

Psychological Adaptation of Islamic Education Teachers In Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum: A Phenomenological Study at Nurul Hijrah Sukamara

Selly Mayang Sari^{1*}, Hamdanah Hamdanah², Surawan Surawan³

¹⁻³Universitas Islam Negeri Palangka Raya, Indonesia

Corresponding Author's e-mail : Sellymayangsari29@gmail.com

ARMADA
JURNAL PENELITIAN MULTIDISIPLIN

e-ISSN: 2964-2981

ARMADA : Jurnal Penelitian Multidisiplin

<https://ejournal.45mataram.ac.id/index.php/armada>

Vol. 04, No. 06 Juni, 2026

Page: 2270-2283

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.55681/armada.v4i6.2643>

Article History:

Received: April 02, 2026

Revised: Mei 13, 2026

Accepted: Juni 17, 2026

Abstract : The Merdeka Curriculum requires teachers to have psychological readiness in responding to more flexible and student-centered learning changes. However, studies that specifically examine the psychological experiences of Islamic Religious Education teachers remain limited. This study aims to explore the dynamics of PAI teachers' psychological experiences in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum and to identify their adaptation patterns. This research used a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design involving three informants, consisting of one principal and two PAI teachers at SMP Nurul Hijrah Sukamara. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation, then analyzed using thematic analysis through transcription, coding, categorization, and theme extraction. The findings reveal four stages of psychological adaptation: initial uncertainty, professional pressure, adaptive learning, and professional confidence. At first, teachers experienced anxiety and pressure due to project-based learning, differentiated instruction, and administrative demands. Over time, teachers showed increased competence and confidence through spiritual coping, time management, social support, and professional development. This study develops the Teacher Psychological Adaptation to Curriculum Reform model.

Keywords: Experience Exploration, Teacher Psychology, Merdeka Curriculum

Abstrak : Kurikulum Merdeka menuntut kesiapan psikologis guru dalam menghadapi perubahan pembelajaran yang lebih fleksibel dan berpusat pada peserta didik. Namun, kajian yang secara khusus membahas pengalaman psikologis guru PAI masih terbatas. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi dinamika pengalaman psikologis guru PAI dalam mengimplementasikan Kurikulum Merdeka serta mengidentifikasi pola adaptasi yang terbentuk. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain fenomenologi terhadap tiga informan, yaitu satu kepala sekolah dan dua guru PAI di SMP Nurul Hijrah Sukamara. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi, dan dokumentasi, lalu dianalisis dengan analisis tematik melalui transkripsi, coding, kategorisasi, dan penarikan tema. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan empat tahap adaptasi psikologis, yaitu initial uncertainty, professional pressure, adaptive learning, dan professional confidence. Pada tahap awal, guru mengalami kecemasan dan tekanan akibat tuntutan pembelajaran berbasis

proyek, diferensiasi, dan administrasi. Seiring waktu, guru menunjukkan peningkatan kompetensi dan kepercayaan diri melalui coping spiritual, manajemen waktu, dukungan sosial, dan pengembangan profesional. Temuan ini menghasilkan model Teacher Psychological Adaptation to Curriculum Reform.

Kata Kunci: Eksplorasi Pengalaman, Psikologis Guru, Kurikulum Merdeka

INTRODUCTION

Educational policies and curricula in Indonesia have undergone continuous reforms aimed at improving the quality of education and learning (Fitriyani & Novalia, 2024). One of the innovations introduced is the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes student-centered learning, flexibility, and relevance to contemporary needs. In this context, teachers are no longer merely transmitters of knowledge but also facilitators and character builders, particularly Islamic Religious Education teachers, who are responsible for instilling moral and spiritual values in students (Sulastri et al., 2020). The curriculum grants teachers considerable autonomy in developing adaptive and contextually relevant learning activities (Situmorang et al., 2023). Furthermore, it promotes more flexible learning experiences both within and beyond the classroom (R. Hidayat et al., 2024).

However, the transition from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum demands that teachers possess the readiness to understand new concepts, implement project-based learning, and employ differentiated instructional approaches (Sa'diah et al., 2023). The lack of adequate training, professional support, and educational resources has hindered some teachers' ability to adapt effectively, leading them to rely on conventional instructional methods. (Prihatien et al., 2023; Windayanti et al., 2023). Moreover, the shift from a teacher-centered to a student-centered learning paradigm necessitates changes in the mindsets of teachers, students, and parents. (Romadona & Arif, 2021).

The dynamics of educational change have implications not only for the technical aspects of teaching but also for teachers' psychological well-being. According to Fullan (2007), educational change involves individual factors, including teachers' readiness and attitudes. Teacher stress occurs when work-related demands surpass an individual's ability to manage or cope with them effectively. Travers & Cooper, (1996) define teacher stress as a form of emotional strain resulting from work-related demands that surpass an individual's ability to manage them effectively. Such stress may arise from various sources, including excessive workload, policy changes, administrative responsibilities, and expectations concerning professional performance. Teachers' capacity to cope with these pressures is largely determined by their level of psychological resilience. Masten, (2014) psychological resilience refers to an individual's capacity to endure adversity and adapt positively in the face of challenges. Such resilience enables teachers to maintain innovation and adapt their instructional strategies effectively despite various limitations and constraints (Puspita et al., 2025; Paridah et al., 2025).

A number of previous studies have indicated that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum positively influences the learning process, particularly by fostering teacher creativity and promoting greater student engagement in classroom activities. The study by Dewi & Kuswandono, (2025) revealed a strong positive association between teacher agency and resilience in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Despite facing challenges such as fixed mindsets, insufficient preparation, limited resources, and technological barriers, teachers exhibited a high degree of resilience by adopting diverse pedagogical approaches. Furthermore, another study Gede et al., (2024) found that resilience training significantly improved teachers' adaptability to workload demands and the digital platforms utilized in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, as indicated by the t-test results ($p = 0.001$). Nevertheless, the majority of existing studies have concentrated on curriculum implementation issues, including instructional strategies, infrastructural readiness, and students' learning outcomes (Sarifah et al., 2024). Despite these findings, research that provides an in-depth exploration of teachers' psychological experiences,

particularly those of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at the junior secondary school level, remains scarce.

Consequently, a significant research gap exists regarding phenomenological investigations into the psychological experiences of PAI teachers during the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Accordingly, this study seeks to explore the psychological experiences of Islamic Religious Education teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, focusing on their perceptions, challenges, and strategies for coping with psychological pressures. The findings are expected to contribute both theoretically to the field of educational psychology and practically to teachers and educational policymakers.

METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative approach with a Husserlian phenomenological research design (Sari *et al.*, 2024). This study employed a qualitative approach using a Husserlian phenomenological research design, as it sought to gain an in-depth understanding of the psychological experiences of Islamic Religious Education teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Nurul Hijrah Sukamara. A phenomenological approach was selected because the study aimed to explore the meaning of teachers' subjective experiences while carrying out their instructional responsibilities, including the challenges, pressures, and adaptation strategies they encountered directly in practice. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate as it enables researchers to describe phenomena naturally from the participants' perspectives without manipulating variables. The participants consisted of one school principal and two Islamic Religious Education teachers. Informants were selected through purposive sampling, based on their direct involvement in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at the school. Data were collected through three primary interview sessions, with the possibility of conducting follow-up interviews if the data had not yet reached saturation.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. In-depth interviews were conducted to explore the experiences, perceptions, and psychological challenges encountered by Islamic Religious Education teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Observations were carried out to directly examine the teaching and learning process as well as the dynamics of curriculum implementation in the classroom. Documentation was utilized to complement the data through lesson plans, school activity records, and other archival materials relevant to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved several stages, including data transcription, coding, categorization of codes into themes, identification of overarching themes, and interpretation of meanings. This analytical process enabled the researcher to uncover patterns and gain a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences regarding the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum (Sari *et al.*, 2022). The coding process involved identifying meaningful units within the interview transcripts and observation notes. These data were then organized into categories based on shared meanings and subsequently synthesized into overarching themes that captured teachers' psychological experiences during the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Exploration of the Psychological Experiences of Islamic Religious Education Teachers in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

1. Self-Concept

Self-concept is defined as an individual's perception, evaluation, and understanding of oneself. It constitutes a fundamental aspect of personal identity, serving as a cognitive framework that guides interactions with the surrounding environment. As self-concept significantly influences individual behavior, an understanding of one's self-concept is essential for comprehending how individuals interpret experiences and respond to various social and professional contexts (Luas *et al.*, 2023). Self-concept not only influences an individual's character but also affects their overall

life satisfaction. Every individual possesses a self-concept that may develop into either a positive or a negative self-concept.

Based on observations and interviews conducted with Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at SMP Nurul Hijrah Sukamara, the psychological experiences of teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum revealed diverse dynamics. During the initial stage of implementation, teachers reported feelings of anxiety and confusion as they were required to adapt to a new learning system that demanded greater creativity and independence in designing teaching modules. Several teachers stated that the transition from the previous curriculum required a period of adjustment, particularly in understanding learning outcomes and implementing project-based learning. The interviews were conducted on a Monday after the teachers had completed their teaching activities. Based on the interview findings, one PAI teacher revealed that during the early phase of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers experienced confusion in adapting to the new instructional demands. This was reflected in the following statement:

“At the beginning of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation, we felt quite confused because we had to develop our own teaching modules and adjust instructional methods to meet students’ needs. We were also still learning to understand the concepts of differentiated instruction and project-based learning.” (Interview with ER, Monday, January 27, 2026, at 09:00 a.m.).

The teachers’ self-concept identified in this study can be explained through Carl Rogers’ humanistic theory, which posits that self-concept consists of the real self and the ideal self. At the beginning of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation, teachers perceived an incongruence between their actual capabilities and the professional expectations imposed upon them, resulting in feelings of anxiety and self-doubt. However, throughout the adaptation process, teachers demonstrated progress toward greater congruence, as reflected in increased self-confidence and professional competence. Furthermore, these findings are supported by Bandura’s self-efficacy theory, which suggests that stronger beliefs in one’s capabilities contribute to the development of a more positive self-concept.

2. Emotional Aspects in Learning

The emotional aspect of learning refers to the feelings and emotional responses of learners that influence how they receive, process, and retain information throughout the learning process. It encompasses the role of emotions and emotional responses experienced by both students and teachers during teaching and learning activities (Isniatry *et al.*, 2024). Positive emotions, such as enjoyment and hope, can enhance motivation, attention, and cognitive performance, whereas negative emotions, such as anxiety, may hinder these processes. Furthermore, teachers reported that the increased administrative demands and lesson preparation requirements constituted one of the major challenges encountered during the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. This is reflected in the following statement:

“The administrative demands and lesson preparation requirements are indeed greater than before. We have to prepare instructional materials in much greater detail, which initially felt quite exhausting.” (Interview with ST, Saturday, January 31, 2026, at 1:16 p.m.).

Nevertheless, as time progressed, observations indicated improvements in teachers’ self-confidence and motivation. Teachers gradually experienced greater freedom in selecting instructional methods that were more flexible and contextually relevant to students’ needs. This increased sense of autonomy in classroom management contributed positively to their professional satisfaction. Observational findings further revealed that teachers who actively engaged in discussions and shared best practices with colleagues tended to demonstrate more positive attitudes and greater adaptability to changes in educational policies. Overall, the psychological experiences of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum reflect a gradual adaptation process, beginning with feelings of anxiety and uncertainty and progressing

toward acceptance, enhanced competence, and the development of stronger self-confidence and professionalism in teaching practice.



Source: Author's Documentation

Figure 1. In-Depth Interviews Conducted with the School Principal and Two Islamic Religious Education Teachers

Based on the findings in the field, the psychological experiences of Islamic Religious Education teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum can be divided into several main themes, namely: (1) initial uncertainty, (2) professional pressure, (3) adaptive learning, and (4) professional confidence (Huyen & Yen, 2022). This categorisation shows that teachers' experiences are not static, but develop gradually as they adapt to curriculum changes.

During the initial uncertainty stage, teachers experienced confusion and anxiety as a result of changes in the learning system. This condition can be explained through the concept of teacher stress, which suggests that stress arises when job demands exceed an individual's ability to cope with them. Teachers' statements regarding difficulties in developing teaching modules and understanding differentiated instruction indicate a mismatch between curriculum requirements and teachers' initial readiness. Subsequently, the professional pressure phase was characterized by increased workload and administrative demands, as reflected in the interview excerpts concerning the extensive preparation of instructional materials. This finding is consistent with the view that curriculum reform often increases teachers' work-related stress, particularly during the early stages of implementation. A comparison across informants revealed that both Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers identified workload as the primary source of pressure, indicating a relatively consistent pattern of experiences.

As teachers entered the adaptive learning stage, they began to demonstrate an increased capacity to adjust to the curriculum requirements. This adaptation was reflected in their improved understanding of instructional concepts and their ability to modify teaching methods accordingly. Such a process illustrates the development of psychological resilience, defined as an individual's capacity to withstand adversity and adapt positively when facing challenges. In this context, teachers' experiences suggest that resilience does not emerge instantaneously but rather develops gradually through continuous learning and practical experience in the field. In the final stage, referred to as professional confidence, teachers reported increased self-confidence and greater professional satisfaction. This condition reflects not only successful adaptation but also a transformation of teachers' professional identities as facilitators of learning. Such changes indicate that curriculum implementation influences not only instructional practices but also the ways in which teachers perceive and construct their professional roles within the educational process.

Based on the above analysis, the findings indicate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum generates complex psychological experiences for Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers, encompassing adaptation challenges, emotional pressures, and opportunities for enhancing creativity and instructional quality. Therefore, adequate training, institutional support, educational facilities, and a supportive work environment are essential for maintaining teachers' psychological well-being and facilitating the successful implementation of curriculum reforms

(Ainun *et al.*, 2025). The findings indicate that most teachers responded positively to the initial implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. They viewed the curriculum as creating a fresh and more engaging learning environment, which contributed to greater enthusiasm and motivation in the teaching and learning process (Sulistyowati *et al.*, 2025). Teachers reported that the Merdeka Curriculum provides greater freedom in teaching and enables more creative learning practices than the previous curriculum. Students are also encouraged to think more broadly, prompting teachers to create opportunities for innovation that are tailored to students' needs. Feelings of enthusiasm emerged as teachers recognized the potential of the curriculum to enhance the quality of instruction and increase student engagement. Despite this enthusiasm, teachers also experienced psychological anxiety during the initial stage of implementation. This anxiety stemmed from significant changes in the learning system, different administrative requirements, and limited initial understanding of the concepts underlying the Merdeka Curriculum. Several teachers expressed concerns about their ability to meet the demands of the new curriculum effectively and to implement its requirements in an optimal manner (Gustiya, 2025).

The condition of SMP Nurul Hijrah Sukamara as a relatively new school also influences teachers' psychological experiences. Limitations in facilities, institutional experience, and organizational systems that are still developing may intensify teachers' work-related pressures during the early stages of curriculum implementation. This finding suggests that organizational and workplace factors also affect teachers' stress levels and their capacity to adapt. Therefore, teachers' psychological experiences are influenced not only by individual factors but also by the institution's readiness to support curriculum reform. The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum also requires teachers to adjust their teaching methods, instructional materials, and assessment strategies. These demands may lead to mental fatigue, pressure in developing teaching modules, and the need for additional time to prepare effective learning activities (Hikmah *et al.*, 2022). However, such pressures tend to diminish as teachers gain greater experience and understanding of the curriculum (Mahmudah *et al.*, 2023). As adaptation progresses, teachers begin to experience increased self-confidence in their teaching practices. They perceive themselves as becoming more creative in designing learning activities, more capable of understanding students' needs, and more flexible in applying various instructional methods. These experiences contribute to strengthening teachers' professional identities as facilitators of learning.

Support from school principals, colleagues, teacher training programs, and professional learning communities emerged as important factors in strengthening teachers' psychological readiness. Such support helps reduce anxiety, enhance motivation in educating students, and accelerate adaptation to curriculum changes. Teachers also reported experiencing personal satisfaction when observing students becoming more active, creative, and confident in expressing their opinions. This generated positive psychological outcomes, including increased teaching motivation, a stronger sense of professional pride, and greater satisfaction with the learning process (Siregar *et al.*, 2024). Overall, the psychological experiences of teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Nurul Hijrah Sukamara demonstrate a developmental process that evolves from enthusiasm and anxiety toward adaptation, enhanced competence, and professional satisfaction. Supportive school environments and positive changes in student behavior were identified as key factors that strengthened teachers' psychological readiness in facing educational transformation.

Based on the overall findings, this study proposes a conceptual framework entitled the "Teacher Psychological Adaptation to Curriculum Reform Model," which illustrates that teachers' psychological experiences during curriculum implementation progress through four stages: (1) initial uncertainty, (2) professional pressure, (3) adaptive learning, and (4) professional confidence (Huyen & Yen, 2022). This model suggests that teachers' adaptation to curriculum reform is a dynamic process shaped by individual characteristics, professional experiences, and support from the school environment.

Psychological Challenges and Strategies of Islamic Religious Education Teachers in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

1. Excessive Job Demands

Excessive job demands refer to a condition in which individuals are required to handle workloads that exceed their available time, energy, or capacity to complete tasks effectively. Such demands are often associated with work overload, performance pressures, and limited time, resulting in stress and both physical and mental exhaustion. Based on the findings from observations and interviews, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers encountered various psychological challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. During the initial stage of implementation, teachers reported feelings of pressure and concern due to the need to rapidly adapt to a new learning system that emphasizes creativity, differentiated instruction, and the independent development of teaching modules. Several teachers stated that uncertainty regarding lesson planning formats and assessment procedures generated doubts about their own capabilities.

Observational findings indicated that increased administrative responsibilities and continuous demands for instructional innovation became significant sources of stress for teachers. They felt compelled to devote additional time and energy to preparing instructional materials and conducting authentic assessments. This situation occasionally resulted in mental fatigue, particularly when teachers had to balance teaching responsibilities with administrative tasks. Furthermore, limited supporting facilities and unequal access to professional training contributed to feelings of frustration and confusion in implementing project-based learning and differentiated instruction. Teachers acknowledged that the lack of practical references required them to engage in self-directed learning, which initially generated considerable psychological pressure.

This condition can be understood as a form of psychological adjustment commonly experienced by teachers when responding to educational policy changes (Saputra *et al.*, 2025). In this context, psychological challenges are not limited to technical workload issues but also involve aspects of self-efficacy, mental readiness, and the ability to adapt to changing professional roles. From a work psychology perspective, this condition can be explained through the concept of job demands, which require teachers to invest greater physical, cognitive, and emotional energy in their work. According to Demerouti & Bakker, (2023), high job demands may lead to psychological exhaustion when not balanced by adequate job resources. Within the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, these demands are reflected in the need to understand new policies, independently develop teaching modules, implement differentiated instruction, and conduct authentic assessments. When high job demands are not accompanied by sufficient support, they may develop into prolonged work stress (Bakker *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, continuous pressure may contribute to emotional exhaustion, a condition characterized by emotional fatigue resulting from the accumulation of workload and professional demands (Hariyani *et al.*, 2025). Over time, this condition may become an early indicator of teacher burnout, which can negatively affect teachers' motivation, work engagement, and instructional effectiveness (Chen *et al.*, 2025).

"Interview findings revealed that increased workload was one of the primary sources of pressure experienced by PAI teachers during the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. This is illustrated in the following statement".

"The workload is greater because we have to prepare more detailed instructional materials and make various adjustments. Sometimes we feel quite exhausted because we have to divide our time between teaching and preparing administrative documents." (Interview with ER, ST, and IP, Tuesday, January 28, 2026, at 09:00 a.m.).

This statement indicates that the psychological pressure experienced by PAI teachers arises not merely from the quantity of tasks but also from the professional expectation to maintain instructional quality amid systemic changes. It highlights the fact that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum requires adequate emotional and managerial preparedness on the part of teachers. More specifically, teachers' psychological stress emerges from the interaction between curriculum policy changes, increasing work demands, and limited supporting resources. Consistent

with this finding, Nurhayati *et al.*, (2025) argued that the Merdeka Curriculum requires teachers to adapt rapidly to learning approaches that are more flexible, creative, and student-centered. However, when such changes are not accompanied by sufficient training, clear technical guidelines, and adequate administrative support, the burden of adaptation is largely borne by teachers themselves. Consequently, the mental fatigue experienced by teachers is attributable not only to administrative responsibilities but also to the substantial cognitive and emotional demands associated with adapting to a new educational system. This finding is consistent with Rochaeni *et al.*, (2025), who reported that teachers' psychological stress results from the interaction between policy-related factors, professional demands, and organizational conditions within schools.

Nevertheless, field observations indicated that support from school principals, collaboration among teachers, and participation in professional discussion forums helped reduce the psychological burden experienced by teachers. Teachers who actively collaborated with colleagues appeared more capable of managing stress, adapting to change, and maintaining positive attitudes toward curriculum implementation. Overall, the psychological challenges faced by PAI teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum included anxiety regarding change, workload pressure, mental exhaustion, and limited initial support. However, through adaptation processes and supportive working environments, teachers gradually developed greater psychological resilience and professional readiness to cope with curriculum reform.

Another challenge perceived by teachers was the limitation of educational facilities and the uneven distribution of professional training opportunities. The status of SMP Nurul Hijrah Sukamara as a relatively newly established school provides an important institutional context for understanding teachers' psychological pressures. In developing schools, limitations in facilities, learning resources, and internal support systems often make the implementation of new policies more challenging than in well-established institutions. Under such circumstances, teachers face not only the pedagogical demands of the Merdeka Curriculum but also structural constraints that may intensify workloads and increase psychological stress.

From a psychological perspective, inadequate facilities and limited training opportunities may heighten teaching anxiety, as teachers may feel insufficiently supported in delivering instruction effectively. Such conditions can negatively affect teachers' confidence in developing innovative and student-centered learning experiences (Aminaty & Surawan, 2025). From an organizational psychology perspective, an environment that lacks stability may increase perceptions of work uncertainty, particularly when teachers are expected to achieve specific educational standards without adequate resources and support (Hidayat *et al.*, 2024). Therefore, the developmental status of the institution itself can be understood as a factor that reinforces the emergence of work-related stress among PAI teachers during the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.



Source: Personal Documentation

Figure 2. Classroom Teaching and Learning Process Conducted by Islamic Religious Education Teachers at SMP Nurul Hijrah Sukamara

Based on the data analysis presented above, the findings indicate that the psychological challenges experienced by Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in implementing the Merdeka

Curriculum emerge as part of the adaptation process to educational policy changes. Feelings of pressure, anxiety, and self-doubt reflect the experience of change shock when teachers are confronted with new demands, such as creative learning, differentiated instruction, and the independent development of teaching modules (Sa'diah et al., 2023). Uncertainty in understanding lesson planning procedures and assessment systems further intensified feelings of low self-confidence during the initial stage of implementation.

The increased administrative workload and demands for instructional innovation were identified as the primary factors contributing to teacher work stress (Rosyada et al., 2024). Teachers were required to allocate greater amounts of time and energy to preparing instructional materials and conducting authentic assessments, resulting in mental exhaustion, particularly when balancing teaching responsibilities with administrative duties. This condition reflects workload pressure that may adversely affect teachers' psychological well-being and professional effectiveness. These findings are consistent with the study conducted by Mere (2024), which demonstrated that educational policy changes often generate adaptive pressure among teachers, particularly during the early stages of implementation when new instructional demands are not yet fully understood. Furthermore, the present findings support those of Ghifari et al. (2026), who identified increased administrative burdens and demands for instructional innovation as dominant factors contributing to teacher work stress.

Limitations in supporting facilities and uneven access to professional training further intensified the psychological pressure experienced by teachers. The lack of practical references required teachers to engage in self-directed learning, which initially resulted in confusion and frustration. This finding highlights the importance of adequate support systems in facilitating the implementation of a new curriculum (Anwar & Putro, 2023). Nevertheless, observational findings also revealed that institutional and social support played a significant role in helping teachers manage psychological pressure during the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Support from school principals, collaboration among colleagues, and professional discussion forums served as important sources of reinforcement that helped teachers reduce stress, build self-confidence, and enhance their ability to adapt to change. Teachers who actively collaborated with others tended to demonstrate greater effectiveness in managing work-related pressure and adjusting to new instructional demands.

These findings suggest that the psychological challenges experienced by PAI teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum are not permanent; rather, they can evolve in a positive direction as teachers gain experience, receive support from their work environment, and engage in continuous learning opportunities. Therefore, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum requires not only pedagogical and administrative readiness but also psychological preparedness to ensure the effective delivery of teaching and learning activities.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings indicate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum can be understood as a form of educational change stress, referring to the psychological pressure that arises when teachers encounter educational policy reforms requiring simultaneous adjustments in roles, competencies, and work patterns (Högberg, 2024). In this context, PAI teachers are required not only to fulfill pedagogical responsibilities but also to continuously adapt emotionally, cognitively, and professionally to changes within the educational system. Consequently, efforts to support the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum should focus not only on strengthening technical aspects of teaching and learning but also on enhancing teachers' psychological well-being through continuous professional development, simplification of administrative workloads, stronger institutional support, and the cultivation of collaborative school cultures.

2. Self-Management and Emotional Regulation

Self-management and emotional regulation refer to an individual's ability to understand, control, and direct both behavior and emotions consciously in order to respond appropriately to various situations. Based on observations and interviews conducted in the field, PAI teachers experienced various forms of psychological pressure, including high administrative demands, curriculum changes, additional workloads, and expectations from schools and parents regarding

successful learning outcomes. Nevertheless, teachers demonstrated various adaptive strategies to manage these pressures while maintaining their professional responsibilities. The strategies employed by PAI teachers to cope with psychological pressure can be understood through the framework of coping stress, which refers to the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral efforts undertaken by individuals to manage internal and external demands perceived as exceeding their available resources (Spătaru *et al.*, 2024). In this context, teachers not only attempted to reduce sources of stress but also adjusted their emotional responses in order to continue performing their professional roles effectively.

Conceptually, the coping strategies identified in this study reflect a combination of problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping was evident in teachers' efforts to manage time, prioritize tasks, improve professional competencies, and prepare instructional materials gradually. Meanwhile, emotion-focused coping was reflected in the use of spiritual approaches, the seeking of social support, and efforts to create more comfortable teaching and working environments. The combination of these coping strategies demonstrates the presence of psychological resilience, or the capacity to withstand and adapt positively to workplace challenges and pressures.

Analysis of the frequency of their occurrence in interviews and observations revealed that spiritual approaches and time management were the most frequently utilized strategies among PAI teachers. Spiritual approaches were commonly employed when teachers faced emotional pressures such as fatigue, anxiety, or frustration, whereas time management was primarily used to address pressures arising from workloads and administrative demands. Collaboration with colleagues, professional development activities, and the creation of enjoyable learning environments functioned as complementary strategies that enhanced the overall effectiveness of coping efforts. Thus, the effectiveness of teachers' coping strategies does not rely on a single approach but rather on the interaction of multiple strategies tailored to different forms of stress. Emotion-oriented strategies help stabilize teachers' psychological conditions, while professional and social strategies contribute to reducing stressors more directly in daily practice. Interviews with one of the PAI teachers revealed that spiritual approaches served as an important means of maintaining emotional stability when dealing with work-related pressures. This is illustrated in the following statement:

“When we feel tired or pressured by our work, we usually try to calm ourselves by increasing our prayers and dhikr. This helps us become more patient in dealing with various situations in the classroom and work-related demands.” (Interview with ER and ST, Monday, January 28, 2026, at 09:00 a.m.).

This statement suggests that spiritual strategies function as a coping mechanism oriented toward emotion regulation (Samadi *et al.*, 2023). In stressful work situations, teachers may not always be able to directly change the sources of pressure; however, they can manage their emotional responses to such pressures. Therefore, spiritual coping plays an important role in helping teachers maintain psychological stability, reduce emotional tension, and preserve their mental readiness to carry out teaching responsibilities professionally. In addition to spiritual approaches, teachers also employed time management and work planning as strategies to reduce work-related pressure (Setiabudi *et al.*, 2025). Teachers attempted to organize their schedules more systematically by establishing work plans and prioritizing tasks. Through this approach, instructional materials could be prepared gradually, preventing work from accumulating excessively. Interview findings further demonstrated the use of time management and work planning as strategies for reducing pressure associated with professional responsibilities, as reflected in the following statement:

“To reduce work pressure, we usually create work schedules and prepare instructional materials in advance. This allows tasks to be completed gradually and prevents them from becoming overwhelming.” (Interview with ER and ST, Monday, January 28, 2026, at 09:00 a.m.).

From the perspective of coping stress theory, time management and work planning can be categorized as problem-focused coping, namely strategies aimed at directly reducing the source of stress (Azhar *et al.*, 2025). In this regard, teachers do not merely attempt to endure stress emotionally but also take concrete actions to manage pressure through more systematic workload organization. This strategy demonstrates that PAI teachers possess adaptive capacities that are not only emotional in nature but also functional and professional.



Source: Author's Documentation

Figure 3. Interviews with Students Concerning the Learning Strategies, Instructional Models, and Teaching Modules Applied by Islamic Religious Education Teachers

Based on the data analysis, the findings indicate that PAI teachers experience psychological pressures arising from high administrative demands, curriculum changes, increased workloads, and expectations from schools and parents regarding successful learning outcomes. These conditions have the potential to generate work-related stress, emotional exhaustion, and professional anxiety (Imron, 2016). However, the data also demonstrate that teachers possess adaptive capacities that enable them to manage these pressures while continuing to perform their professional responsibilities effectively. Spiritual Approaches as a Source of Emotional Stability. Interview data revealed that spiritual values constitute a primary strategy for managing psychological pressure. Religious practices such as prayer, dhikr, and maintaining the quality of worship function as mechanisms of inner peace that help teachers regulate emotions and enhance patience (Shiddiqy *et al.*, 2025). This approach strengthens teachers' psychological resilience, enabling them to remain calm when dealing with challenging classroom situations.

Time Management and Work Planning as Strategies for Controlling Workload. Psychological pressure arising from administrative tasks and instructional demands is addressed through systematic time management. Teachers organize daily work schedules, establish task priorities, and prepare instructional materials in advance. Observational findings indicate that the gradual preparation of teaching modules helps prevent work accumulation and improves work efficiency. Collaboration and Social Support as Psychological Buffers. Interview findings further revealed that sharing experiences with colleagues provides both emotional and professional support. Informal discussions and collaborative efforts in preparing instructional materials help reduce psychological burdens. Observations demonstrated active interactions among teachers, including the exchange of teaching resources and discussions regarding instructional strategies, which foster a sense of collegiality and alleviate work-related pressure.

Professional Development and Adaptive Attitudes. Teachers demonstrated adaptive efforts in responding to educational changes by continuously enhancing their professional competencies through training programs, workshops, and self-directed learning. The utilization of digital learning resources and participation in professional development activities increased teachers' self-

confidence and pedagogical readiness. From a psychological perspective, such competence development reduces professional anxiety and strengthens teachers' confidence in their instructional abilities (Supriyanto, 2024). Creating a Positive Learning Environment. Teachers also sought to create interactive and enjoyable classroom environments through discussion-based learning, educational games, and humanistic teaching approaches. Positive learning environments not only increase student engagement but also reduce the emotional pressure experienced by teachers. A conducive classroom atmosphere enables teachers to teach more comfortably and confidently (Jejen Tabriji, 2024). Overall, the findings suggest that the strategies employed by PAI teachers to manage psychological pressure are comprehensive and mutually reinforcing. Spiritual approaches function as sources of emotional strength, time management assists in controlling workload, social support enhances psychological well-being, professional development strengthens professional confidence, and positive learning environments contribute to stress reduction. The combination of these strategies reinforces teachers' psychological resilience and supports the sustainability of effective professional performance.

Based on the overall findings, teachers' coping strategies for managing psychological pressure can be conceptualized within a framework referred to as the Teacher Coping Strategy Model (Lindqvist et al., 2023). This model suggests that teachers' coping processes in responding to the pressures associated with the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum operate through four primary dimensions: (1) spiritual coping, which includes prayer, dhikr, and the strengthening of religious practices as mechanisms for emotional regulation; (2) professional coping, which encompasses time management, work planning, and competency development; (3) social coping, which involves collaboration, discussion, and support from colleagues and school leaders; and (4) pedagogical coping, which refers to efforts to create interactive, enjoyable, and conducive learning environments as a means of reducing teaching-related pressures.

This model demonstrates that PAI teachers' coping strategies are not singular in nature but rather multidimensional and interconnected. In other words, teachers' psychological resilience is shaped not only by individual strengths but also by social support, professional competence, and the ability to manage instructional processes adaptively (Riesmawati et al., 2025). This finding represents an important contribution of the present study, as it illustrates that the coping strategies employed by PAI teachers during the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum follow a systematic pattern that may serve as an analytical framework for future research.

As a researcher, the study proposes several practical implications. The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum generates various psychological dynamics for PAI teachers, ranging from adaptation-related anxiety to increased self-confidence and professionalism. Therefore, systematic efforts from multiple stakeholders are required to strengthen teachers' psychological and professional readiness so that curriculum implementation can proceed effectively. Schools should create supportive work environments through policies that promote teachers' psychological well-being, while teachers should be provided with practical and continuous training related to module development, project-based learning, differentiated instruction, and authentic assessment.

Furthermore, support for teachers should be directed toward strengthening coping capacities and psychological well-being on a continuous basis. Schools may establish teacher reflection forums, professional learning communities, and psychosocial mentoring programs that enable teachers to share experiences and adaptation strategies. From a theoretical perspective, these findings suggest that the success of curriculum implementation is determined not only by policy frameworks and technical competencies but also by teachers' coping abilities in responding to the pressures associated with educational change. Consequently, teacher empowerment strategies should be understood as integrated efforts encompassing pedagogical, psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum generates dynamic psychological experiences among Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers that evolve through a gradual and adaptive process. During the initial phase, teachers experienced uncertainty

and professional pressure resulting from changes in the learning system, increased administrative demands, and limited resources. However, these pressures were not permanent; rather, they developed into an adaptation process characterized by enhanced competencies, greater self-confidence, and strengthened professionalism.

The principal finding of this study is the identification of a four-stage pattern of teachers' psychological adaptation, consisting of initial uncertainty, professional pressure, adaptive learning, and professional confidence. In addition, teachers developed multidimensional coping strategies encompassing spiritual, professional, social, and pedagogical dimensions to effectively manage work-related pressures. The scientific contribution of this study lies in the formulation of the Teacher Psychological Adaptation to Curriculum Reform Model, which enriches the field of educational psychology, particularly in understanding teachers' responses to educational policy changes. This model highlights that the success of curriculum implementation depends not only on technical and pedagogical aspects but also on teachers' psychological dynamics and adaptive coping strategies. Therefore, efforts to support curriculum reform should focus not only on improving teachers' professional competencies but also on strengthening their psychological well-being and resilience in responding to educational change.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the principal and Islamic Religious Education teachers of SMP Nurul Hijrah Sukamara for their valuable participation, openness, and support during the research process. Their experiences and insights have contributed significantly to understanding teachers' psychological adaptation, coping strategies, and professional resilience in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum.

REFERENCES

- Ainun, A., Fitriani, Saiffudin, Nurma, Nasaruddin, & Ruslan. (2025). Pendekatan psikologis dalam pendidikan Islam: Menjawab tantangan pendidikan di era digital. *ARJI: Jurnal Riset dan Inovasi*. <https://journal.nahnuinisiatif.com/index.php/ARJI/article/view/576/594>
- Aminaty, D., & Surawan, S. (2025). Teaching anxiety sebagai hambatan pengembangan kompetensi mengajar mahasiswa PAI. *Jurnal Ilmiah Pendidikan*, 2(4), 887–897.
- Anwar, Z., & Putro, K. Z. (2023). Integrasi pendidikan dan psikologi dalam mengatasi tantangan pendidikan di madrasah ibtidaiyah. *Ibtidai'Y Datokarama: Jurnal Pendidikan Dasar*, 4(1), 15–25. <https://doi.org/10.24239/ibtidaiy.vol4.iss1.54>
- Azhar, R. A., Suroso, & Pratitis, N. T. (2025). The relationship between self-management and problem-focused coping with academic stress among graduate students in professional psychology programs in Surabaya. *JSRET (Journal of Scientific, Research, Education, and Technology)*, 4(1), 152–166.
- Bakker, A. B., Xanthopoulou, D., & Demerouti, E. (2023). How does chronic burnout affect dealing with weekly job demands? A test of central propositions in JD-R and COR theories. *Applied Psychology*, 72(1), 389–410. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12382>
- Chen, W., Huang, Z., Peng, B., Li, L., & Chen, J. (2025). Teacher competency and work engagement among secondary school physical education teachers: The multiple mediating roles of occupational stress, emotional exhaustion, and professional achievement. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 16, Article 1530413. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2025.1530413>
- Demerouti, E., & Bakker, A. B. (2023). Job demands-resources theory in times of crises: New propositions. *Organizational Psychology Review*, 13(3), 209–236. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20413866221135022>
- Dewi, A. S., & Kuswandono, P. (2025). Teacher agency with teacher resilience in facing challenges in the times independent curriculum implementation. *Jurnal Pendidikan Indonesia*, 14(1), 156–167. <https://doi.org/10.23887/jpi-undiksha.v14i1.83477>
- Fitriyani, F., & Novalia, R. J. (2024). Meningkatkan kualitas pembelajaran: Peran strategis pelatihan guru. *Jurnal Pendidikan Vokasi dan Seni*, 3(1), 13–24. <https://doi.org/10.52060/jpvs.v3i1.2768>

- Fullan, M. (2007). *The new meaning of educational change* (4th ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Högberg, B. (2024). Education systems and academic stress: A comparative perspective. *British Educational Research Journal*, *50*(3), 1002–1021. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3964>
- Huyen, N. P., & Yen, D. T. H. (2022). Teachers' adaptability to general curriculum reform. *VNU Journal of Science: Education Research*, *38*(3), 85–95. <https://doi.org/10.25073/2588-1159/vnuer.4308>
- Imron, I. (2016). Kinerja guru dilihat dari spiritualitas, komitmen organisasi, modal psikologis, dan perilaku kewargaorganisasian. *Belajea: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, *1*(2), 101–123.
- Lindqvist, H., Weurlander, M., Wernerson, A., & Thornberg, R. (2023). The emotional journey of the beginning teacher: Phases and coping strategies. *Research Papers in Education*, *38*(4), 615–635. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2022.2065518>
- Masten, A. S. (2014). *Ordinary magic: Resilience in development*. Guilford Press.
- Travers, C. J., & Cooper, C. L. (1996). *Teachers under pressure: Stress in the teaching profession*. Routledge.
- Windayanti, W., Afnanda, M., Agustina, R., Kase, E. B. S., Safar, M., & Mokodenseho, S. (2023). Problematika guru dalam menerapkan Kurikulum Merdeka. *Journal on Education*, *6*(1), 2056–2063. <https://doi.org/10.31004/joe.v6i1.3197>