

Teacher Agency and Differentiated Instruction in the Implementation of Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum

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Article History Received : 05-09-2026 Revised : 29-09-2026 Published : 05-10-2026 Keywords: <i>curriculum policy, differentiated instruction, educational accountability, Merdeka Curriculum, teacher agency</i>	The Merdeka Curriculum transfers substantial design authority to schools and teachers, making its success dependent on professional judgement rather than procedural compliance, yet implementation studies consistently report differentiated instruction that exists in documentation without corresponding classroom practice. This study aims to examine how the regulatory architecture of the curriculum constructs the role of the teacher, to identify the conditions that enable or constrain the exercise of professional agency, and to formulate the realignment required between accountability arrangements and the pedagogical model the curriculum presupposes. The research employs qualitative document analysis combined with a critical policy- analysis approach based on problem representation, examining national education standards, ministerial regulations on content, process and assessment, curriculum regulation, and the governing statutes, read against theories of differentiated instruction, formative assessment, and ecological teacher agency. The findings show that the regulatory corpus constructs the teacher simultaneously as a professional exercising diagnostic judgement and as an implementer subject to documentary accountability, and enforces the second construction far more stringently than it supports the first; that differentiation is consequently reduced to documentable

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	material preparation rather than responsive adjustment grounded in formative evidence; and that agency is constrained across its iterative, practical-evaluative, and projective dimensions. The article recommends shifting supervision from planning documents to evidence of learning and teacher reasoning, genuine reduction of documentary burden defended against local reinstatement, reconstruction of professional development as sustained job-embedded support, and alignment of assessment architecture across educational levels.

I. INTRODUCTION

Curriculum reform in Indonesia has followed a recognisable cycle for more than five decades: a new national framework is announced, technical guidelines are issued, teachers are trained in cascaded workshops, and within a few years the reform is judged to have been implemented in form but not in substance. The *Kurikulum Merdeka*, introduced as a recovery instrument following the pandemic-era learning loss and subsequently established as the national curriculum, represents the most ambitious attempt yet to break this cycle.¹ Its distinguishing feature is not the reorganisation of content, which previous reforms also attempted, but the transfer of substantial design authority to the school and the teacher. Schools select the depth and sequence of learning; teachers diagnose the readiness of their students and differentiate instruction accordingly; assessment is reoriented from ranking toward the description of individual progress.²

This transfer of authority is precisely what makes the reform theoretically interesting and practically precarious. A curriculum that specifies content can be implemented through compliance; a curriculum that requires professional judgement cannot. The success of *Kurikulum Merdeka* therefore depends on a variable that Indonesian education policy has historically treated as residual rather than central: the capacity and disposition of teachers to exercise agency within the space the policy opens. Where that capacity is present, the

¹ Peraturan Menteri Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi Nomor 12 Tahun 2024 tentang Kurikulum pada Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini, Jenjang Pendidikan Dasar, dan Jenjang Pendidikan Menengah, Pasal 2–3.

² Peraturan Menteri Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi Nomor 21 Tahun 2022 tentang Standar Penilaian Pendidikan, Pasal 3–5.

policy's flexibility becomes productive. Where it is absent, flexibility produces either paralysis or the reconstruction of familiar routines under new terminology.

The ideal condition is articulated clearly enough in law. Law Number 20 of 2003 on the National Education System establishes that education must be organised democratically and equitably, attending to the diversity of learners, and that learners have the right to educational services in accordance with their talents, interests, and abilities.³ Law Number 14 of 2005 on Teachers and Lecturers positions the teacher as a professional whose work requires pedagogical, personal, social, and professional competence, and guarantees professional freedom in carrying out learning tasks.⁴ Read together, these provisions describe an education system in which differentiated instruction is not an innovation but an entitlement, and in which teacher agency is not a concession but a statutory condition of professional work.

The actual condition diverges in ways that are by now well documented. Classrooms are large and heterogeneous; the administrative burden associated with lesson documentation remains heavy despite repeated simplification; supervision practices continue to reward observable conformity to procedure; and the professional development available to most teachers takes the form of episodic, decontextualised workshops rather than sustained, job-embedded support.⁵ International evidence from teaching and learning surveys consistently finds that Indonesian teachers report comparatively high participation in professional development alongside comparatively low confidence in the specific practices differentiation, formative assessment, teaching in mixed-ability groups that the current reform requires.⁶ The gap between participation and confidence is itself a finding: it suggests that what is transmitted in training is information about the reform rather than capability within it.

Scholarly debate has approached this gap from three directions. Implementation studies, following the tradition established by the RAND change-agent research, emphasise mutual adaptation: policies are not delivered to schools but reconstructed within them, and

³ Undang-Undang Nomor 20 Tahun 2003 tentang Sistem Pendidikan Nasional, Pasal 4 ayat (1) dan Pasal 12 ayat (1) huruf b.

⁴ Undang-Undang Nomor 14 Tahun 2005 tentang Guru dan Dosen, Pasal 10 ayat (1) dan Pasal 14 ayat (1) huruf f.

⁵ Linda Darling-Hammond, Maria E. Hyler, and Madelyn Gardner, *Effective Teacher Professional Development* (Palo Alto: Learning Policy Institute, 2017), 2–14.

⁶ OECD, *TALIS 2018 Results (Volume I): Teachers and School Leaders as Lifelong Learners* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2019), 145–172.

the reconstruction is shaped by local capacity and local meaning.⁷ Policy enactment research, developed most fully by Ball and colleagues, argues that schools do not implement policy so much as translate it, and that translation is mediated by material conditions, institutional histories, and the positions of particular actors.⁸ Teacher agency research, drawing on ecological rather than individualist conceptions of agency, locates the capacity to act not in the attributes of the teacher but in the interaction between professional biography, present cultural and material conditions, and projected futures.⁹

The research gap this article addresses lies at the intersection of these literatures. Indonesian scholarship on *Kurikulum Merdeka* has been dominated by descriptive accounts of implementation readiness and by small-scale studies reporting teacher perceptions, which document the existence of difficulties without theorising their production. What is largely missing is an analysis that reads the policy architecture itself the regulations, standards, and instruments through which the reform is operationalised against a theory of agency capable of explaining why professional discretion granted on paper is not always exercisable in practice. The novelty of this article lies in that reading, and in the argument that the principal obstacle to differentiated instruction in Indonesian classrooms is not teacher resistance or deficient training content, but an unresolved contradiction within the policy architecture between the discretion the curriculum grants and the accountability regime through which schools continue to be governed.

Three research questions follow. First, how does the current regulatory architecture of *Kurikulum Merdeka* construct the role of the teacher, and what conception of professional agency does that construction presuppose? Second, what conditions enable or constrain the exercise of that agency in the enactment of differentiated instruction? Third, what reconstruction of professional development, supervision, and assessment policy would align the accountability regime with the pedagogical model the curriculum requires?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Differentiated instruction has a substantial theoretical and empirical foundation. Tomlinson's formulation, which remains the most influential, holds that teachers may differentiate content, process, product, and learning environment in response to students'

⁷ Paul Berman and Milbrey W. McLaughlin, *Federal Programs Supporting Educational Change, Vol. VIII: Implementing and Sustaining Innovations* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1978), 13–34.

⁸ Stephen J. Ball, Meg Maguire, and Annette Braun, *How Schools Do Policy: Policy Enactments in Secondary Schools* (London: Routledge, 2012), 1–14.

⁹ Mark Priestley, Gert Biesta, and Sarah Robinson, *Teacher Agency: An Ecological Approach* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 19–39.

readiness, interests, and learning profiles, while maintaining common learning goals.¹⁰ The approach is frequently misread as individualisation the preparation of a separate plan for each student and this misreading is a recurrent source of implementation failure, since individualisation is genuinely impossible in classes of thirty-five and its impossibility is then taken as proof that differentiation cannot work.¹¹ The theoretical foundation lies rather in Vygotsky's proposition that instruction is effective when it operates within the zone of proximal development, the distance between what a learner can do independently and what they can do with support.¹² Differentiation, on this reading, is the practical consequence of taking seriously the fact that this zone differs across learners in the same room.

The operational link between differentiation and learning outcomes runs through formative assessment. Black and Wiliam's review established that regular, low-stakes assessment used to adjust instruction produces learning gains of a magnitude rarely matched by other interventions, and that the effect depends on the information being used to change what happens next rather than on the act of testing itself.¹³ Wiliam's later synthesis specifies the practices involved: clarifying success criteria, engineering discussions that elicit evidence of understanding, providing feedback that moves learning forward, and activating students as instructional resources for one another and as owners of their own learning.¹⁴ These practices are recognisably the ones that *Kurikulum Merdeka* requires, which is why the reform's assessment policy and its pedagogical model must be analysed together rather than separately.

The second theoretical strand concerns teacher knowledge and agency. Shulman's account of pedagogical content knowledge demonstrates that effective teaching requires more than subject mastery and more than generic method: it requires knowledge of how particular content can be represented, what makes specific topics difficult, and what preconceptions learners bring.¹⁵ Differentiation is impossible without this knowledge,

¹⁰ Carol Ann Tomlinson, *How to Differentiate Instruction in Academically Diverse Classrooms*, 3rd ed. (Alexandria: ASCD, 2017), 1–18.

¹¹ Carol Ann Tomlinson, *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners*, 2nd ed. (Alexandria: ASCD, 2014), 30–45.

¹² Lev S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 84–91.

¹³ Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam, "Assessment and Classroom Learning," *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice* 5, no. 1 (1998): 7–74.

¹⁴ Dylan Wiliam, *Embedded Formative Assessment* (Bloomington: Solution Tree Press, 2011), 45–72.

¹⁵ Lee S. Shulman, "Those Who Understand: Knowledge Growth in Teaching," *Educational Researcher* 15, no. 2 (1986): 4–14.

because deciding how to adjust a task for a struggling learner requires understanding what specifically makes the task difficult. The ecological theory of agency then explains why possessing such knowledge is necessary but not sufficient. Drawing on Emirbayer and Mische's conception of agency as a temporally embedded process oriented simultaneously toward past habit, present judgement, and future projection, Priestley and colleagues show that teachers achieve agency rather than possess it, and that the achievement depends on conditions the individual teacher does not control.¹⁶ Where the projective dimension is thin where teachers have no articulated professional vision beyond compliance with the next inspection agency collapses into adaptation.

A third strand addresses the institutional conditions of reform. Tyack and Cuban's account of the grammar of schooling explains the durability of classroom practice: the organisational forms of age-graded classes, subject periods, and standardised examination exert a structuring force that survives successive waves of reform rhetoric.¹⁷ Ball's analysis of performativity adds a normative dimension, showing how accountability regimes reorganise professional identity around the production of measurable performances, generating what he terms values schizophrenia in practitioners required to reconcile professional judgement with audit demands.¹⁸ Fullan and Hargreaves's concept of professional capital the combination of human, social, and decisional capital offers the constructive counterpart, identifying decisional capital, the capacity to make sound judgements in non-routine situations, as the element most systematically neglected in reform investment.¹⁹

The theoretical gap this article addresses concerns the articulation between these bodies of work and the specific regulatory instruments through which Indonesian curriculum policy operates. Agency theory has been developed largely in decentralised systems where the object of analysis is school-level enactment. Indonesian curriculum policy is formally centralised in its standards and decentralised in its implementation, producing a hybrid in which the teacher is simultaneously addressed as an autonomous professional and governed as an implementer of national standards. The framework adopted here therefore combines ecological agency theory with policy enactment analysis,

¹⁶ Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische, "What Is Agency?" *American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 4 (1998): 962–1023; Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson, *Teacher Agency*, 22–30.

¹⁷ David Tyack and Larry Cuban, *Tinkering toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 85–109.

¹⁸ Stephen J. Ball, "The Teacher's Soul and the Terrors of Performativity," *Journal of Education Policy* 18, no. 2 (2003): 215–228.

¹⁹ Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan, *Professional Capital: Transforming Teaching in Every School* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2012), 79–103.

and applies both to the text of the regulatory instruments themselves, asking what problem representation those instruments encode and what subject position they construct for the teacher.²⁰

III. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs qualitative research using a document analysis design, supplemented by a critical policy analysis approach. Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating documentary material, in which the researcher examines and interprets data to elicit meaning, develop understanding, and generate empirical knowledge.²¹ The design is appropriate because the research questions concern the construction of the teacher's role within a regulatory architecture, which is a question about texts and the conditions of their enactment rather than a question about the frequency of observable behaviours.

The analytical approach draws on Bacchi's problem-representation framework, which examines policy not as a response to a pre-existing problem but as a practice that constitutes the problem in a particular way, and which asks what presuppositions underlie that constitution, what is left unproblematised, and what effects follow.²² Applied here, the framework directs attention to how curriculum regulation represents the difficulty of learning recovery, what it presupposes about teacher capacity, and what remains unaddressed within its terms.

Sources of data are organised in three categories. Primary documents comprise the regulatory instruments governing the curriculum and its associated standards: Government Regulation Number 57 of 2021 as amended by Government Regulation Number 4 of 2022 on National Education Standards; Regulation of the Minister of Education, Culture, Research and Technology Number 5 of 2022 on Graduate Competency Standards; Regulation Number 7 of 2022 on Content Standards; Regulation Number 16 of 2022 on Process Standards; Regulation Number 21 of 2022 on Assessment Standards; Regulation Number 12 of 2024 on the Curriculum; and the ministerial decrees establishing the framework for learning recovery. Statutory materials comprise Law Number 20 of 2003 and Law Number 14 of 2005. Secondary sources comprise peer-reviewed scholarship

²⁰ Carol Bacchi, *Analysing Policy: What's the Problem Represented to Be?* (Frenchs Forest: Pearson Australia, 2009), 1–24.

²¹ Glenn A. Bowen, "Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method," *Qualitative Research Journal* 9, no. 2 (2009): 27–40.

²² Bacchi, *Analysing Policy*, 2–14.

on differentiated instruction, formative assessment, teacher agency, and educational change, together with comparative reports issued by international organisations.

Analysis proceeded in four stages. First, the regulatory corpus was read in full and coded for provisions bearing on teacher discretion, differentiation, assessment, and supervision. Second, the coded provisions were examined for their implicit construction of the teacher, distinguishing passages that address the teacher as a professional exercising judgement from those that address the teacher as an implementer of specified procedure. Third, the identified constructions were tested against the theoretical framework to determine what conditions of agency each presupposes. Fourth, tensions between constructions were analysed as sites of implementation difficulty, and reconstruction proposals were derived. Credibility was pursued through source triangulation across regulatory levels and through iterative re-reading of the corpus against emerging categories.²³ The study's limitations should be stated plainly: it analyses the conditions of enactment rather than enactment itself, and its propositions about classroom practice are analytically derived rather than observationally verified.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Two Constructions of the Teacher within the Regulatory Corpus

The regulatory corpus constructs the teacher in two distinct and incompletely reconciled ways. The first construction, dominant in the curriculum and assessment regulations, addresses the teacher as a professional exercising diagnostic judgement. Assessment is to be conducted to ascertain learners' needs and to inform the design of subsequent learning; assessment results are to be reported descriptively; the teacher is expected to determine the pace and the sequencing of material according to the achievement of learners in the class.²⁴ This construction presupposes a teacher who can read evidence of learning, infer its causes, and design a response in Shulman's terms, a teacher in possession of pedagogical content knowledge, and in Priestley's terms, a teacher with a projective orientation toward what their students might become.

The second construction, dominant in the standards and quality assurance instruments, addresses the teacher as an implementer of specified procedure operating within a framework of documentary accountability. Learning must be planned, executed,

²³ John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2018), 254–270.

²⁴ Permendikbudristek Nomor 21 Tahun 2022, Pasal 3 dan Pasal 9; Permendikbudristek Nomor 16 Tahun 2022 tentang Standar Proses, Pasal 4–6.

and evaluated in accordance with process standards; planning must be documented; documentation is subject to supervision; and the school's performance is assessed against indicators that aggregate individual results.²⁵ This construction presupposes a teacher whose work can be rendered visible in advance and verified after the fact.

The two constructions are not inherently contradictory. A skilled professional can document their reasoning, and accountability for outcomes is compatible with discretion over means. The difficulty arises from the asymmetry in how the two constructions are enforced. Discretion is granted in permissive language and is unaccompanied by any mechanism that obliges the system to support its exercise. Documentary accountability is specified in mandatory language and is enforced through supervision with tangible consequences for the school and the individual. Where a permissive norm and a mandatory norm address the same actor and compete for the same finite resource the teacher's time and attention the mandatory norm will prevail. This is not a failure of teacher commitment; it is a predictable response to the incentive structure the corpus creates.

The consequence is a phenomenon that might be termed procedural differentiation: the production of documents that record differentiated planning, accompanied by classroom practice that remains substantially undifferentiated. This is the reform equivalent of what Ball describes as fabrication the generation of performances that satisfy the audit without corresponding to practice.²⁶ It is important to be precise about the moral character of this phenomenon. It is not deception by individual teachers. It is the rational output of a system that measures documentation because documentation is measurable, in a domain where the thing that matters is not.

B. The Misreading of Differentiation and Its Structural Causes

A second finding concerns the conception of differentiation circulating in implementation practice. The evidence from training materials, school-level guidance, and the scholarly literature reporting teacher perceptions points consistently toward a reading of differentiation as the preparation of separate materials for ability groups, frequently formalised as three tiers designated by readiness level. This reading is understandable, since tiering is the most concrete of Tomlinson's suggestions and the easiest to demonstrate in a document. It is nonetheless a serious reduction of the concept, with three damaging consequences.

²⁵ Peraturan Pemerintah Nomor 57 Tahun 2021 tentang Standar Nasional Pendidikan sebagaimana diubah dengan Peraturan Pemerintah Nomor 4 Tahun 2022, Pasal 12–14.

²⁶ Ball, "The Teacher's Soul," 222–226.

The first is workload. If differentiation means three sets of materials for every lesson, the practice is unsustainable in a system where teachers carry heavy teaching loads across multiple classes. Teachers correctly conclude that the requirement is impossible and comply symbolically. The second is stratification. Fixed ability grouping, particularly when it is stable across time and visible to students, produces well-documented effects on self-concept and expectation that operate against the equity purposes the reform asserts. Tomlinson's framework explicitly requires flexible grouping precisely to avoid this, but flexibility is the element most frequently lost in translation.²⁷ The third is the displacement of formative assessment. When differentiation is understood as material preparation, it becomes an activity conducted before the lesson on the basis of prior categorisation, rather than an ongoing adjustment conducted during the lesson on the basis of present evidence. This inverts the logic of the practice, and it severs differentiation from the mechanism through which its effects on learning are actually produced.²⁸

The structural cause of the misreading is instructive. Differentiation understood as responsive adjustment is difficult to document in advance, because its content is determined by what the teacher observes in the moment. Differentiation understood as material preparation is easy to document in advance, because the materials exist as artefacts. In a system governed through documentary accountability, the version of the practice that survives translation will be the documentable one. The misreading is therefore not primarily a knowledge deficit to be corrected by better training. It is an artefact of the accountability regime, and training that does not change that regime will produce teachers who understand differentiation correctly and continue to practise the documentable version.

C. Conditions of Agency: Why Discretion Is Not Exercisable

The ecological account of agency directs attention to three dimensions: the iterative, drawing on accumulated professional experience; the practical-evaluative, concerning judgement in present circumstances; and the projective, concerning orientation toward imagined futures.²⁹ Each dimension is constrained in identifiable ways within the Indonesian context.

²⁷ Tomlinson, *How to Differentiate Instruction*, 82–98.

²⁸ Black and Wiliam, "Assessment and Classroom Learning," 20–37; Wiliam, *Embedded Formative Assessment*, 105–128.

²⁹ Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson, *Teacher Agency*, 22–30; Emirbayer and Mische, "What Is Agency?" 970–1002.

The iterative dimension is constrained by the accumulated repertoire available to teachers. Most Indonesian teachers have been taught, and have taught, within a whole-class transmission model. This is not a criticism but a description of a professional inheritance, and it means the repertoire available for reconstruction under a differentiated model is thin. Reform rhetoric that treats the transmission model as simple backwardness misunderstands its function: it is a coherent adaptation to large classes, examination pressure, and limited materials, and teachers will not abandon a functioning adaptation for an unfamiliar one on the strength of a workshop.

The practical-evaluative dimension is constrained by material and temporal conditions. Judgement requires time to observe, to interpret, and to decide. Where a teacher meets each class for a limited period, teaches a large number of students across several classes, and carries a documentary burden outside teaching hours, the conditions for sustained diagnostic attention to individual learners are simply absent. It is analytically important to name this as a resource constraint rather than a capability constraint, because the two imply entirely different policy responses, and the sector has a persistent tendency to address resource constraints with training.

The projective dimension is constrained most severely, and this is the least discussed of the three. Agency in the projective register requires a professional vision an articulated sense of what one's teaching is for that extends beyond the next assessment cycle. Where professional life is organised around compliance events, and where the dominant public discourse about teaching concerns administrative status and certification, the projective dimension atrophies. Restoring it is not a matter of motivational exhortation. It requires structures in which teachers collectively deliberate about purpose: subject-based professional learning communities with protected time, sustained inquiry into their own students' learning, and genuine influence over school-level decisions.³⁰

Table 1. Dimensions of Teacher Agency and Corresponding Policy Conditions

Dimension of Agency	Enabling Condition	Current Constraint	Policy Implication
Iterative (past repertoire)	Access to worked examples of differentiated practice	Professional inheritance formed within transmission	Modelling and coaching in situ rather than lecture-based

³⁰ Hargreaves and Fullan, *Professional Capital*, 104–132; Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner, *Effective Teacher Professional Development*, 5–14.

Dimension of Agency	Enabling Condition	Current Constraint	Policy Implication
Practical-evaluative (present judgement)	in local conditions Time and class size permitting diagnostic attention	pedagogy High teaching load and documentary burden	workshops Reduction of documentation; protected planning time
Projective (future orientation)	Collective deliberation about educational purpose	Professional life organised around compliance events	Funded professional learning communities with decisional influence

Source: Author's analysis based on the ecological agency framework, 2026.

D. Realigning Accountability with Pedagogy

If the central obstacle is the contradiction between granted discretion and documentary accountability, the reconstruction required is one that changes what is inspected rather than one that exhorts teachers to be more autonomous. Four measures follow from the analysis.

The first is to shift the object of supervision from planning documents to evidence of learning and the reasoning that connects them. A supervisor who asks to see a teacher's lesson documentation obtains an artefact that can be produced without teaching. A supervisor who asks what the teacher noticed about a specific group of students last week, what they did in response, and what changed, obtains evidence of professional judgement that cannot be fabricated without actually exercising it. This is a low-cost change with substantial signalling effect, because supervision practice communicates institutional priority more reliably than policy documents do.

The second is to reduce documentary requirements to the minimum consistent with accountability, and to say so explicitly and repeatedly at every administrative level. Simplification announced centrally is frequently reversed locally, as intermediate administrative layers add requirements to demonstrate their own diligence. Central policy that does not anticipate and counteract this dynamic will be experienced by teachers as unchanged.

The third is to reconstruct professional development around sustained, job-embedded, subject-specific support. The evidence on effective professional development is unusually consistent: it is content-focused, incorporates active learning and collaboration, uses models of effective practice, provides coaching and expert support, offers feedback and reflection, and is of sustained duration.³¹ The cascade workshop model satisfies almost none of these criteria. Its persistence is explained by cost and reach rather than effect, and any honest policy discussion must confront the trade-off directly rather than assume that wide coverage of an ineffective format constitutes provision.

The fourth is to align assessment policy across levels. Teachers respond rationally to the assessment that has consequences for their students. Where formative, descriptive assessment is required at classroom level while selection into subsequent stages continues to operate through high-stakes ranked instruments, the formative regime will be subordinated to preparation for the summative one. Any serious commitment to differentiated instruction therefore has implications for the architecture of selection that extend well beyond curriculum policy.³²

E. Implications for Equity and Professional Identity

Two broader implications deserve articulation. The first concerns equity. Differentiated instruction is frequently justified as an equity measure, and correctly so in principle: a uniform pedagogy in a heterogeneous classroom systematically advantages students whose prior preparation matches the pace of instruction. But differentiation implemented without the conditions identified above can produce the opposite effect. Where differentiation becomes fixed tiering, low-attaining students receive a permanently reduced curriculum; where it becomes documentary performance, nothing changes for anyone; and where it depends on resources that are unevenly distributed across schools, it will be practised most successfully in the schools whose students need it least. The equity claim attached to the reform is therefore conditional, and the conditions are precisely the ones that current implementation arrangements do not reliably supply.

The second concerns professional identity. The deepest ambition of *Kurikulum Merdeka* is arguably not pedagogical but professional: it seeks to reconstitute the Indonesian teacher as a designer of learning rather than a deliverer of material. This is a defensible and, in the long run, necessary ambition. It cannot be achieved by regulation alone, because professional identity is formed in the daily experience of what one's work is

³¹ Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner, *Effective Teacher Professional Development*, 4.

³² Tyack and Cuban, *Tinkering toward Utopia*, 85–109.

treated as being. A teacher whose judgement is solicited in policy documents and audited in practice through documentary compliance will learn, correctly, that the audit expresses the system's real expectation. Realigning the audit with the ambition is therefore not a technical adjustment to supervision procedure. It is the substantive content of the reform.

F. Comparative Perspective and the Limits of Policy Transfer

The difficulty analysed here is not peculiar to Indonesia. Systems that have devolved curricular authority to schools have encountered a recurrent pattern: discretion granted at the level of curriculum policy is withdrawn in practice by accountability instruments that were designed for an earlier, more prescriptive settlement and were never revised alongside the reform. Comparative experience suggests three lessons of direct relevance.

The first concerns sequence. Where curricular devolution has taken hold, the reduction of prescriptive accountability preceded or accompanied the grant of discretion rather than following it. Where discretion was granted first and accountability reform deferred, the reform produced documentary compliance within a short period and then stalled. The Indonesian sequence has followed the second pattern, which indicates that the present difficulty was foreseeable rather than anomalous and that its remedy lies in the accountability layer rather than in further curricular guidance.

The second concerns the unit of professional support. Systems reporting sustained improvement in responsive pedagogy have generally organised professional learning around the school or the subject department rather than around the individual teacher, and have treated collaborative inquiry into students' work as the basic activity of professional development rather than as an optional supplement.³³ The cascade model that dominates Indonesian provision treats the individual as the unit and transmission as the mode, and is therefore misaligned with the practice it is intended to build.

The third lesson is a caution against uncritical transfer. Comparative reference points are drawn overwhelmingly from systems with smaller classes, stronger initial teacher preparation, and far greater per-student resourcing. Practices developed under those conditions cannot simply be imported. What transfers is the structural principle that accountability must be aligned with the pedagogy it is meant to support not the specific instruments through which other systems have applied it. Indonesian implementation must construct its own instruments under its own constraints, and comparative literature is most useful when it is read for mechanisms rather than for models.

³³ Hargreaves and Fullan, *Professional Capital*, 104–132.

A final observation concerns time horizons. Reform of professional practice is slow because it depends on the accumulation of repertoire, and repertoire accumulates through cycles of attempt, feedback, and refinement that cannot be compressed. Policy cycles in Indonesia have historically been shorter than the interval required for such accumulation, with the result that each reform is evaluated before its conditions have been established and is then replaced on the strength of that premature evaluation. Protecting the reform from this dynamic by committing to a stable framework over a defined period while reforming the accountability layer within it may matter more to the outcome than any further refinement of curricular guidance.

V. CONCLUSION

This article has examined why the professional discretion granted by *Kurikulum Merdeka* has proved difficult to exercise, and has located the explanation in the architecture of the policy rather than in the disposition of teachers. In response to the first research question, the regulatory corpus constructs the teacher in two competing ways as a professional exercising diagnostic judgement and as an implementer subject to documentary accountability and enforces the second more stringently than it supports the first. In response to the second, the exercise of agency is constrained across all three of its temporal dimensions: a professional repertoire formed within transmission pedagogy, material conditions that do not permit sustained diagnostic attention, and a professional life organised around compliance rather than deliberation about purpose. In response to the third, realignment requires shifting the object of supervision from documents to evidence of learning and teacher reasoning, genuinely reducing documentary burden and defending that reduction against local reinstatement, reconstructing professional development as sustained and job-embedded support, and aligning the assessment architecture across levels so that formative practice is not subordinated to high-stakes selection.

The theoretical implication is that agency-based analyses of curriculum reform must attend to accountability regimes as constitutive rather than contextual. A policy that grants discretion while auditing compliance has not granted discretion in any operative sense, and analyses that treat the resulting practice as teacher resistance mislocate the causal mechanism. The practical implications are addressed to policymakers, who should treat documentary reduction and supervision reform as core reform instruments rather than administrative housekeeping; to school leaders, who exercise decisive influence over whether protected collaborative time exists; and to teacher educators, who should treat the

diagnostic reading of student work as a central rather than peripheral component of preparation.

Further research should pursue three directions. Classroom observational studies are needed to establish the relationship between documented and enacted differentiation, since the present analysis derives that relationship rather than observing it. Longitudinal study of schools that have sustained collaborative professional structures would clarify which conditions are necessary and which merely helpful. And comparative analysis of systems that have decoupled supervision from documentary compliance would supply evidence on the durability of the effects such decoupling is expected to produce.

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