Preserving professional identity: teachers' voices and internal struggle on the discourse of the *kurikulum merdeka*

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the experiences and perspectives of teachers in implementing the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, an independent curriculum movement in Indonesia. The study aims to understand how teachers navigate the challenges associated with the implementation process while preserving their professional identity. This research will employ a hermeneutic phenomenological approach which involves transcription, thematic analysis, and interpretation and meaning-making. The approach will provide a robust framework for exploring teachers' lived experiences in relation to the implementation of the curriculum. The methodology involved in-depth interviews with the teachers who have been actively involved in the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* in their schools. The findings show the dynamic and dialogic responses of teachers to educational reforms like *Kurikulum Merdeka*. It applies Bakhtin's theory of dialogism to uncover themes and sub-themes in teachers' narratives. These themes include the adaptation of teaching roles and conflicts stemming from traditional training versus new approaches. Social interactions and support from colleagues, as well as changes in the student-teacher dynamic, are vital aspects. Challenges like letting go of control and finding a balance in guiding students are discussed, along with strategies for navigating these challenges. The discussion emphasizes the evolution of professional identity as a result of ongoing dialogues in response to educational changes.

1. Introduction

In recent years, Indonesia has been undergoing educational reforms to enhance the quality of its education system. One significant reform is the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka*, which translates to "Independent Curriculum" in English. This curriculum reform seeks to provide schools and teachers with greater autonomy in designing and implementing their curricula, aiming to promote a more learner-centered and contextually relevant education system. The implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* builds upon the previous curriculum framework known as *Kurikulum 2013*, which was introduced in 2013 with the objective of shifting from a teacher-centered to a student-centered approach to education. However, feedback and experiences from teachers, schools, and other stakeholders highlighted the need for further improvements and adjustments to the curriculum to make it more responsive to local contexts and to better address the diverse needs of learners. *Kurikulum Merdeka* was officially launched by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture in 2018 as an extension of *Kurikulum 2013*. It aims to provide schools and teachers with increased autonomy in adapting and customizing the curriculum to suit their local context, student needs, and community

aspirations. The implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* emphasizes the principles of local wisdom, character education, and the cultivation of 21st-century skills.

The implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* in Indonesia is influenced by several factors. Firstly, there is agrowing recognition of the need to address the diverse needs and cultural contexts of students across the country [1]. *Kurikulum Merdeka* aims to empower schools and teachers to design a curriculum that is responsive to the specific needs and aspirations of their students and communities [2]. Secondly, the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* aligns with the broader global trend towards more progressive and inclusive educational approaches [3]. There is an increasing emphasis on student agency, critical thinking, problem-solving, and the development of 21st-century skills. *Kurikulum Merdeka* seeks to incorporate these principles into the curriculum, encouraging active student engagement and fostering creativity andinnovation. The implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* also recognizes the importance of local knowledge and cultural heritage. It seeks to integrate indigenous wisdom, local traditions, and cultural diversity into the curriculum, allowing students to have a deeper understanding of their own cultural identity and promoting respect for diverse perspectives. However, the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* also presents challenges for teachers and schools. They need to navigate issues such as curriculum design, instructional materials, assessment methods, and alignment with national standards. Additionally, the successful implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* requires adequate support and professional development for teachers to effectively adapt their pedagogical approaches and practices.

Teachers' professional identity plays a significant role in shaping their teaching practices and interactionswith students, colleagues, and the educational community. Understanding the formation and development of teachers' professional identity is crucial for fostering effective educational experiences. This essay examines teachers' professional identity through the lens of Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, which emphasizes the importance of social interactions and cultural contexts in identity construction. Byexploring the implications of dialogism for teachers' professional identity, we gain valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of their roles and the influences that shape their identities. Bakhtin's Theory of Dialogism: At the core of Bakhtin's theory of dialogism is the notion that human interactions are inherently dialogic, involving dynamic exchanges of ideas, beliefs, and values within a social and cultural context. Bakhtin posits that language and communication are shaped by various voices, perspectives, and cultural discourses. Dialogism recognizes the interconnectedness of individuals with their social environment and highlights the active and co-constructed nature of meaning-making [4], [5]. Teachers' Professional Identity: Teachers' professional identity encompasses their beliefs, values, knowledge, skills, and attitudes, as well as their interactions with students, colleagues, and the broader educational community. It is a complex interplay of personal, social, and cultural factors that shape theirsense of self in the professional realm. Teachers' professional identity evolves through their experiences,reflections, and interactions, leading to the construction of their professional selves [6], [7].

The Dialogic Nature of Teachers' Professional Identity: Examining teachers' professional identity throughthe lens of dialogism reveals that their identities are constantly negotiated and constructed in interaction with others. Teaching is inherently dialogic, involving engagement with diverse stakeholders. Teachers engage in dynamic exchanges with students, colleagues, parents, and the educational community, incorporating different voices and perspectives into their practice. These dialogic interactions shape teachers' beliefs, values, and practices, influencing how they perceive themselves and their roles as educators [8], [9]. Cultural Context and Professional Identity: Bakhtin's dialogism underscores the significance of cultural context in the construction of identity. Teachers' professional identity is shaped by cultural norms, values,and expectations embedded in the educational system and wider society. Cultural influences include societal beliefs about education, pedagogical approaches, and prevailing discourses on teaching and learning. Teachers engage in dialogue with these cultural elements, internalizing and negotiating them as they develop their professional identities [10], [11]. Understanding the dialogic nature of professional identity has significant implications for teacher education and professional development. Teacher education programs can integrate dialogic perspectivesto encourage critical reflection, collaborative learning, and the exploration of diverse voices and perspectives. Professional development initiatives can provide opportunities for teachers to engage in meaningful dialogue, share experiences, and learn from one another, fostering the growth of their professional identities. Creating supportive environments that acknowledge the dialogic construction of professional identity promotes teachers' well-being and enhances their effectiveness as educators.

Examining teachers' professional identity through the lens of Bakhtin's theory of dialogism highlights the multifaceted nature of their roles and the influences that shape their identities. The dialogic nature of teaching underscores the importance of social interactions and cultural contexts in identity construction. By acknowledging the dialogic construction of professional identity, teacher education programs and professional development initiatives can better support teachers' growth and foster effective educational experiences. Embracing dialogism can contribute to continuously developing teachers' professional identities and enhancing teaching practices. Teachers play a pivotal role in the education system, and their voices are crucial in understanding the challenges they face and preserving their professional identity. By exploring teachers' perspectives, policymakers and educational stakeholders gain valuable insights into the realities of teaching, enabling more informed decision-making and the development of targeted support systems. Exploring teachers' voices is of paramount importance in navigating challenges and preserving professional identity in the teaching profession. By understanding teachers' perspectives, policymakers and educational stakeholders can make informed decisions, develop targeted support systems, and create environments that empower teachers and foster their professional growth. Ultimately, this contributes to the improvement of the education system and enhances the overall quality of teaching and learning experiences. This research aims to investigate how teachers experience the discourse of *Kurikulum Merdeka* and in what ways teachers' internal struggle with the *Kurikulum Merdeka* reflect the dialogical aspects outlined in Bakhtin's theory, and how do these dialogical interactions shape their professional identity negotiation and formation?

2. Method

The study employs a hermeneutic phenomenological approach [12], to delve into the internal struggles faced by teachers in preserving their professional identity within the context of the curriculum reform known as *Kurikulum Merdeka*. This approach allows for a deep exploration of teachers' lived experiences and their subjective interpretations of these experiences. The research participants, consisting of three teachers working in public schools in Yogyakarta Regency that have implemented *Kurikulum Merdeka*, will be purposefully sampled to capture a range of perspectives related to the curriculum reform. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted to enable the participant to reflect on her experiences, challenges, and internal struggles concerning their professional identity. The research design aligns with hermeneutic phenomenology, focusing on interpreting the lived experiences and subjective meanings attributed to them by the participants [13]–[15]. This approach provides a robust framework for understanding the complexities involved in teachers' efforts to preserve their professional identity amidst curriculum changes. Data analysis will involve transcription of interview recordings, followed by thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns within the data. The interpretation phase will entail a hermeneutic understanding of the meanings embedded in the participants' experiences, drawing on relevant theoretical frameworks and the researchers' backgrounds. Overall, this research draws on Ricoeur's work and the principles of hermeneutic phenomenology to explore teachers' lived experiences in the context of *Kurikulum Merdeka* [16]. Through in-depth interviews and rigorous analysis, the study seeks to gain valuable insights into the internal struggles of teachers and their endeavors to maintain their professional identity in the face of curriculum reform, while also ensuring ethical considerations and participant well-being throughout the research process. Aligned with Ricoeur's phenomenological approach, the process of data analysis entails dialectical movements between three levels of analysis: the naïve reading, structural analysis, and critical interpretation and discussion [17]. This procedure involves transitions between providing explanations and enhancing understanding to affirm the initial ideas and assumptions regarding the meaning of the text [16]. Fig. 1 illustrates the stages of the data analysis process.
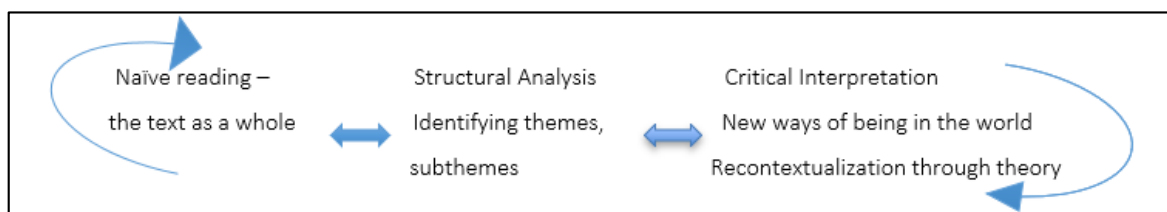

Fig. 1. Illustration of Data Analysis Process

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Naïve Reading

Upon an initial naive reading of the interview transcripts, it is apparent that the participants have experienced a significant shift in their teaching roles and responsibilities due to the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka*. They describe the curriculum reform as a departure from traditional teaching methods. The transition involves guiding students to explore their interests and develop critical thinking skills. Despite having a strong foundation in traditional teaching methods, the teacher participants express challenges in adapting to the more student-centered approach of *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Social interactions with fellow teachers, students, and parents play a crucial role in navigating these challenges, impacting their professional identity. The teachers acknowledge the necessity of the curriculum reform but highlights challenges such as a lack of clear guidelines and resources. They express hopes for ongoing evolution based on feedback and concerns about the potential struggles some teachers may face without comprehensive support. Overall, the teachers envision personal and professional growth through adaptability and openness to change in response to the evolving educational landscape.

3.2. Structural Analysis and Critical Interpretation

In the context of educational reforms such as *Kurikulum Merdeka*, teachers' experiences and professional identities are intricately woven into the dialogic interactions that unfold within the evolving educational landscape. This discussion section employs Bakhtin's theory of dialogism as a lens to examine and elucidate the themes and sub-themes that have emerged from teachers' narratives, shedding light on the dynamic and dialogic nature of their responses to the curriculum change.

1) Theme 1: Adapting to Kurikulum Merdeka and Its Impact on Professional Identity

In the evolving landscape of education brought about by *Kurikulum Merdeka*, teachers find themselves at the forefront of a dynamic dialogue that reshapes their professional identities.

Sub-Theme 1.1, "Shift in Teaching Role," encapsulates the profound transformation teachers undergo as they adapt to this curriculum reform. Bakhtin's theory of dialogism reminds us that meaning is constructed through dialogic exchanges, and this shift signifies a fundamental dialogue between teachers and external forces shaping their roles as educators. The statement, "My teaching role has changed significantly with *Kurikulum Merdeka*," poignantly reflects this responsiveness. It is an acknowledgment of the dialogic nature of their professional identities, highlighting their active participation in this evolving educational discourse. The new script presented by *Kurikulum Merdeka* challenges teachers to transition from being the primary source of knowledge to becoming facilitators of students' exploration. This shift in teaching roles represents a profound transformation that challenges their established professional identities. The tension between their traditional pedagogical roles and the emerging discourse of student-centered learning is a compelling narrative within this dialogue. This sub-theme underscores the dynamic and responsive nature of teachers' professional identities as they navigate and shape their roles within the changing educational landscape.

Sub-Theme 1.2, "Conflict Between Traditional Training and New Approach" delves into the complexities teachers face when confronting the misalignment between their traditional training and the demands of *Kurikulum Merdeka*. In the context of Bakhtin's theory, this sub-theme represents a dialogic tension, a clash of voices and ideologies in the interaction between established pedagogical practices and emerging educational paradigms [18]. Teachers' reference to the conflict they encounter illustrates the ongoing dialogic negotiation taking place within them, influenced by their academic backgrounds and the shifting landscape of education. In his accounts regarding encountering conflict between traditional and new approach Kunti describes, "My academic background has given me a strong foundation in traditional teaching methods. However, it has been a challenge to adapt to the more student-centered approach," symbolizes the internal dialogue teachers engage in. They grapple with the voices of their past education that emphasized structured teaching methods and the new discourse that advocates student-centered and inquiry-based learning. This conflict is not a mere cognitive dissonance; it represents the dynamic and responsive nature of teachers' professional identities. As they navigate this tension, they are actively constructing their identities, embracing change, and seeking to harmonize the traditional and the innovative in their teaching practices. This sub-theme underscores the ongoing dialogue within teachers as they adapt to the shifting educational landscape. It encapsulates their ever-evolving professional identities influenced by both tradition and innovation.

2) Theme 2: Social Interactions and Support in the Context of Kurikulum Merdeka

Sub-Theme 2.1: "Collaboration with Colleagues". Within the framework of Bakhtin's dialogism, Sub-Theme 2.1 delves into the intricate web of social interactions and collaboration among teachers as they navigate the challenges of *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Bakhtin's theory underscores the dialogic nature of these interactions [19], where teachers' collaborative efforts become a fertile ground for dialogic exchanges. Teachers' dialogic interactions with colleagues play a pivotal role in making sense of the changes brought about by the curriculum reform and, in turn, significantly shape their professional identities. Pandu's quote, "I interact closely with my fellow teachers, sharing our experiences and challenges with *Kurikulum Merdeka*," signifies the dialogic relationship between teachers and their peers. This interaction is not a passive exchange of information but an active and dynamic dialogue where experiences, challenges, and ideas are shared, discussed, and negotiated. This dialogic engagement among teachers is pivotal in collectively making sense of the complex shifts in education, offering mutual support and insight into the evolving educational landscape. It serves as a mechanism for preserving their professional identities amidst the transformative forces of *Kurikulum Merdeka*.

Sub-Theme 2.2: "Change in Student-Teacher Dynamic", The change in the student-teacher dynamic, as explored in Sub-Theme 2.2, is emblematic of the dialogic transformation occurring within the classroom. Bakhtin's theory emphasizes the mutuality of dialogues and the responsiveness of individuals to each other's voices [20]. This sub-theme, highlighting the shift from the teacher as the 'sage on the stage' to a facilitator, underscores the profound dialogic repositioning taking place within the educational discourse. Pandu remarked, "With students, it's been a shift from being the 'sage on the stage' to more of a facilitator," elucidates the dialogic nature of the teacher-student relationship. This shift in the dynamic represents more than just a change in instructional methods; it encapsulates the dialogic responsiveness of teachers to the evolving discourse surrounding educational practices. The classroom is no longer a monologue but a dynamic dialogue, with teachers actively engaging with their students. This shift reflects their responsiveness to the changing dialogic contexts within the classroom, where students' voices, needs, and inquiries play a central role in shaping the educational experience. Within the context of *Kurikulum Merdeka*, social interactions and support systems have become essential elements in the preservation of teachers' professional identities. These dialogic exchanges among colleagues and the shifting student-teacher dynamic are indicative of the ongoing dialogues in the educational landscape. Teachers are not passive recipients of the curriculum changes but active participants in dialogues that continually shape their professional identities. The dialogue within the teaching community and the evolving interaction within the classroom are essential aspects of understanding how teachers navigate and adapt to the dynamic discourse of *Kurikulum Merdeka* while preserving their professional identities.

3) Theme 3: Challenges and Internal Struggles in Implementing Kurikulum Merdeka

Sub-Theme 3.1: "Letting Go of Control", In the educational landscape transformed by *Kurikulum Merdeka*, the challenge of letting go of control in the classroom encapsulates a profound dialogic tension. Bakhtin's dialogism underscores the interplay of voices and ideologies, and this sub-theme illustrates how teachers' struggles to relinquish control represent dialogic responses to external pressures and the evolving discourse of student-centered learning. Bhima referred to this episode, "One of the biggest challenges has been letting go of control in the classroom and allowing students to take more initiative," brings to light the inherent dialogic negotiation within teaching practices. It is not merely a matter of pedagogical adjustment but a continuous dialogue between established teaching methods and emerging educational paradigms. Teachers must navigate this tension as they reshape their professional identities within the changing dialogic context of the classroom. This internal struggle extends beyond the realm of teaching methods; it is a dialogue between the authoritative role traditionally held by educators and the new, more collaborative role necessitated by *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Teachers actively engage in conversations with themselves and external forces, actively shaping their professional identities as they learn to cede control, fostering student agency and autonomy while preserving the essence of their role as educators.

Sub-Theme 3.2: "Finding Balance in Guiding Students", The sub-theme related to finding a balance between guiding students and letting them explore independently sheds light on the dialogic nature of pedagogical decision-making. Teachers engage in an ongoing dialogic process of negotiation as they seek to strike the right balance in their teaching approaches. Underlying the sub-theme, Pandu referred to this episode, "It's tough to find the balance between guiding them and letting them explore independently," highlights the intricate dialogues teachers hold with themselves, their students, and

the educational discourse. This internal dialogue influences their pedagogical choices and significantly contributes to the construction of their professional identities. This theme illustrates the responsiveness of teachers to the evolving educational discourse. It is not a dichotomous choice between guiding and freedom but a dynamic dialogue, where teachers actively negotiate and adapt to the changing needs and voices within their classrooms. They explore a continuum of approaches to meet students' needs, reacting to the dialogic context shaped by *Kurikulum Merdeka's* principles of student-centered learning and inquiry-based education.

Theme 3: Challenges and Internal Struggles in Implementing *Kurikulum Merdeka* brings forth the intricate dialogues within teachers' professional identities as they grapple with the transformative forces of the curriculum reform. The dialogic tensions in letting go of control and finding the right balance in guiding students serve as vital illustrations of how teachers actively engage with the evolving discourse. Their internal struggles, as discussed in these sub-themes, represent a continuous negotiation and dialogue within the dynamic educational landscape. The preservation of their professional identities becomes an active, responsive, and evolving process that is intrinsically tied to these dialogues. Understanding these challenges through the lens of Bakhtin's dialogism [4] provides essential insights into the complex role of teachers within the context of *Kurikulum Merdeka*.

4) Theme 4: Strategies for Navigating Challenges and Preserving Professional Identity
Sub-Theme 4.1: "Seeking Mentorship and Support", within the dialogic framework, the act of seeking mentorship from colleagues represents a response to the clash of voices within the educational discourse. Teachers engage in dialogues with more experienced peers to navigate the challenges brought about by *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Bakhtin's theory highlights the role of responsive listening in dialogues, and in this context, teachers actively seek guidance and support from voices that have successfully adapted. Underlying the importance of seeking mentorship and support, Kunti stated, "I've sought mentorship from colleagues who have adapted successfully. I also engage in regular self-reflection and stay open to feedback," embodies the dialogic nature of teacher adaptation. It illustrates the responsive and adaptive qualities of teachers' professional identities as they actively engage with experienced colleagues to negotiate the complexities of the new curriculum. Teachers' readiness to seek mentorship and support from colleagues is indicative of their proactive response to the evolving educational landscape. The dialogic relationship with experienced peers serves as a form of collective sense-making, allowing teachers to benefit from the wisdom and expertise of those who have effectively navigated the challenges posed by *Kurikulum Merdeka*. This internal dialogue and shared expertise contribute significantly to the preservation and development of their professional identities in the face of educational reforms.

Sub-Theme 4.2: "Continuous Learning and Workshop Attendance", The dedication to continuous learning and attending workshops aligns with Bakhtin's concept of the dynamic nature of dialogue. Teachers actively participate in dialogues with educational experts, researchers, and the curriculum itself through workshops and learning experiences. This dialogue informs their evolving practices and shapes their professional identities. The following is an excerpt from Pandu's interview where he touched on continuous learning and attending workshops. He stated, "I've dedicated time to continuous learning and attending workshops specifically focused on *Kurikulum Merdeka*," demonstrates the dialogic process of learning and adaptation. Teachers actively engage in these dialogues to acquire new skills and perspectives, resulting in the ongoing construction of their professional identities. This sub-theme highlights teachers' commitment to staying abreast of current educational practices and the evolving curriculum. By actively participating in workshops and learning experiences, teachers engage in dialogues with experts and colleagues to enhance their pedagogical toolkit. It is not a one-sided conversation but a dynamic exchange that fosters their responsiveness and adaptability to the changing dialogic context of education. Continuous learning and workshop attendance are, therefore, integral strategies that enable teachers to actively engage in the dialogue surrounding *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Their participation in these dialogues allows them to integrate new ideas and approaches into their teaching practices, leading to the ongoing evolution of their professional identities as educators.

In essence, Theme 4: Strategies for Navigating Challenges and Preserving Professional Identity reveals the dynamic, responsive nature of teachers' professional identities as they actively engage in dialogues with colleagues and educational experts. Seeking mentorship and support, along with dedicating time to continuous learning, are vital dialogic strategies employed by teachers to navigate the complexities of *Kurikulum Merdeka*. These strategies empower teachers to adapt to the evolving

educational landscape, contributing to the ongoing construction and preservation of their professional identities within the changing discourse of education

4. Conclusion

In this comprehensive discussion, we've explored four key themes that shed light on the dynamic evolution of teachers' professional identities within the context of *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Theme 1 delves into the adaptation to the curriculum reform and the consequential shift in teaching roles, along with the associated conflict between traditional training and the new approach. These dialogic interactions underscore that teachers are actively participating in the reshaping of their roles and practices amidst the evolving educational landscape. Theme 2 emphasizes the significance of social interactions and support, focusing on collaboration with colleagues and the evolving student-teacher dynamic. These dialogic exchanges within the teaching community and classrooms reveal the dynamic and responsive nature of teachers' identities as educators. Teachers' interactions with both colleagues and students play pivotal roles in preserving their professional identities within the context of changing educational discourse. Theme 3 explores the challenges and internal struggles faced in implementing *Kurikulum Merdeka*, particularly regarding the tension of relinquishing control and finding the right balance in guiding students. These dialogues represent the dynamic nature of teachers' professional identities as they reshape their roles and practices in response to the evolving dialogic context of the classroom. Finally, in Theme 4, we uncover strategies employed by teachers for navigating these challenges while preserving their professional identities, such as seeking mentorship and engaging in continuous learning and workshops. These dialogic strategies reflect teachers' active participation in conversations with colleagues, experts, and the curriculum, contributing significantly to the ongoing construction and preservation of their professional identities. Ultimately, the discussion underscores the intricate and ever-evolving nature of teachers' professional identities, emphasizing that these identities are actively shaped through dialogic interactions with various stakeholders and the dynamic educational landscape. Understanding this dynamism is essential for the development of policies and practices that support teachers' adaptation to educational changes, ensuring they remain responsive and resilient while advancing the educational discourse in Indonesia.

Declarations

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