process rather than a mere structural shift. The results indicate that instructors' cognitive clarity and emotional engagement substantially affect the transition from administrative conformity to genuine professional commitment. Although participants progressively understood the philosophical underpinnings of the Merdeka Curriculum and the Deep Learning methodology, interpretative ambiguities and emotional fatigue persisted as significant mediating factors in the implementation of the reform. The study confirms that sustainable curriculum transformation relies on the convergence of cognitive comprehension, emotional fortitude, and collaborative professionalism.

The findings indicate that the effectiveness of change depends on organized interpretative assistance, established reflective discussion, and leadership mediation that converts policy into contextualized practice. The emotional aspects of transformation must be recognized as essential, rather than secondary, to policy execution. Enhancing professional learning groups

and reflection forums may expedite the assimilation of beliefs and cultivate enduring commitment.

This study is constrained by its focus on vice principals for curriculum affairs in two districts, potentially limiting its generalizability across different educational levels or areas. The qualitative design prioritizes depth of understanding over statistical generalizability. Future studies should incorporate classroom teachers and school principals from diverse contexts, along with longitudinal designs, to investigate the evolution of belief transformation over time during ongoing curriculum reform.

This study situates curriculum reform within a belief-transformation framework, offering a contextualized approach for educational systems aiming to progress beyond procedural compliance towards enduring professional commitment.

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