

Islamic Education Teachers' Concerns and Curriculum Use in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum: A CBAM-Based Study in Rural Indonesia

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Abstract

This research is important to understand Islamic Education teachers' concerns and their use of the curriculum in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in rural areas, so that educational policies can be applied effectively and in alignment with local needs. The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum represents a significant shift toward flexible, student-centred learning in Indonesian education. However, limited empirical evidence exists regarding how Islamic Education teachers, particularly in rural contexts, experience and enact this curriculum reform. Understanding teachers' concerns and instructional practices is crucial, as ineffective implementation may result in procedural compliance rather than meaningful pedagogical change. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum by Islamic Education teachers through the lens of the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM). This study employed a qualitative case study design involving five Islamic Education teachers in rural secondary schools. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and document analysis of lesson plans, teaching modules, and assessment records. The research instruments were developed based on the Stages of Concern and Levels of Use constructs of CBAM. Data analysis was conducted through iterative qualitative coding guided by CBAM dimensions, supported by data triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents to enhance credibility. The findings reveal that teachers predominantly experienced informational and management concerns, indicating an early stage of curriculum adoption. Classroom practices were largely situated at mechanical, routine levels of use, characterized by procedural implementation rather than reflective adaptation. Although teachers reported increased student engagement, formative assessment practices remained inconsistent. These findings highlight the need for sustained, subject-specific professional development and structured mentoring to support more effective implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Education.

Keywords: *Curriculum Implementation, Merdeka Curriculum, Islamic Education, Teachers' Concerns, Concerns-Based Adoption Model, Rural Education*

Introduction

Curriculum reform has become a central concern in education systems worldwide as governments seek to respond to rapid social, technological, and cultural change (Lee et al., 2018). Contemporary reforms commonly emphasize learner-centered pedagogy, instructional flexibility, formative assessment, and the development of higher-order thinking skills (Barua & Lockee, 2024; Mir, 2025). Despite these progressive intentions, numerous studies indicate that curriculum reform often encounters difficulties in classroom implementation, largely because teachers are required to modify long-established pedagogical practices, beliefs, and professional routines (Drayton et al., 2020; Romanowski & Du, 2022). Research on curriculum change

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consistently positions teachers as the most critical agents in the adoption of educational innovation. While policy documents articulate curriculum goals and structures, it is teachers who interpret, adapt, and enact these policies in daily instructional practice (Brown et al., 2021; Jenkins, 2020).

When teachers lack sufficient understanding, training, or institutional support, curriculum reforms tend to be implemented superficially, resulting in limited pedagogical transformation (Buabeng & Amo-Darko, 2025). Common challenges reported across reform contexts include uncertainty about new curriculum components, increased workload, difficulties in assessment, and resistance to instructional change, particularly when reforms are introduced through top-down mechanisms (Alfikalia et al., 2022). In Indonesia, the *Merdeka* Curriculum represents a substantial departure from previous, centralized, content-driven curricula. The curriculum promotes flexibility, school autonomy, and learning experiences that are responsive to students' needs and local contexts (Bhaswara, 2022). Central features of the *Merdeka* Curriculum include project-based learning, differentiated instruction, and continuous formative assessment (Hakim et al., 2024; Marthawati & Adi, 2024). These principles align with global trends in curriculum reform; however, their implementation requires teachers to assume greater responsibility in curriculum planning, instructional design, and assessment practices (Ingias et al., 2022).

Emerging empirical evidence suggests that Indonesian teachers experience considerable difficulty in adapting to these demands. Challenges include limited familiarity with curriculum terminology and structure, uncertainty in developing teaching modules, and confusion regarding formative and project-based assessment (Angelina et al., 2024; Mujiburrahman et al., 2025). These difficulties are more pronounced in rural and peripheral regions, where access to professional development, technological infrastructure, and collaborative learning communities is often limited. Consequently, teachers in these contexts may struggle to move beyond mechanical compliance toward meaningful curriculum enactment. The complexity of curriculum implementation is further intensified in the context of Islamic Education (*Pendidikan Agama Islam/PAI*). Islamic Education differs from many other school subjects in that it integrates cognitive learning with affective and psychomotor domains, aiming to foster faith, moral character, and religious practice alongside conceptual understanding (Arfani, 2024; Gunawan et al., 2023).

Teachers of Islamic Education are therefore expected to balance spiritual and moral objectives with contemporary pedagogical approaches (Ramli & Ilhamsyah, 2024; Lutfi et al., 2025). Under the *Merdeka* Curriculum, this expectation requires Islamic Education teachers to design contextual, student-centered learning activities that align with Islamic values and educational goals. While project-based and contextual learning offer opportunities to make Islamic Education more meaningful, they also pose pedagogical challenges. Teachers may encounter difficulties in integrating religious content into interdisciplinary projects, assessing students' moral and spiritual development, and managing instructional time within a flexible curriculum framework. These challenges highlight the need for analytical frameworks that can capture both teachers' internal experiences and their observable instructional practices during curriculum reform.

Despite the growing body of research on curriculum reform and teacher implementation challenges, existing studies have predominantly focused on general subjects, urban school settings, or large-scale quantitative evaluations of policy effectiveness. Limited attention has been given to how teachers in religious education contexts, particularly Islamic Education, experience curriculum change at the classroom level. Moreover, empirical studies examining

curriculum reform in rural and peripheral regions remain scarce, even though such contexts often present distinct structural and professional constraints. Additionally, few studies have employed the CBAM to systematically analyze teachers' stages of concern and levels of curriculum use in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum. This lack of theoretically grounded, context-sensitive research creates a gap in understanding how Islamic Education teachers interpret, adapt, and enact curriculum reform in practice, especially in rural settings.

To address this need, the present study adopts the CBAM as its theoretical framework (Hall, 1974). CBAM conceptualizes curriculum change as a developmental process in which teachers progress through distinct stages of concern, ranging from initial awareness and information-seeking to management, collaboration, and refinement. In addition, CBAM examines levels of curriculum use, providing insight into how teachers translate policy into practice. This model has been widely applied in studies of curriculum innovation and teacher professional development, yet its application in religious education and rural contexts remains limited. Accordingly, this study aims to examine how Islamic Education teachers in a rural district of Indonesia experience and implement the Merdeka Curriculum. Specifically, the study seeks to analyze teachers' concerns, identify factors that support and inhibit curriculum adoption, and propose contextually relevant strategies to enhance implementation.

By situating curriculum reform within the lived experiences of Islamic Education teachers, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on teacher-centered perspectives in curriculum change and offers insights for policy and professional development in similar educational contexts. This study offers novelty by applying the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM) specifically to Islamic Education teachers within the context of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in rural Indonesia an area that has received limited scholarly attention. While prior research has examined curriculum reform or teacher concerns separately, this study integrates both perspectives to analyze how stages of concern relate to actual curriculum use in under-resourced rural settings. By focusing on faith-based subject teachers and contextual rural challenges, the research provides context-sensitive insights that extend CBAM applications beyond general education settings and contribute new empirical evidence to discussions on curriculum reform implementation in developing regions.

Method

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore Islamic Education teachers' experiences in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum (Leavy, 2022). The research was explicitly grounded in the CBAM, which views curriculum change as a developmental process experienced by individual teachers. In this study, CBAM was operationalized through two analytical dimensions: Stages of Concern (SoC) and Levels of Use (LoU), as adapted from the original CBAM framework and aligned with the research focus of the thesis. Operationally, the Stages of Concern dimension was used to identify teachers' dominant concerns regarding curriculum implementation, particularly informational, management, and consequential concerns. These concerns were explored through semi-structured interview questions that elicited teachers' understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum, perceived challenges, instructional readiness, and reflections on student learning.

Meanwhile, the Levels of Use dimension was employed to analyze how teachers enacted the Merdeka Curriculum in classroom practice. This dimension focused on observable patterns of curriculum use, such as mechanical and routine implementation, which were identified through classroom observations and supported by document analysis. Through this operationalization, CBAM functioned not only as a conceptual framework but also as a guiding structure for data collection and analysis.

Research Participants

The participants of this study were five Islamic Education teachers, who served as the main subjects of the research. They were selected based on qualitative relevance to the research objectives rather than statistical representativeness. The criteria for participant inclusion were: (1) active involvement in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, (2) teaching Islamic Education at the secondary school level, and (3) having experience teaching during the curriculum transition period. All participants were teaching in rural schools, where contextual limitations, such as limited access to professional development and instructional resources, were evident. The number of participants was considered sufficient to yield in-depth, information-rich data, consistent with qualitative research principles.

Data Collection Techniques and Instrument Development

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and non-participant classroom observations, supported by document analysis. The research instruments were systematically developed based on the operational structure of the CBAM, particularly the Stages of Concern (SoC) framework, and were aligned with the research objectives. The interview guide was designed to explore teachers' experiences, concerns, and responses toward the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Education. The questions were explicitly mapped to the seven stages of concern in CBAM: awareness, informational, personal, management, consequences, collaboration, and refocusing. Each stage was operationalized into indicators and guiding questions to capture teachers' cognitive, affective, and practical concerns.

Specifically, awareness and informational stages focused on teachers' initial understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum and sources of information used to support instructional preparation. Personal and management stages explored teachers' worries, readiness, time management, and resource allocation during curriculum implementation. Consequence-related questions examined teachers' perceptions of the impact of the Merdeka Curriculum on student learning outcomes. The collaboration and refocusing stages addressed teachers' professional interactions with colleagues and their reflective evaluation of curriculum implementation, including perceived areas for improvement.

In addition, interview questions explored internal factors (such as curriculum understanding, instructional readiness, and pedagogical content knowledge) and external factors (including school leadership support, resource availability, and collegial collaboration), as well as teachers' proposed solutions to overcome implementation challenges. Classroom observations were conducted using an observation guide developed in alignment with the Stages of Concern (SoC) framework of CBAM. Observation indicators focused on visible instructional behaviours and classroom practices that reflect teachers' concern stages. These included teachers' reference to curriculum concepts, instructional confidence, classroom management, use of learning resources, attention to student learning outcomes, and engagement in collaborative practices.

Observations also captured internal and external factors influencing curriculum implementation, such as teachers' preparedness, mastery of Islamic Education content, availability of instructional resources, administrative support, and the integration of technology and learning media. Furthermore, observation data documented teachers' efforts to apply professional development outcomes, to receive supervisory feedback, and to engage with the community in supporting the Merdeka Curriculum. Field notes were recorded systematically to ensure consistency across observation sessions. To ensure methodological transparency, the

operational relationship between the CBAM framework and the research instruments is illustrated in Figure 1.

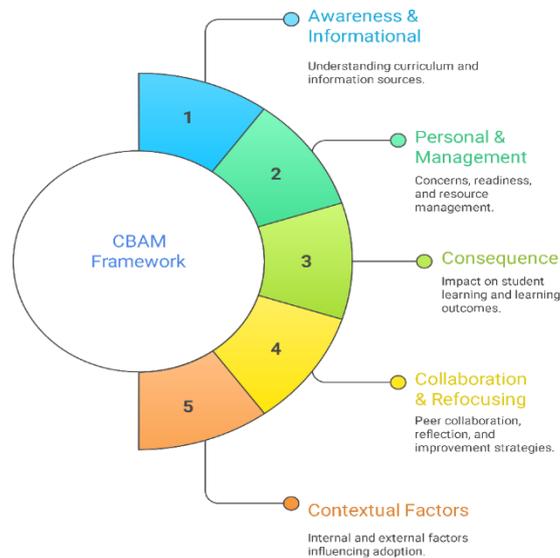


Figure 1. Operationalization of the CBAM and Research Instruments

The figure demonstrates how the Stages of Concern dimension informed the development of interview questions and observation indicators, and how internal and external contextual factors were incorporated into the instrument design. Through this alignment, CBAM functioned not only as a theoretical foundation but also as a practical guide for data collection and analysis.

Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis was conducted through an interactive qualitative process involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were coded using categories derived from the CBAM framework, particularly the Stages of Concern and Levels of Use dimensions. The analysis focused on identifying dominant concern stages and corresponding levels of curriculum use exhibited by the teachers. Triangulation across data sources was used to ensure the trustworthiness and consistency of the findings.

Results

The findings of this study are derived from interview data, classroom observations, and document analysis. To enhance transparency, the empirical data are first displayed in tabular form, followed by brief explanatory narratives that clarify key patterns emerging from each data source. Interview data reflecting Islamic Education teachers' concerns during the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum are summarized in Table 1. The data are organized according to the Stages of Concern framework of the CBAM, enabling the systematic identification of teachers' dominant concerns.

Table 1. Interview Findings Based on CBAM Stages of Concern

CBAM Stages of Concern	Main Findings from Teacher Interviews
Awareness	Teachers were aware that the Merdeka Curriculum had been implemented, but received limited official socialization or training.
Informational	Teachers reported confusion regarding curriculum concepts, learning outcomes, and the application of project-based learning in Islamic Education.

CBAM Stages of Concern	Main Findings from Teacher Interviews
Personal	Teachers expressed uncertainty about their readiness and ability to implement the curriculum independently.
Management	Teachers experienced difficulties in managing instructional time, organizing learning activities, and conducting assessments aligned with curriculum demands.
Consequence	Teachers perceived increased student engagement but were unsure how to systematically evaluate learning outcomes.
Collaboration	Professional collaboration occurred informally through peer discussions and online messaging groups.
Refocusing	Teachers suggested the need for continuous training, mentoring, and clear instructional guidelines for Islamic Education.

The interview data indicate that teachers' concerns were predominantly concentrated at the informational and management stages. While awareness of curriculum reform was evident, limited understanding of curriculum concepts and practical implementation challenges shaped teachers' experiences. Consequence-related concerns began to emerge, particularly in relation to student engagement, but had not yet developed into systematic evaluative practices. Classroom observation data were used to examine how these concerns were reflected in instructional practice. The observation findings are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Classroom Observation Findings

Observed Aspect	Observation Results
Instructional Approach	Teaching was predominantly teacher-centred, with limited implementation of student-centred or project-based approaches.
Use of Curriculum References	Teachers rarely referred explicitly to Merdeka Curriculum documents during instruction.
Classroom Management	Teachers focused on maintaining classroom order and completing learning material within a limited time.
Assessment Practices	Formative assessment was applied inconsistently and focused mainly on cognitive aspects.
Student Engagement	Students showed enthusiasm during interactive activities, though they were not consistently implemented.

These observations suggest that teachers' classroom practices remained largely procedural. Although teachers attempted to align instruction with curriculum requirements, instructional strategies were primarily oriented toward content completion and classroom control. This pattern reflects mechanical, routine levels of curriculum use, consistent with the management concerns expressed in the interviews. To further corroborate these findings, document analysis was conducted on lesson plans, teaching modules, and assessment records. The results of the document analysis are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Summary of Document Analysis Findings

Document Type	Key Findings
Lesson Plans	Lesson plans followed the Merdeka Curriculum format but showed limited contextual adaptation.
Teaching Modules	Teaching modules emphasized content delivery rather than inquiry-based or project-based learning.
Assessment Documents	Assessment records focused primarily on written tests, with minimal documentation of formative assessment processes.

The document data reinforce the interview and observation findings by showing that curriculum implementation was largely administrative in nature. While teachers complied with required formats, there was limited evidence of instructional innovation or systematic formative assessment aligned with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. To enhance the credibility of

the findings, triangulation was conducted by comparing interview, observation, and document data. The results of this triangulation are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Triangulation of Interview, Observation, and Document Data

Theme	Interview Data	Observation Data	Document Data
Curriculum Understanding	Teachers reported limited understanding of curriculum concepts	Curriculum concepts were rarely mentioned during lessons	Curriculum documents were used mainly for administrative purposes
Instructional Practice	Teachers expressed difficulty implementing student-centred learning	Teaching was largely lecture-based	Modules emphasized content completion
Assessment	Teachers were unsure about formative assessment	Formative assessment was inconsistently applied	Assessment focused on cognitive outcomes
Support and Collaboration	Teachers relied on informal peer support	Limited collaborative practices observed	No formal documentation of collaborative planning

The triangulation results demonstrate strong convergence across data sources, confirming that teachers' concerns, instructional practices, and contextual constraints were closely interconnected. This consistency strengthens the findings' trustworthiness and illustrates how early-stage curriculum implementation in Islamic Education was shaped by both individual concerns and contextual limitations.

Discussion

This study examined the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum by Islamic Education teachers through the lens of the CBAM. By explicitly applying CBAM constructs, the findings can be interpreted as reflecting an early and transitional stage of curriculum adoption, in which teachers' concerns and instructional practices develop gradually rather than linearly. From the perspective of the Stages of Concern (SoC), the dominance of informational concerns indicates that teachers were primarily focused on understanding the nature, structure, and requirements of the Merdeka Curriculum. Teachers' uncertainty about curriculum concepts, learning outcomes, and project-based learning reflects the informational stage, in which individuals seek clarity about an innovation before fully engaging in its implementation. According to CBAM, unresolved informational concerns can hinder progression to higher stages of concern, a pattern evident in this study due to limited access to structured, subject-specific professional development for Islamic Education teachers (Hall, 1974; Rahmawatie et al., 2025; Wachidi et al., 2024).

As implementation progressed, management concerns emerged as the most prominent stage of concern. Teachers' difficulties in managing instructional time, organizing learning activities, and conducting formative assessments indicate that they were struggling with the practical demands of curriculum enactment. Within the CBAM framework, management concerns typically arise when teachers attempt to operationalize an innovation in real classroom contexts (Rogers, 2022; Zhao et al., 2024). The persistence of these concerns suggests that teachers were still negotiating how to integrate curriculum principles into their daily instructional routines, particularly under contextual constraints such as limited resources and rural school conditions.

The emergence of consequence-related concerns, although still limited, signals an important developmental shift in teachers' engagement with the Merdeka Curriculum. Teachers' observations of increased student engagement indicate that they had begun to reflect on the impact of curriculum implementation on learners. In CBAM terms, this stage reflects a growing focus on student outcomes rather than on the innovation itself (Bakar et al., 2025; Zhao et al.,

2024). However, the inconsistent application of formative assessment observed in this study suggests that consequence concerns had not yet matured into systematic evaluative practices, particularly in assessing affective and process-oriented learning outcomes central to Islamic Education.

The findings also reveal that collaboration and refocusing concerns, which represent higher stages in the CBAM model, were not yet fully developed. Teachers' collaboration was largely informal and episodic, indicating that collective reflection and shared problem-solving had not become integral to curriculum implementation. According to CBAM, the absence of structured collaboration can limit teachers' capacity to refine and improve instructional practices, thereby slowing the progression toward refocusing concerns, in which individuals actively seek to adapt and improve the innovation (Magallanes et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2024). In terms of instructional enactment, the findings can be further interpreted through the Levels of Use (LoU) construct of CBAM. Classroom observation and document analysis indicate that teachers' curriculum use was predominantly situated at the mechanical and routine levels.

Mechanical use was reflected in teachers' procedural compliance with curriculum formats, such as lesson plans and teaching modules, while routine use was evident in the repetition of similar instructional strategies without systematic reflection or modification. According to CBAM, such levels of use are typical when teachers are still addressing informational and management concerns, reinforcing the close relationship between concern stages and levels of use (Min, 2017; Shahjahan et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2024). The convergence of interview, observation, and document data, as demonstrated through triangulation, further supports the CBAM assumption that the interaction between individual concerns and contextual conditions shapes curriculum implementation. In this study, rural constraints, limited professional support, and the absence of subject-specific guidance amplified teachers' management concerns and constrained progression toward higher levels of curriculum use.

These findings suggest that curriculum reform efforts that do not explicitly address teachers' developmental concerns risk resulting in compliance-oriented implementation rather than meaningful pedagogical change. Overall, by explicitly applying CBAM, this study demonstrates that implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Education should be understood as a developmental process that requires sustained, context-sensitive support. Addressing teachers' informational and management concerns through targeted professional development, mentoring, and collaborative structures is essential to facilitate progression toward higher stages of concern and more integrative levels of curriculum use.

This study makes a distinctive contribution to curriculum reform research by extending the application of the CBAM to the underexplored context of Islamic education in rural Indonesian schools. Unlike previous CBAM-based studies that predominantly focus on general subjects or urban settings, this research demonstrates how subject-specific characteristics and contextual constraints shape teachers' stages of concern and levels of curriculum use. By explicitly integrating Stages of Concern and Levels of Use with triangulated qualitative evidence, the study provides a nuanced understanding of curriculum implementation as a developmental process rather than a policy-driven outcome. Furthermore, the findings highlight that early-stage dominance of informational and management concerns in Islamic Education is closely linked to limited subject-specific professional support, offering empirical insight into why curriculum reforms may stabilize at mechanical or routine levels of use. This contribution advances CBAM scholarship by illustrating its analytical relevance in specialized and resource-limited educational contexts, thereby informing more context-sensitive curriculum support strategies.

Conclusion

This study examined the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum by Islamic Education teachers in a rural Indonesian context through the CBAM. The findings indicate that teachers predominantly experienced informational and management concerns, suggesting that curriculum implementation remained at an early stage of development. Teachers' classroom practices largely reflected mechanical, routine levels of curriculum use, characterized by procedural compliance rather than reflective or adaptive instructional change. Although teachers demonstrated willingness to implement the Merdeka Curriculum and observed increased student engagement, their efforts were constrained by limited subject-specific training, insufficient mentoring, and contextual challenges typical of rural schools. From a CBAM perspective, the dominance of early-stage concerns highlights the importance of addressing teachers' developmental needs during curriculum reform. The findings suggest that without systematic support, teachers may struggle to progress toward higher stages of concern and more integrative levels of curriculum use.

Therefore, sustained professional development, structured mentoring, and collaborative learning forums tailored to Islamic Education are essential to support more effective curriculum implementation. At the policy level, curriculum support strategies should be differentiated by subject area and school context to avoid a compliance-oriented approach. Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the research involved a small number of participants in a specific rural context, limiting the transferability of the findings to other settings. Second, the study relied primarily on qualitative data collected within a limited time frame, which may not fully capture changes in teachers' concerns and practices over time. Future research is encouraged to employ longitudinal designs, involve a wider range of school contexts, and further examine how progression through CBAM stages influences student learning outcomes in Islamic Education.

Aknowledgment

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