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Elementary teachers' beliefs and practices pertaining to freedom of learning curriculum reform policy: A qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

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This study examines elementary school teachers' beliefs and practices pertaining to the 'freedom-of-learning' curriculum reform policy in Indonesia. With regard to teachers' beliefs, this study explored current topics and discussed the challenges that teachers, schools, and the government must address to when preparing to implement reforms. We conducted interviews and discussions with six elementary school teachers from six schools and enrolled participants based on their past or current experience in coordinating school curriculum frameworks and managing school curricula. Responses differed between 1) teachers who were skeptical of and resistant to the new policy, and 2) teachers who felt that the new policy was crucial and were enthusiastic about it provided specific conditions were met. However, both groups of teachers were not yet ready to accept this new policy. Based on these findings, this study recommended the following for teachers, schools, and curriculum policymakers: (1) The ongoing driving teacher program must be implemented effectively and, in a manner, different from prior programs. (2) The socialization of the freedom-of-learning curriculum reform policy must be conceptualized and systematic such that teachers develop a clear understanding of the policy. (3) During the implementation of reforms, the government should not only focus on technical implementation but also on fundamental changes in mindset.

Contribution/Originality This study contributes by providing meaningful information to teachers, schools, and policymakers about what should be considered when implementing curriculum reform contained in the Indonesia's 'freedom of learning' curriculum reform policy implemented in 2020.

1. INTRODUCTION

Countries worldwide are implementing measures to increase the quality of their education, and a key area of focus is curriculum reform (Park & Sung, 2013). However, the education reform implemented in most developed countries has reduced teacher autonomy (Erss, 2018). In some countries, limits to the development of the teaching profession have resulted in teacher de-professionalization (Biesta, 2015; Erss, 2018). Therefore, a key aspect of educational reform is the improvement of the professional autonomy of teachers pertaining to curriculum and teaching.

The Indonesian curriculum has changed over the years in response to the country's political evolution. Since Indonesia gained independence on August 17, 1945, the national educational curriculum has been revised several times (Mukminin, Habibi, Prasajo, Idi, & Hamidah, 2019; Prihantoro, 2015). However, during Indonesia's previous curriculum reforms, teachers did not engage in independent and creative exploration, contribute to the curriculum, or enhance their professional image and working conditions. This phenomenon was also observed in numerous countries (Bascia, Carr-Harris, Fine-Meyer, & Zurzolo, 2014; Erss, 2018).

The latest revision involves the 'freedom-of-learning' curriculum reform policy, which was proposed in 2019 and implemented in 2020. Compared with prior reforms, changes in teacher autonomy are being implemented. In addition, teachers have the freedom to interpret the curriculum and are even encouraged to contribute to it. They are no longer administrators but also co-creators of the curriculum (Makarim, 2019). They can freely interpret the curriculum and promote flexible learning by creating and contributing to the curriculum (Hendri, 2020; Mustaghfiroh, 2020). This curriculum reform policy is meaningful to student and teacher development, and it must thus be properly executed to ensure that improvements are made (Ng, 2009; Tikkanen, Pyhältö, Pietarinen, & Soini, 2020; Yuen, Cheung, & Wong, 2012). A curriculum reform does not automatically guarantee the establishment of sustainable changes in everyday school practices (Cuban, 2013; Fullan, 1985; Fullan & Miles, 1992). Reform implementation often leads to unanticipated results, even though well-intentioned curricular reforms have never been effectively applied in practical class settings (Park & Sung, 2013). Several studies have focused on why curriculum reform initiatives are rarely successful (Cohen, 1990; Feldman, 2000; Fullan & Miles, 1992; Klein, 1994; McLaughlin, 1987).

Numerous studies have verified the essential role of teachers in implementing a good curriculum well (Kirk & MacDonald, 2001; Little, 1993; Park & Sung, 2013; Spillane, 1999). Specifically, understanding teachers' opinions about curriculum reform and their beliefs is crucial to the effective implementation of a curriculum according to established goals. Their knowledge, beliefs, and perceptions play key roles in the effective implementation of reforms (Park & Sung, 2013). Fullan (2007) also argued that reform is a subjective process in which teachers individually construct personal meanings based on the changes that they experienced.

The present study examined the beliefs and practices of elementary school teachers toward the current freedom-of-learning policy. Elementary school teachers were enrolled as research participants because of the Ministry of Education and Culture's current focus on improving the professional quality of elementary school teachers. Elementary education is regarded as a crucial starting point for improving education. This is indicated by the introduction of the "driving teacher" policy in elementary schools to support the freedom-of-learning curriculum reform policy. The driving teacher policy was initiated to support and ensure the success of the freedom-of-learning curriculum reform policy.

Moreover, elementary schools are foundational to education, and their role is thus a strategic one. We hypothesized that teachers have mixed perceptions towards curriculum reform; their skepticism, pessimism, and optimism with respect to the new policy greatly influence curriculum reform policy implementation. Our research questions are as follows:

1. What are elementary school teachers' beliefs and practices with respect to the freedom-of-learning policy curriculum reforms?
2. In relation to teachers' beliefs, what are the ongoing challenges and what should teachers, schools, and the government focus on and prepare for to maintain a proactive stance during reform implementation?

The present study also discussed, through critical reflection and evaluation, what active contributions one can make to the curriculum and the problem of having the ability to implement the curriculum successfully according to a given set of goals.

2. THEORETICAL REVIEW

2.1. *Freedom of Learning in Indonesia: Concept and Strategy*

The search for effective strategies to achieve better education quality is an unending endeavor. This is also why Indonesia frequently revises its curriculum and education policy. Fullan and Miles (1992) indicated that individuals and organizations play fundamental roles in reform; they argued that a substantial expansion of the capacity of individuals and organizations is essential to understanding and dealing with change (Fullan & Miles, 1992). That is, a curriculum reform policy can only be effective if human resources and institutions (i.e., teachers and schools in this context) understanding the substance of the reform and are proactive in implementing it.

Some of the reforms that have been carried out: first, Indonesia's National Examination was replaced by the Minimum Competency Assessment and Character Survey which emphasizes literacy and numerical reasoning skills based on PISA (Program for International Student of Assessment) best-practice tests and was carried out in grades 4, 8 and 11 (Hendri, 2020; Mustahfiroh, 2020). In contrast to previous tests that were held at the end of an educational stage. The assessment results are expected to be utilized by educational institutions to improve learning processes before students complete their education. Policies that incorporate PISA standards are in line with global trends, and numerous researchers have observed the crucial roles of cross-jurisdictional curriculum standardization, curriculum policies over time, and the relevance of curricula to PISA assessments (Ball, 1998; Bascia et al., 2014; Weiler, 1983).

Second, schools are responsible for administering the National Standard School Examination. They are given the freedom to determine the forms of assessment, which include portfolios, papers, and other forms of assignment (Hendri, 2020). Third, with regard to the preparation of a lesson plan, a teacher can freely choose, create, use, and develop the lesson plan format that comprises learning objectives, learning activities, and assessments. The preparation is conducted efficiently such that teachers have more time on preparing for classes and evaluating the learning process (Hendri, 2020). Teachers are also curriculum co-creators who can contribute to curriculum development.

The strategy of implementing a given reform is essential to its success (Pietarinen, Pyhältö, & Soini, 2017; Ramberg, 2014; Tikkanen et al., 2020) and, as argued by Tikkanen et al. (2020) influences the pressures generated by the reform and the strategies used to manage the reform. In conjunction with the curriculum reform, the Ministry of Education and Culture created the strategy of the driving teacher. This concept is intended to increase teacher competence because the freedom-of-learning curriculum reform policy can only be successfully implemented if teachers are highly competent. Driving teachers are selected by the government from among the best teachers to assist and evaluate other teachers (Makarim, 2019). The driving teacher program takes the form of training for teachers, trainers, school principals, and school supervisors. The driving teacher concept is implemented through the andragogical method, which involves the structuring of learning experiences and utilization of experiences that comprise multiple processes (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020).

2.2. *Key Problems and Potential Challenges in Curriculum Reform*

Curriculum reforms are implemented to bring about meaningful and sustainable change. Sustainable school development refers to context-sensitive development in which learning and stakeholder well-being play central roles (Tikkanen et al., 2020). Thus, one challenge in school reform is providing sufficient support to teachers and principals in cultivating new pedagogical practices, developing solutions to problems in everyday school life, and increasing their commitment to maintaining school development (Sullanmaa, Pyhältö, Pietarinen, & Soini, 2019).

In a society, 'the curriculum hence expresses concurrently an inheritance from the past and aspirations and restlessness about the future' (Erstad & Voogt, 2018). Curriculum reform is an essential instrument for societal change and development. Curriculum implementation in Indonesia has always been hampered by a lack of knowledge of innovation by teachers. Moreover, professional teacher development is a major instructional resource

that can contribute substantially to the quality of teaching and instruction (Cohen, Raudenbush, & Ball, 2003; Hill & Charalambous, 2012; Stein, Remillard, & Smith, 2007). The government introduced the Teacher Professional Education program in 2012, which aims to improve teacher competence and well-being.

Few studies have examined teacher competence and teacher understanding of innovation in the Indonesian text. Instead, previous studies have focused on the technical implementation of curricula (Rahmawati, 2018). The success of a curriculum is greatly influenced by teacher competence, and the freedom-of-learning curriculum reform policy is highly reliant on teachers' competence because teachers have the freedom to interpret the curriculum, design teaching and learning processes, and even become a curriculum co-creator. The inclination of teachers to adopt curricular innovations is dependent on their opinions toward or approval of such innovations (Brown & McIntyre, 1982; Park & Sung, 2013). As such, the present study provides valuable contributions to schools and all stakeholders.

Teachers are central to learning (Delen & Krajcik, 2018; Driver, Asoko, Leach, Scott, & Mortimer, 1994; Erduran, Simon, & Osborne, 2004; Guskey, 2002; Krajcik & Delen, 2017; McNeill & Krajcik, 2007) thus, the question of whether teachers should be considered in policy design should be addressed. This question was first addressed by Ball and Cohen (1996) who highlighted several crucial challenges, including (a) what teachers should consider regarding their students, (b) teachers' comprehension of learning materials, (c) teachers' use of learning materials, (d) classroom climate, and (e) external factors (e.g., policy, parents, and the community).

Park and Sung (2013) highlighted two other major elements, namely subjective norms and perceived behavioral control. Subjective norms are beliefs about others' perception of a given behavior. In an educational context, "others" are individuals who have leverage over teachers because of their social or professional status. From the perspective of teachers, "others" can be ministry officials, principals, colleagues, department heads, parents, or students.

Perceived behavioral control refers to how much an individual perceives themselves to be in control in the face of innovation (Park & Sung, 2013). Ball and Cohen (1996) indicated that the factors affecting behavioral control can be internal or external. Internal factors include the capacity of teachers to apply curricular innovations and the quantity and explicitness of information provided about such innovations. External factors are those that relate to an overloaded task environment and support from colleagues.

Fullan (2007) reported that teachers are inclined to misinterpret some aspects of the objectives or implementation of a new program. Therefore, teachers' knowledge and understanding of a curriculum is crucial (Hill & Charalambous, 2012). Teachers' opportunities for professional development, coaching, training, mentoring is emphasized. Tikkanen et al. (2020) argued that a proactive strategy, support from colleagues, effective leadership, and the utilization of well-being have a significant effect on the success of a reform.

A study Cheung and Wang (2002) reported that teachers' beliefs greatly influence how they design a school curriculum and how much time and energy they commit to curricular reform. Pak, Parkoff, Desimone, and Saldívar (2020) argued that curriculum implementation must be consolidated through either technical and adaptive methods to better support teachers' fulfilment of new demands imposed by educational standards.

Rochrig, Kruse, and Kern (2007) verified the findings of Behar-Horenstein, Pajares, and George (1996) that the effectiveness of curriculum innovation implementation is influenced by how closely teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and instructional skills align with the philosophy and demands of a curriculum. The success of a reform is at least dependent on how proposed innovations correspond to teachers' beliefs about appropriate programs and instruction and how teachers prioritize reform initiatives. The quality and success of a reform is closely related to the commitment and beliefs of teachers with respect to curriculum innovation (Priestley & Philippou, 2018). Consequently, curricular reforms are affected by complex problems and challenges that impede the achievement of idealized goals. Thus, a critical examination of the readiness and understanding of teachers regarding curricular

reform must be conducted; furthermore, the strengths and limitations of this policy must be explored to identify relevant factors and contradictions relating to the realities of daily school life.

3. METHODOLOGY

The present study was conducted at six elementary schools in Surabaya, the second-largest city in Indonesia. This research was part of a qualitative study that focused on six elementary school teachers and drew on empirical research on teachers' practices and beliefs. Table 1 presents details of the participants' characteristics and we used pseudonym. Eligible participants were enrolled through purposive sampling. We selected participants based on their past and current experience in coordinating school curriculum frameworks and managing the school curriculum (as part of the freedom-of-learning curriculum reform policy that is currently being implemented). We coordinated with school principals to determine which teachers had experience with curriculum performance, and a thorough selection was conducted to obtain detailed and in-depth information.

Table 1. Teacher participants.

Name	Years of teaching experience	Educational level	Gender
Tik	19	Bachelor's degree	Female
Lin	16	Bachelor's degree	Female
Zain	11	Master's degree	Male
Nefi	3	Bachelor's degree	Female
Mai	16	Bachelor's degree	Female
Anne	11	Bachelor's degree	Female

We collected data through semi-structured interviews. In the first round of data collection, we interviewed participants based on a series of questions and then identified key themes based on their responses (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtler, 2010). In the next round, we conducted in-depth interviews and discussions to understand their experiences more deeply. To provide participants with the freedom to discuss details that were not covered in the interviews, we asked each participant to provide comments and write an essay on their understanding, experiences, and beliefs (including those relating to the difficulties that they face) regarding the implementation of the freedom-of-learning curriculum reform policy. The interviewers systematically collected information on teachers' beliefs toward curriculum reforms, commitment to policy implementation, dilemmas and barriers encountered during implementation, and the limitations of the new policy.

One-on-one interviews that each lasted approximately one hour were conducted with each participant (Lodico et al., 2010). The interviews were conducted in the Indonesian language to ensure participant's confidentiality. Prior to each interview, we obtained the written informed consent of all participant for all research procedures, including our recording of the interview. We also briefed the participants on the research and its scope. A qualitative content analysis of the interview data was conducted to understand the participants' beliefs and practices; this was achieved by interpreting the data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Subsequently, we coded and analyzed the data into numerous small pieces and gradually combined them to form broader and more general descriptions and conclusions to ensure that the coding (code categories and code names) process was properly executed. We first established a scheme which provided the definition for each word and term (Lodico et al., 2010). We transcribed the data and identified key information links to the research topic; determined the scope of the data (by writing and coding in margins); performed an initial review to develop a sense of the overall flow and structure of the data; specifically analyzed the participants' use of language and noted words or phrases that were relevant to the research theme or concept (Lodico et al., 2010) and finally established broad coding categories.

We performed member checks to ensure data validity. Each participant was given the opportunity to read, correct, and comment on the transcripts of the interviews and the identified themes (Thyer, Miles, & Jozefowicz-Simbeni, 2019). Furthermore, we discussed our interpretations of the data and findings with colleagues and professors who were involved in the research and experts in the curriculum implementation process.

4. FINDINGS

The elementary schools' teachers' current beliefs and practices pertaining to the freedom-of-learning curriculum reform policy were polarized. We split the participants into two groups for discussion based on the interview data. Specifically, the first group comprised participants who were skeptical (with most being resistant) toward the policy. They felt that the new policy was vague and confusing and will not lead to substantial changes. The second group comprised participants who felt that the new policy was crucial and were enthusiastic about accepting it provided specific conditions were met. They were enthusiastic about the autonomy and room for creativity granted to teachers. However, the participants in both groups stated their unreadiness to accept this new policy. According to them, teacher competence must be improved to implement the freedom-of-learning curriculum reform in an effective, proactive manner.

4.1. A Desire that is Seemingly Just a Dream

Initially, the teachers were generally skeptical about the curriculum reform. They argued that the curriculum changes whenever a different administration takes power after an election. This perception aligns with the findings of other studies (Bascia et al., 2014; Bunnell, 2009; Dorn, 2008; Schoenfeld & Pearson, 2009) that curriculum policy is influenced by ideologically driven actors. This group felt that despite the frequent implementation of these reforms, no substantial change in education has been achieved until recently. To them, a reform is an ideal that is difficult to practically implement in schools; hence, they are skeptical of the current curriculum reform. The ideal vision that is often presented by the government did not directly correspond to the reality faced in school. The participants' perceptions are based on their extensive experience as teachers. In addition, they did not fully understand the freedom-of-learning curriculum reform policy due to lack of details and directions regarding socialization. Lin responded as follows:

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Perhaps this policy is better than the previous one, but I don't think it will work effectively because teachers, who are the key actors, are not receiving proper support. The government wants us to be creative but does not provide real support. Teacher competence, facilities, and well-being are inadequate for this new policy to be successful. We're used to new ideas being proposed but they don't mean anything. Thus, I felt that it was just a dream (Lin).

The participants always emphasized teacher competence because teacher autonomy requires teachers to apply creativity and incorporate numerous new ideas in their instruction. For example, the utilization of human resources (e.g., colleagues, school facilities, and support from principals) has not been optimized. The freedom-of-learning curriculum reform policy provides autonomy to teachers and reduces the administrative component of lesson plans. However, the policy also requires teachers to be creative because they must design their lessons independently, which is a challenging task.

The participants were aware that this curriculum encourages teachers to be creative and to explore new ground in their teaching. Nevertheless, they were not interested and exhibited low motivation. With respect to preparations for policy implementation, no distinction was made between the preparation instructions for the policy and those of the previous one. In fact, the participants only responded to the simpler one-page lesson plans. Nevertheless, they did not understand the purpose of the policy. The preparations and requirements for implementing this curriculum were almost identical to those of the previous policy. Specifically, the new policy did

not represent a shift in perspective and instructional style from the previous one. Zain, who is a teacher with a master's degree, was not enthusiastic about the policy, and his response was as follows:

I do not think that what I prepared and did in class was different from what I did under the previous policy, that is, apart from the simpler lesson plans. I feel that there is less time to prepare optimally, and adaptation and effective teacher training may be required (Zain).

The teachers were still in their comfort zone, and they were reluctant to move forward in a step-by-step manner. This indicated that the teachers still exhibited a conservative attitude toward instruction. When we asked about the key differences between the new policy and previous policies, they could not provide clear explanations and always shifted the conversation to discuss previous policies. Under the policy, teachers are curriculum co-creators, that is, they can flexibly implement the curriculum and contribute to curriculum development. However, the participants had no idea what they should do in this position; they were confused and reported a lack of clear socialization. A major challenge was cooperation from other teachers, particularly in aligning their perceptions. A teacher is necessarily influenced by their idealism, or even ego. Lin and Tik shared the same opinion, and they responded as follows:

Each teacher has his or her own style, thus the alignment of perceptions through coordination and discussions is a difficult task. Teachers often have differences in opinions due to differing interpretations, and some are firm about their positions; therefore, it is a challenge to collaborate with colleagues who want immediate results but yet do not want to work for them. It is also difficult to convince the guardians of students about the implementation of a new program (Lin and Tik).

They expressed doubts about the autonomy that was given to them, feeling that it is all talk. The curriculum developers did not know that many ideas were not well implemented in the classroom. This is because the system that was formulated was also poor in the first place. The evaluation and supervision were merely formalities that resulted in no substantive change. The participants expressed reservations toward the autonomy that was granted to them through the policy because the school-based management policy that was previously implemented was not successful. In other words, teachers were still technically bound to a byzantine web of administrative systems; this made them feel that the curriculum reform was only a form of external pressure, which demoralized them.

The teachers had to cope with the constraints of their school culture, which tended to be highly hierarchical (e.g., in the relationship between teachers, principals, and senior colleagues). Furthermore, the traditional conception of rote, textbook-based learning has become an important component of standardized evaluation, and parental pressure is oriented toward grades and achievements and the students' moral cultivation. For religious Indonesians, moral education is essential. Zain said that in addition to the difficulty of conducting evaluation to identify which standards and parameters are appropriate, he was worried that freedom of learning curriculum reform policy would lead to poorly brought up students who do not know their place.

Therefore, although the concept of curriculum reconstruction encourages teachers to contribute to the curriculum, the participants were pessimistic about whether this can be achieved. According to Zain, the aforementioned goal can only be achieved when teachers have a light workload and if effective teacher training is implemented. Instead of expecting teachers to contribute to the curriculum, the quality of the training, which was usually completed in 3 days with any further follow-up and thus unsustainable, must be addressed.

4.2. Enthusiastic Support for the Policy Provided Conditions are Met

Some teachers in the second group expressed mixed feelings. They were enthusiastic about the policy but lacked confidence in it. They believed that the policy is appropriate and addresses substantial challenges beyond administrative and technical ones. They also expressed enthusiasm for the policy even though they lacked confidence in several aspects of the policy. They believe that that the freedom-of-learning curriculum reform policy provides opportunities for teachers to stretch and test their abilities. However, according to the teachers, this was

not a straightforward process for those who are unwilling to leave their comfort zones. Mai's response was as follows:

For some teachers, this policy is intimidating because it forces them to upgrade their skills. However, personally and honestly, I like this reform. The simplified lesson plan is more concise but in-depth and substantive, and I have the autonomy to explore and be creative. This policy entails numerous challenges, and for it to be successfully implemented, all moving parts must work together, particularly with regard to increasing the competence of teachers. This means that I agree with and believe in this policy provided specific conditions are met; that is, the core goal of increasing the competence of teachers (who serve as the spearhead of reform) is achieved, the previous problem of unclear training does not happen again, and supervision is properly conducted and not as a mere formality. (Mai).

Nefi was another teacher who was enthusiastic toward the policy. She believed that the recent curriculum reform will raise the level of education. Indonesia's Minister of Education and Culture announced the government's aim of raising Indonesia's traditionally low PISA rankings. Nefi indicated that with the application of the minimum competency assessment, teachers are challenged and "forced" to become more creative because they are now being assessed; in general, a school becomes a pilot school if it is successful. Therefore, Nefi agreed with and believed in the freedom-of-learning curriculum reform policy provided that the government is committed to improving teacher competence effectively. A driving teacher who is appointed by the Minister of Education and Culture should effectively improve teacher competence in accordance with the freedom-of-learning curriculum reform policy and not just focus on documentation and administrative tasks. Nefi provided the following response:

I believe in this curriculum reform, and I think that the minimum competency assessment will be successful provided that it is well implemented unlike the previous policy. I currently have more freedom to explore my ideas, and I like the simple lesson plans (Nefi).

Nefi detailed how she taught, which involved preparation, implementation, and evaluation. She changed her habits and started with creating modules, maintaining control, creating targets, conducting home visits, implementing two-way learning, developing applications that support learning (e.g., the Nearpod platform), evaluating students, and implementing innovations.

They commented positively on the concept of freedom of learning curriculum reform because of their desire to move away from a prescriptive learning model that restrains teachers' creativity. However, some of the participants who agreed with and believed in the policy were unable to accurately explain the new curriculum content and the key role that teachers should undertake under the policy. This is crucial information for the government because although some schools are located in urban areas and have implemented the freedom-of-learning curriculum reform policy approach, this move was not well received by teachers. Notably, although some participants felt optimistic about the new curriculum, they were still uncertain about their roles in its implementation.

The participants reported challenges in implementing the policy. The government's expectations were too high, but socialization was suboptimal and poorly implemented in schools. They also commented on the government's commitment to increasing teacher competence because they felt that teachers were unready to implement the policy. Furthermore, they also complained that the reforms were not fully thought out prior to socialization and that the initiatives were numerous and hastily implemented without proper follow-up. This was the participants' general opinion about the reform, and they felt that teacher competence, school facilities, and teacher well-being must be developed; they also indicated that the concept of driving teachers should be optimized to have an effect on and promote the implementation of the freedom-of-learning curriculum reform policy.

They acknowledged that the freedom-of-learning curriculum reform policy rewards flexible teaching methods. However, these teachers still wanted detailed guidance on how they should teach the curriculum, and this created some tension and challenges. Nefi stated that she was challenged to develop her skills and said, "To hone my skills in conducting live training, I attended seminars and learned through YouTube (because it has a lot of good content), and online

platforms, I tried to create engaging learning media and innovative applications to encourage participation.” Nefi and Mai focused on how they could make their instruction fun and interactive.

The teachers perceived the implementation of the driving teacher program to be beneficial in terms of skill development and the effective implementation of the program. The driving teacher program, which was intended as a supplement to the freedom-of-learning policy, was more focused on sustainable learning. This program allowed teachers who were less confident and required continual feedback to be observed and assessed directly by teachers who were experienced and have a good track record. Notably, the appointment of a senior and professional teacher to deliver training helped the teachers to build their confidence in teaching new topics. They felt that believing in change and reform was essential to maintaining their confidence. When the teachers felt confident about the change, they were able to contribute to what was entailed and prepared. The driving teacher model was also regarded as being sustainable because it had a proficient internal provider.

5. DISCUSSION

National and international trends in curriculum reform, an undoubtedly complex process, require teachers to serve as agents of reform and to have the freedom to determine how to present a curriculum (Hughes & Lewis, 2020; Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2013). Our case study findings indicated that although some Indonesian elementary school teachers were pessimistic about the outcomes of curriculum reform, which dampened their motivation, other teachers appreciated the objective of the curriculum reform and remained positive about its potential benefits for teachers and students. Teachers in Indonesia are accustomed to teaching prescriptive curricula and coping with heavy administrative loads. Therefore, the freedom-of-learning curriculum reform policy is regarded as a valuable opportunity for teachers to flourish and expand their horizons. All the participating teachers believed that teacher competence must be improved. In the following subsections, we discuss several topics, namely teacher competence and professional development, and social cultural constraints.

5.1. Teacher Competence and Professional Development

In my opinion, the most fundamental component is teachers' knowledge. I think that teachers' competence is a key factor in addressing all education-related problems. This may seem like self-criticism on my part of teachers, but the government has the obligation and responsibility to resolve this problem. We should identify measures to ensure that programs and policies, such as the teacher certification program and teacher training, can operate well. (Tik).

The teachers all highlighted teacher competence and the training that was often conducted by the government to improve teacher competence. Teacher certification, which was introduced in 2010, has not substantially changed teacher performance. A study Kusumawardhani (2017) reported that the teacher certification program in Indonesia succeeded in increasing teachers' wages; however, this increase did not lead to a commensurate increase in performance. The aforementioned study suggested that one reason is that wage increases are not pegged to performance. In Indonesia, professional teachers are civil servants for whom job security is assured, meaning that they cannot be fired if they perform poorly. This is in line with the findings of another study (Chang et al., 2014) which reported that the quality of teaching and learning was similar among certified and non-certified teachers, even though their salaries were different.

According to that study, the teacher certification and teacher training mechanisms in Indonesia are often ineffective. Professional teacher development was a meaningless formality that lacked ongoing support (Utami, 2015). No scholarly evaluation of the effectiveness of the certification process has been conducted even though the process has improved substantially. Although every school has a supervisor, principles of academic evaluation principles have not been applied except for those pertaining to administration.

Some teachers who were passionate received inadequate support from their colleagues. They were less confident because they did not have an adequate understanding of these reforms, and they share the same opinion that teacher competence should be increased. Some of the participants confessed that they still adopted traditional pedagogical perspectives and sometimes only made slight modifications to traditional methods without sufficient comprehension.

Professional teacher development did not benefit from key sources of information such as university studies, research results, communities of practices, and associations. Teachers were limited to their formal interactions with their supervisors (which was still ineffective), formal training programs and workshops, and official exchanges of observations with colleagues. Nevertheless, schools did not enforce professional teacher development measures, such as peer coaching, critical friendship programs, action research assistance, community practices models, and conferences. Therefore, teacher competence must be continually and effectively upgraded to ensure the success of these reforms. If we want teachers to precisely implement the core ideas underpinning the curriculum reform, they must receive training on how to implement the freedom-of-learning policy and receive sustainable support from stakeholders (Makunja, 2016).

5.2. Sociocultural Challenges

Indonesia is a developing country whose society is transitioning away from traditionally feudal beliefs and practices and where harmony is prioritized at the expense of constructive criticism. Gaps exist between levels of a hierarchy, such as between the headmaster and the teacher and between the headmaster and the education office; this means that bottom-up criticism is rare, and one fears the negative consequences of engaging in such criticism. Therefore, the present study is a crucial one because it amplifies voices that have hitherto been unheard. A hierarchical school culture where courtesy is prioritized over honesty critically impedes the freedom-of-learning curriculum reform, which emphasizes the spirit of democracy in education. Such a school culture is also linked to the conception of the teacher as a disciplinarian and the student as a passive recipient of knowledge. Park and Sung (2013) argued that sociocultural constraints affect not only schools but also the progress of reform.

The failure of a curriculum reform is often related to the reluctance of teachers to implement essential curriculum requirements per the curriculum developers' intention. However, the assumption that curricula are not directly correlated with instruction has substantially contributed to the failure of reforms. Therefore, to overcome these constraints, curriculum theorists have reconceptualized the curriculum as a series of actions that allow student learning to occur in a given culture. Based on this premise, a curriculum reform program should account for the teachers, students, and culture associated with the place where learning occurs.

Numerous researchers have reported on the necessity of implementing democratic education, and to shift away from the traditional model; thus, adaptation is required. However, success can only be achieved with effective teacher coaching or training. In the absence of any consideration of actual constraints, reforms that imbue a democratic spirit to education cannot be realized precisely by teachers and may even be resisted. Anne is a teacher who expressed optimism about the freedom-of-learning curriculum reform, but she also had some criticisms of it; she questioned the commitment of the government in monitoring the reform in aspects such as the evaluation of constraints. She also complained about the likelihood of poor performance among teachers who are reluctant to upgrade themselves. Anne's closing comment was as follows:

We must be granted freedom in an education environment because each school is unique; thus, flexibility must be given to determine the best learning process but under the supervision and direction of the government. In my opinion, this policy is linked to learning that is based on the multiple intelligences of individuals, who include our students; therefore, an educator must design learning that can promote students' multiple intelligences such that effective and fun learning achieved for these students (in this scenario, the supervision of the government is still required to ensure the responsible exercise of this freedom). Teachers also need space to be able to actively

and creatively contribute to the curriculum that is being implemented, that is, teachers can freely make lesson plans that suit their education environment; this is also closely related to the conditions of an education environment such as the availability of facilities, prevailing culture, and technology. In addition, because teachers always look at grades, the parents or guardians of students must also be educated to help them develop a proactive attitude and understand policies (Anne).

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Curriculum reform is an ongoing process. Our study findings indicated that Indonesian teachers were generally critical of such reform, and this should be a concern for the government. Teachers' beliefs and understanding of a reform are key to its success. In this study, some studies were pessimistic about the reform's prospects whereas others were optimistic. Nevertheless, they all highlighted the same constraints and problems, indicating the presence of challenges to the implementation of the policy. Therefore, curriculum developers should respond prudently to these constraints to close the gap between conceptualization and implementation in schools.

Thus, the present study identified crucial challenges that ought to be examined. First, teacher competence should be improved; this was highlighted by all participants, who indicated that teacher certification had no substantial effect. In addition, the training that teachers received was implemented haphazardly and had no follow-up. As such, the participating teachers expressed a desire for the driving teacher program to be implemented effectively. Second, a good academic climate has not been established among teachers, and had unaligned perceptions regarding this reform. This indicates that the government has not socialized the policy in schools. Third, the presence of sociocultural barriers hampers the attainment of freedom-of-learning curriculum reform, which emphasizes a democratic climate in schools. The education environment is still under the influence of a conservative culture and an emphasis on rote learning. Some teachers were even unable to clearly explain differences between the freedom-of-learning curriculum reform policy and the previous policy.

Therefore, the following recommendations are proposed. (1) The ongoing driving teacher program must be implemented effectively and, in a manner, different from prior programs, which prioritized formality and administration. (2) The socialization of the freedom-of-learning curriculum reform policy must be conceptualized and systematic such that teachers develop a clear understanding of the policy. Most of the teachers lacked a comprehensive understanding of the policy. (3) During the implementation of reforms, the government should not only focus on technical implementation but also on fundamental changes in mindset. Furthermore, cultures that work against curriculum reform are rooted at the school level and must be addressed. As a step forward, efforts should be made to involve teachers in discussions around curriculum development.

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