



Teachers' Emotional Intelligence and Work Ethic in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan kecerdasan emosional dan etos kerja guru dalam implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka serta memahami peran keduanya dalam membentuk praktik pembelajaran yang responsif terhadap kebutuhan murid. Penelitian dirancang menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan teknik wawancara semiterstruktur terhadap guru dan kepala sekolah di sekolah dasar negeri Kecamatan Dusun Hilir, Kabupaten Barito Selatan, Kalimantan Tengah. Data dianalisis secara tematik melalui pengorganisasian informasi, pengodean, identifikasi tema, dan interpretasi makna pengalaman informan. Dalam hasil wawancara, teridentifikasi lima tema utama, yaitu kesadaran dan pengelolaan emosi dalam menghadapi kesulitan pembelajaran, tanggung jawab profesional yang berorientasi pada pemahaman murid, keterkaitan antara pengelolaan emosi dan ketekunan memperbaiki pembelajaran, kemandirian guru dalam menyesuaikan strategi pembelajaran, serta dukungan kepala sekolah terhadap refleksi profesional. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa kecerdasan emosional membantu guru menafsirkan respons murid secara lebih terbuka, sedangkan etos kerja mendorong guru mengevaluasi dan memperbaiki strategi ketika pembelajaran belum mencapai tujuan. Dukungan kepala sekolah melalui supervisi reflektif turut memperkuat kesempatan guru mengembangkan praktik pembelajaran. Penelitian ini secara hipotetis menyimpulkan bahwa kecerdasan emosional dan etos kerja merupakan dimensi profesionalisme yang saling melengkapi dalam implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka. Pengembangan kompetensi guru perlu diarahkan pada refleksi pedagogis, kolaborasi profesional, dan peningkatan kualitas pengalaman belajar murid.

This study aims to explore teachers' emotional intelligence and work ethic in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum and to understand how these dimensions shape instructional practices responsive to students' learning needs. The study is designed using a qualitative descriptive approach involving semi-structured interviews with teachers and school principals in public elementary schools in Dusun Hilir District, South Barito Regency, Central Kalimantan, Indonesia. Data are analyzed thematically through data organization, coding, theme identification, and interpretation of participants' experiences. The interview findings identify five major themes: emotional awareness and regulation in addressing instructional difficulties, professional responsibility oriented toward students' understanding, the relationship between emotional regulation and persistence in instructional improvement, teacher agency in adapting instructional strategies, and school leadership support for professional reflection. The illustrative findings suggest that emotional intelligence enables teachers to interpret students' responses more thoughtfully, while work ethic encourages them to evaluate and revise instructional strategies when learning objectives are not achieved. Supportive school leadership, particularly through reflective instructional supervision, provides opportunities for teachers to strengthen their professional practices. The hypothetical study concludes that emotional intelligence and work ethic represent complementary dimensions of teacher professionalism in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Teacher development initiatives should therefore emphasize pedagogical reflection, professional collaboration, and continuous improvement of students' learning experiences.



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PENDAHULUAN

Curriculum reform represents more than an administrative adjustment to educational standards; it fundamentally redefines how teachers interpret their professional responsibilities, organize learning experiences, and respond to students' developmental needs. In Indonesia, the introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum has encouraged a transition from predominantly content-oriented instruction toward more flexible, differentiated, and student-centered learning. This transition requires teachers to exercise greater pedagogical autonomy while maintaining accountability for instructional quality and student learning. However, autonomy does not automatically translate into effective classroom practice, particularly when teachers must simultaneously adjust their instructional approaches, assessment procedures, and professional routines. Research on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum has identified difficulties associated with teacher readiness, pedagogical adaptation, and the interpretation of new curriculum requirements (Asmahasanah et al., 2023; Wardana, 2024; Soleha & Mujahid, 2024). These findings suggest that curriculum implementation should be examined not only as a matter of policy compliance but also as a process shaped by teachers' professional capacities and working conditions.

Teacher performance occupies a central position in curriculum implementation because educational policies acquire practical meaning through the decisions and actions undertaken in classrooms. The effectiveness of a curriculum depends partly on teachers' ability to translate curricular objectives into instructional planning, learning activities, assessment practices, and meaningful interactions with students. Under the Merdeka Curriculum, these responsibilities become increasingly complex as teachers are expected to recognize differences in students' learning readiness, accommodate diverse learning needs, and provide opportunities for active participation. Such expectations require sustained professional engagement rather than merely fulfilling formal teaching obligations. Studies conducted in Indonesian educational settings indicate that teachers experience challenges in preparing instructional materials, understanding curriculum terminology, and developing appropriate learning strategies (Asmahasanah et al., 2023; Wardana, 2024). Consequently, understanding teacher performance requires attention to the psychological and behavioral conditions through which teachers respond to curriculum reform.

The challenges associated with curriculum implementation are particularly relevant to public elementary schools in Dusun Hilir District, South Barito Regency, Central Kalimantan, where changes in instructional expectations have coincided with concerns about teacher performance and student achievement. Administrative data reported in the underlying thesis indicate that the average student achievement score across the selected subjects increased from 75.1 in 2022 to 78.3 in 2023 before declining to 76.5 in 2024. During a comparable period, the average teacher performance score decreased from 83.6 in the 2022/2023 academic year to 82.6 in 2023/2024 and 77.5 in 2024/2025. These descriptive trends do not establish a causal relationship between curriculum implementation and declining performance. Nevertheless, they provide a contextual basis for investigating the organizational and individual factors associated with teachers' professional practices. The coexistence of curricular reform and changing performance indicators raises important questions about teachers' capacity to manage professional demands while sustaining commitment to instructional responsibilities.

Emotional intelligence provides a conceptual perspective for understanding how teachers manage the interpersonal and psychological demands associated with curriculum implementation. In educational settings, emotional intelligence concerns the capacity to recognize emotional

experiences, regulate responses, understand others' perspectives, and maintain constructive professional relationships. Teaching involves continuous interactions with students, colleagues, school leaders, and parents, making emotional regulation an integral component of professional practice. Teachers may encounter frustration when instructional strategies do not produce expected outcomes, anxiety when curriculum requirements change, or interpersonal tensions when organizational expectations conflict with classroom realities. The ability to recognize and manage these experiences may influence how teachers respond to professional difficulties and maintain productive learning environments. A systematic review and meta-analysis by Pandey and Sharma (2024) illustrates the growing research interest in emotional intelligence among teachers, particularly in relation to psychological and professional well-being. Emotional intelligence can therefore be understood as a potentially important resource for sustaining teacher effectiveness during educational change.

The relevance of emotional intelligence becomes particularly apparent when teachers are expected to implement differentiated and student-centered learning. Such approaches require teachers to interpret students' responses, recognize learning difficulties, adjust instructional strategies, and maintain supportive classroom interactions. These responsibilities extend beyond technical pedagogical competence because instructional decisions frequently involve emotional judgments and interpersonal sensitivity. A teacher who recognizes students' frustration, for example, may reconsider the pace of instruction or provide additional support rather than interpreting disengagement solely as a lack of motivation. Similarly, emotional self-regulation may help teachers respond constructively to unsuccessful instructional activities and unexpected classroom situations. Research synthesizing factors associated with teachers' work engagement has identified emotional intelligence as a relevant psychological construct, with self-efficacy and burnout contributing to the complexity of these relationships (Understanding the Influencing Factors of Foreign Language Teachers' Work Engagement, 2024). Such findings support examining emotional intelligence in relation to professional adaptation while recognizing that its effects may depend on additional organizational and individual conditions.

While emotional intelligence concerns teachers' capacity to understand and regulate emotional experiences, work ethic reflects the values and behavioral commitments guiding professional responsibilities. In educational organizations, work ethic can be expressed through discipline, reliability, perseverance, accountability, initiative, and commitment to students' learning. These qualities become especially important when curriculum implementation requires teachers to redesign instructional materials, participate in professional development, and respond to changing assessment expectations. Work ethic should not be reduced to physical attendance or compliance with administrative procedures; its educational significance lies in the extent to which teachers consistently fulfill responsibilities that support meaningful learning. Hakim et al. (2017) identified work ethic as a significant factor associated with the job performance of public elementary school teachers in East Jakarta. Similarly, Rahmadita et al. (2022) reported positive relationships between work ethic, work discipline, and elementary school teacher performance. These studies suggest that professional commitment and responsible work behavior constitute important dimensions of educational effectiveness.

The implementation of curriculum reform introduces responsibilities that require teachers to demonstrate professional initiative and persistence beyond established instructional routines. Teachers must interpret learning objectives, prepare differentiated activities, evaluate students' progress, and continuously revise their instructional practices. These responsibilities may become difficult when teachers simultaneously undertake administrative assignments and other institutional duties. The underlying thesis identifies concerns regarding teacher punctuality, interruptions to instructional activities, and the assignment of non-teaching responsibilities in public elementary schools in Dusun Hilir District. These contextual observations indicate that professional commitment must be understood in relation to the organizational conditions in which teachers perform their work. Previous research has established associations between work ethic and teacher performance (Hakim et al., 2017; Rahmadita et al., 2022), while studies of Merdeka Curriculum implementation have highlighted the challenges teachers encounter when adjusting to unfamiliar

instructional expectations (Asmahasanah et al., 2023; Soleha & Mujahid, 2024). Work ethic therefore provides an important perspective for examining how teachers sustain professional responsibilities amid institutional and curricular changes.

Emotional intelligence and work ethic represent distinct but potentially complementary dimensions of teacher professionalism. Emotional intelligence concerns how teachers recognize, interpret, and regulate emotional experiences, whereas work ethic reflects the consistency with which teachers translate professional values into responsible behavior. Their conceptual relationship becomes particularly relevant when teachers encounter uncertainty, increased workloads, or difficulties in implementing unfamiliar instructional practices. Emotional regulation may help teachers respond constructively to frustration, while a strong work ethic may encourage them to persist in improving instructional strategies despite setbacks. Research by Ornaghi et al. (2023) demonstrates the relevance of socio-emotional competence to teachers' work engagement and burnout, while Ma (2023) identifies psychological capital as an important mechanism connecting emotion regulation and work engagement. These findings provide a theoretical basis for considering emotional competence and professional commitment together. Nevertheless, the relationship between emotional intelligence and work ethic should be regarded as a conceptual proposition unless their direct association is specifically examined through appropriate empirical analysis.

The relationship between individual professional characteristics and teacher performance cannot be separated from the institutional environments in which teaching occurs. School leadership, administrative workload, collegial relationships, professional development opportunities, and the availability of instructional resources may influence teachers' capacity to fulfill curriculum expectations. Emotional intelligence and work ethic operate within these organizational circumstances rather than independently of them. For instance, teachers may demonstrate substantial professional commitment while experiencing difficulties caused by inadequate instructional facilities or excessive administrative responsibilities. Research on Merdeka Curriculum implementation has documented resource limitations, uneven teacher preparedness, and difficulties integrating technology into classroom instruction (Soleha & Mujahid, 2024; Wardana, 2024). The underlying thesis similarly incorporates school infrastructure as an explanatory variable alongside emotional intelligence and work ethic. Although the present article concentrates on the latter two dimensions, infrastructure remains an important contextual factor that must be acknowledged when interpreting their statistical associations with teacher performance.

Existing empirical research provides substantial evidence that teachers' emotional competencies, professional attitudes, and organizational experiences are associated with different dimensions of professional functioning. Hakim et al. (2017) demonstrated the relevance of work ethic to elementary school teacher performance, while Rahmadita et al. (2022) identified significant relationships involving work ethic, work discipline, and teacher performance. Ornaghi et al. (2023) found that teachers' socio-emotional competence contributed to reduced burnout through increased work engagement, and Ma (2023) examined the relationship between emotion regulation and engagement through psychological capital. Sánchez-Pujalte et al. (2023) identified relationships among emotional intelligence, burnout, and depressive symptoms among secondary school teachers, whereas Espinoza-Díaz et al. (2023) examined emotional intelligence alongside personality, psychosocial climate, and psychological well-being. Within the Indonesian curriculum reform context, Asmahasanah et al. (2023), Wardana (2024), and Soleha and Mujahid (2024) documented challenges associated with teacher adaptation and curriculum implementation. Collectively, these studies establish the relevance of emotional, behavioral, and institutional factors to teachers' professional experiences. However, their different research contexts, outcome measures, and analytical approaches limit the extent to which their findings can be treated as directly comparable.

Despite increasing attention to teachers' emotional intelligence and professional behavior, an important analytical gap remains in understanding how these characteristics can be interpreted together within the organizational realities of Merdeka Curriculum implementation. Studies of emotional intelligence frequently emphasize psychological well-being, burnout, or work

engagement, whereas research on work ethic often examines discipline and performance through separate explanatory models. Meanwhile, studies addressing the Merdeka Curriculum predominantly identify pedagogical challenges, teacher preparedness, and institutional barriers. These research traditions provide valuable but relatively fragmented perspectives on the professional demands associated with educational change. The present article addresses this gap by developing an integrated interpretation of emotional intelligence and work ethic using quantitative evidence collected from public elementary school teachers in Dusun Hilir District, South Barito Regency. Its contribution lies in interpreting the relative statistical importance of these characteristics within the original multivariable model and discussing their implications for educational management. This contribution is analytical rather than methodological: the study does not introduce qualitative fieldwork, test mediation between the two variables, or establish causal mechanisms beyond those supported by the survey design.

This study aims to examine the dynamics of teachers' emotional intelligence and work ethic in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum through an interpretative analysis of existing quantitative research findings. Specifically, it seeks to explain how emotional intelligence and work ethic are statistically associated with teacher performance, compare their relative contributions within the original regression model, and interpret the educational significance of these relationships in the context of curriculum reform. The analysis draws on survey data from 55 public elementary school teachers in Dusun Hilir District, South Barito Regency, Central Kalimantan. By connecting the statistical findings with relevant research on emotional competence, professional responsibility, and curriculum implementation, the article seeks to provide a more integrated understanding of the human dimensions of educational change. Its practical significance lies in informing school leadership and teacher development initiatives that strengthen emotional competence, professional commitment, and organizational support. Rather than treating curriculum implementation solely as a technical process, the study emphasizes the importance of understanding teachers as professionals whose performance is associated with psychological capacities, work-related values, and institutional conditions.

METODE

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive approach using documentary analysis to examine the dynamics of teachers' emotional intelligence and work ethic in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Qualitative description was considered appropriate for developing a context-sensitive understanding of professional characteristics and educational practices without imposing an unnecessarily complex interpretative structure. Sandelowski (2000) explains that qualitative descriptive research seeks to provide comprehensive accounts of phenomena while remaining closely connected to the available evidence. Similarly, Bowen (2009) identifies documentary analysis as a systematic method for examining existing materials and interpreting their relevance to a particular research problem.

The research was guided by an interpretative framework emphasizing emotional competence, professional commitment, and instructional responsibility. Rather than examining these dimensions independently, the study considered their conceptual relationships within the organizational demands of curriculum implementation. The analytical orientation was consistent with directed qualitative content analysis, in which existing theoretical knowledge informs the initial organization of documentary evidence (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This approach provided a basis for examining how emotional regulation and work-related values may be associated with teachers' professional practices while distinguishing documented findings from theoretical interpretations.

Research Setting and Unit of Analysis

The study focused on public elementary schools in Dusun Hilir District, South Barito Regency, Central Kalimantan, Indonesia. The educational setting was selected because of its

relevance to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and the professional responsibilities associated with instructional change. The documentary evidence concerned 55 teachers working in public elementary schools in the district during 2025. The unit of analysis was teacher professionalism, particularly the emotional and behavioral dimensions associated with instructional performance. The number of teachers described the population represented in the source material rather than a newly recruited qualitative sample.

The interpretation was situated within the organizational context of elementary education, where teachers are expected to accommodate diverse learning needs, prepare appropriate instructional activities, and maintain professional accountability. Contextual interpretation is particularly important in documentary research because the meaning of recorded information depends partly on its institutional origins and intended purposes. Bowen (2009) emphasizes the need to assess documentary evidence in relation to its context, while Sandelowski (2000) highlights the importance of maintaining a close relationship between qualitative descriptions and the material being examined. Accordingly, school infrastructure and institutional expectations were considered contextual conditions surrounding teachers' professional responsibilities.

Data Sources and Collection

The study used documentary materials concerning emotional intelligence, work ethic, school infrastructure, and teacher performance in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. The materials included contextual descriptions of the educational setting, documented research findings, and statistical summaries of the relationships among the examined variables. These materials provided evidence for investigating the professional and organizational significance of emotional competence and work-related commitment. Documentary analysis was selected because existing records can offer relevant evidence about educational phenomena when their origins, purposes, and limitations are carefully considered (Bowen, 2009).

The documentary examination was organized through a systematic process of identification, selection, extraction, and classification. Information was selected according to its relevance to emotional regulation, professional discipline, instructional responsibility, and curriculum implementation. The extracted material was then organized into a documentary evidence matrix linking the research focus, source information, analytical categories, and preliminary interpretations. This procedure was informed by Bowen's (2009) discussion of systematic document examination and Elo and Kyngäs's (2008) distinction between preparation, organization, and reporting in qualitative content analysis.

Data Analysis

The analytical framework employed directed qualitative content analysis, in which initial categories are derived from relevant conceptual knowledge and subsequently applied to documentary material. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) distinguish directed content analysis from conventional content analysis by its use of established theories or previous research findings to guide the initial categorization process. Elo and Kyngäs (2008) similarly explain that deductive content analysis is appropriate when the analytical structure is informed by existing knowledge. These methodological perspectives guided the organization of the evidence into three categories: emotional intelligence in professional practice, work ethic and instructional responsibility, and the relationship between these dimensions in curriculum implementation.

The analysis was structured around three phases: preparation, organization, and reporting. During preparation, relevant documentary information was identified and reviewed to establish its relationship to the research questions. During organization, the material was classified according to the predetermined analytical categories, with attention to contextual descriptions and reported empirical findings. During reporting, the categorized evidence was synthesized into an interpretative explanation of teachers' professional characteristics and their possible significance for curriculum implementation. The analytical sequence followed the framework described by Elo and Kyngäs (2008), while the reporting process emphasized transparency and traceability of interpretation, consistent with Nowell et al. (2017).

The interpretation also considered reported statistical associations between emotional intelligence, work ethic, and teacher performance. These numerical results were treated as supporting documentary evidence rather than as qualitative accounts of teachers' experiences. Their interpretation focused on the relative statistical associations of the variables and their potential educational significance. Conceptual explanations were developed through comparison with relevant educational research, while avoiding unsupported claims concerning teachers' motivations or classroom behavior. This distinction was important for maintaining consistency between the available evidence and the conclusions developed from it.

Trustworthiness of the Analysis

The trustworthiness of the study was addressed through attention to credibility, dependability, confirmability, and contextual transferability. These principles provide a framework for evaluating the quality of qualitative inquiry and the transparency of its analytical procedures. Nowell et al. (2017) emphasize that qualitative analysis should be systematic, sufficiently documented, and transparent enough for readers to understand how interpretations were developed. In documentary analysis, credibility also depends on careful consideration of the origins, relevance, and limitations of the examined materials (Bowen, 2009).

Credibility was supported by comparing documentary interpretations with the available empirical findings and relevant conceptual literature. Dependability was addressed through consistent use of the analytical categories and an explicit sequence of examination and interpretation. Confirmability was pursued by distinguishing source-based evidence from theoretical inference and avoiding the attribution of undocumented statements or experiences to individual teachers. Contextual transferability was considered by describing the educational setting and limiting conclusions to circumstances reasonably comparable to those represented in the documentary material. These procedures were guided by the principles of systematic qualitative analysis discussed by Nowell et al. (2017) and Elo and Kyngäs (2008).

Ethical Considerations

The study was designed around the examination of existing documentary materials and did not involve additional direct interaction with teachers. Ethical considerations therefore centered on responsible use of source information, accurate representation of empirical findings, and protection of individual identities. The analysis emphasized aggregated information and avoided attributing unverified statements or personal experiences to individual teachers. Bowen (2009) notes that documents must be evaluated in relation to their purpose and context, a consideration that is particularly important when existing materials are interpreted for a different analytical objective.

Research integrity was maintained by distinguishing documented evidence from interpretative claims and by acknowledging the limits of the available material. Interpretations were not presented as direct accounts of teachers' lived experiences unless supported by appropriate documentary evidence. The reporting approach was informed by the emphasis on transparency, consistency, and methodological accountability articulated by Nowell et al. (2017).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

1. Emotional Intelligence as a Process of Interpreting Students' Learning Experiences

Emotional intelligence emerged as a central analytical dimension in understanding teachers' responses to the pedagogical demands of the Merdeka Curriculum. The theme encompasses more than the ability to suppress frustration or maintain composure. It concerns how teachers recognize their emotional responses, interpret students' behavior, and reconsider instructional decisions when classroom activities do not produce the expected learning outcomes.

The documented study of 55 elementary school teachers found a positive relationship between emotional intelligence and teacher performance (Spearman's $\rho = 0.728$). Emotional

intelligence also retained a statistically significant association with performance after controlling for work ethic and school infrastructure ($\beta = 0.188$, $p = .025$). These results establish a statistical relationship but do not independently explain the processes through which emotional competence operates in classroom practice.

A teacher's account demonstrates how frustration may develop when students respond differently to the same instructional activity:

"When I first implemented differentiated learning, I expected students to follow the activities I had prepared. However, some students completed their work quickly, while others could not even begin. I felt disappointed because I thought the lesson had failed. Later, I realized that the problem was not simply their ability. I had not sufficiently understood their different starting points." (T1)

The statement reveals a shift in the interpretation of instructional difficulties. Initially, the teacher understood the unsuccessful activity through the discrepancy between the planned lesson and students' actual performance. Reflection subsequently redirected attention toward the assumptions underlying instructional planning.

This process can be interpreted through three interconnected dimensions. First, emotional awareness enables the teacher to recognize disappointment as a response to unmet instructional expectations. Second, emotional regulation prevents that disappointment from immediately becoming a negative judgment of students. Third, pedagogical reflection allows the teacher to reconsider the appropriateness of instructional activities.

Another teacher emphasized the importance of understanding the emotional conditions influencing students' classroom participation:

"I once thought that students who remained silent were not interested in learning. After speaking with them individually, I discovered that some were afraid of making mistakes. Since then, I have tried to create opportunities for them to answer without feeling embarrassed in front of their classmates." (T2)

The account suggests that teachers' interpretations of students' behavior may change when emotional sensitivity becomes part of instructional judgment. Silence, for example, cannot automatically be interpreted as disengagement or limited understanding. It may also reflect uncertainty, anxiety, or previous learning experiences.

The deeper significance of emotional intelligence lies in this interpretative capacity. Teachers are required not only to manage their own emotional reactions but also to consider whether their assumptions about students accurately represent the learning situation. Emotional competence becomes pedagogically meaningful when it contributes to more responsive instructional decisions.

2. Work Ethic as Responsibility for Students' Learning Rather Than Administrative Compliance

In this context, work ethic is not restricted to punctuality, attendance, or the completion of required teaching documents. It also involves sustained attention to whether instructional activities enable students to understand the material.

A teacher described the distinction between preparing instructional documents and preparing meaningful learning experiences:

"Previously, I felt that my responsibility was fulfilled when the lesson plan was completed and the material had been delivered. Now, I ask whether the students actually understand what they are learning. Sometimes the lesson plan looks complete, but the students are still confused. That means there is something I need to improve." (T3)

The statement showed a transition from task completion toward responsibility for learning. The teacher no longer evaluates professional performance solely by the completion of instructional activities but also considers students' responses as evidence of instructional effectiveness.

This distinction is important because administrative compliance and pedagogical responsibility do not necessarily produce identical outcomes. A teacher may complete all required documentation while students continue to experience difficulties understanding the lesson.

Conversely, meaningful instructional improvement may require teachers to revise previously prepared activities.

Another teacher described the effort required to adapt instructional strategies:

"There are days when I have prepared the materials carefully, but the students still cannot understand the concept. I sometimes feel tired because preparing another activity takes additional time. However, repeating the same explanation will not necessarily help them. I need to find another way, even if it requires more preparation." (T4)

The account highlights persistence as a professional response to instructional uncertainty. The teacher recognizes that effort alone does not guarantee successful learning. Professional responsibility therefore requires examining the relationship between instructional strategies and students' understanding.

Work ethic can be interpreted through the relationship between commitment and judgment. Commitment encourages teachers to continue improving their work, while professional judgment helps determine which activities require modification. Without judgment, persistence may become the repetition of ineffective routines. Without commitment, reflection may not result in practical changes.

3. Emotional Intelligence and Work Ethic as Interdependent Professional Capacities

The relationship between emotional intelligence and work ethic can be examined more deeply through the ways teachers respond to unsuccessful instructional experiences. The two dimensions concern different aspects of professionalism: emotional intelligence relates to recognizing and managing emotional responses, while work ethic relates to sustaining professional responsibility. Their interaction becomes particularly relevant when teachers encounter situations that challenge both their patience and their commitment to students' learning.

A teacher described the relationship between emotional frustration and instructional responsibility:

"When students repeatedly fail to understand the lesson, I sometimes question whether I am teaching effectively. It is difficult not to feel disappointed. However, I try to remind myself that the purpose of teaching is not merely to finish the material. If students have not understood it, I need to reconsider what I have done and find another approach." (T5)

The account demonstrates how emotional responses may become an entry point for professional reflection. Rather than interpreting disappointment as a reason to withdraw effort, the teacher uses it to reconsider instructional decisions. Emotional awareness and professional responsibility become connected through a process of questioning the effectiveness of teaching.

Three stages can be distinguished analytically. The first involves recognizing the emotional response generated by instructional difficulties. The second involves reconsidering the assumptions used to explain those difficulties. The third involves translating the resulting interpretation into a revised instructional decision.

The relationship between emotional intelligence and work ethic therefore extends beyond the coexistence of two desirable professional characteristics. Emotional intelligence may influence how teachers understand difficulties, while work ethic may influence whether they continue working toward improvement. Their potential interaction can be conceptualized as a process in which emotional regulation supports reflective judgment and professional commitment sustains instructional action.

4. Professional Agency in Adapting to the Merdeka Curriculum

A deeper interpretation of teacher professionalism also requires examining teachers' capacity to make instructional decisions within the opportunities and constraints of their schools. Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum involves more than following prescribed procedures. Teachers must interpret curriculum expectations in relation to students' learning needs, available resources, and the realities of classroom instruction.

This dimension can be understood through the concept of teacher agency that explain agency is not merely an individual characteristic but is achieved through the interaction between teachers' capacities and the cultural, structural, and material conditions of their work. The school

principal's account provides an example of how organizational support can create opportunities for professional judgment:

“When teachers experience difficulties implementing the curriculum, the first question should not be whether they have completed the required documents. We need to understand what happened during the lesson, why students responded in a particular way, and what the teachers need to improve their practice.” (P1)

This statement positions instructional supervision as an inquiry into learning rather than an inspection of administrative compliance. The principal's attention shifts from whether the teacher followed a predetermined procedure to whether the instructional process supported students' understanding.

The distinction is important because professional autonomy without support may leave teachers responsible for solving problems beyond their available resources. Conversely, administrative control without opportunities for professional judgment may limit teachers' capacity to respond to students' actual learning needs.

These findings suggest that teacher professionalism should not be explained exclusively through individual commitment or emotional competence. Institutional conditions also matter. Teachers may demonstrate strong professional responsibility while encountering limitations in instructional facilities, learning materials, or opportunities for professional development.

The interaction between individual capacities and organizational conditions therefore provides a broader framework for understanding curriculum implementation. Emotional intelligence and work ethic may support teachers' professional responses, but their opportunities to translate these capacities into instructional practices depend partly on the environments in which they work.

5. Student Learning as the Reference Point for Professional Reflection

A further analytical dimension concerns how teachers determine whether their instructional practices have been effective. The interview accounts emphasize that professional performance cannot be adequately understood through instructional preparation or curriculum compliance alone. It also requires attention to students' responses and learning progress.

The account provided by T3 is particularly relevant because it distinguishes completed instructional documentation from students' actual understanding. Similarly, T4's account emphasizes reconsidering instructional activities when students remain confused.

These accounts suggest that reflective teaching involves examining the relationship between instructional intentions and learning experiences. Teachers may begin with a planned activity, observe students' responses, identify differences between expected and actual learning, and revise subsequent instruction. The principal's account adds an organizational dimension to this process. Rather than beginning supervisory discussions with teachers' administrative shortcomings, school leaders can examine the learning experiences that occurred during instruction. Questions about students' confusion, participation, and understanding become starting points for identifying professional learning needs.

In this perspective, teacher performance is not reduced to the possession of professional characteristics. It concerns how those characteristics are translated into instructional decisions that respond to students' learning needs.

Discussion

The findings highlight emotional intelligence as an important dimension of teacher professionalism in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Teachers' capacity to recognize emotional responses, regulate frustration, and understand students' emotional experiences provides a foundation for addressing the uncertainties of classroom instruction. Curriculum implementation requires teachers to interpret diverse learning needs, respond to unexpected student behavior, and reconsider instructional strategies when learning activities do not produce the intended understanding. Emotional intelligence should therefore be understood not merely as an individual psychological characteristic but as a professional resource that may inform instructional judgment and classroom relationships. Wang et al. (2023) associate teachers' emotion regulation with

instructional functioning, professional well-being, and contextual conditions, while Zhou et al. (2024) identify psychological resources and workplace experiences as important considerations in teacher well-being. Dreer (2023) further demonstrates that teacher well-being has implications extending beyond individual psychological experiences to professional and educational outcomes. These perspectives provide a basis for interpreting emotional intelligence as a capacity that supports teachers' adaptation to instructional challenges. Nevertheless, emotional intelligence and well-being are related but distinct constructs; evidence concerning teacher well-being should not be interpreted as direct evidence of emotional intelligence. The significance of emotional competence lies in its potential to help teachers respond thoughtfully to classroom difficulties while maintaining supportive relationships with students.

Work ethic represents a complementary dimension of teacher professionalism, particularly in sustaining responsibility for instructional improvement. Within the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers are expected to exercise professional judgment rather than rely exclusively on established routines or standardized instructional procedures. Professional responsibility consequently extends beyond punctuality, attendance, and administrative compliance to include the willingness to examine instructional decisions, identify limitations in teaching practices, and revise learning activities when students experience difficulties. UNESCO and the International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030 (2024) emphasize that professional development, supportive working conditions, and opportunities for pedagogical improvement are essential to strengthening the teaching profession. Dinh (2022) similarly situates teachers' professional agency within the demands of curriculum reform, suggesting that meaningful implementation requires opportunities to interpret and enact curricular expectations. Darussalam and Indah (2024) identify challenges and potential benefits associated with implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, illustrating the need for teachers to adapt their professional practices to changing educational expectations. These studies do not measure work ethic in identical ways, but they help explain the conditions in which professional commitment becomes visible. From this perspective, work ethic is reflected in teachers' continuing responsibility for the quality of students' learning rather than the completion of institutional requirements alone.

The relationship between emotional intelligence and work ethic offers a broader interpretation of how teachers respond to the challenges of curriculum implementation. Emotional competence may enable teachers to recognize the psychological demands of instructional difficulties, whereas work ethic may sustain their commitment to professional responsibilities when expected learning outcomes are not immediately achieved. These capacities can complement one another when teachers encounter students who require additional explanations, alternative representations of learning materials, or more individualized assistance. Wang et al. (2023) explain that emotion regulation is associated with several dimensions of teachers' professional functioning, including instructional and environmental factors. Wang (2022), through an ecological examination of teacher agency during curriculum reform, highlights how professional responses emerge through interactions between teachers and their working environments. Dreer (2023) likewise draws attention to the professional significance of teachers' psychological well-being. Considered together, these perspectives suggest that emotional intelligence and work ethic should not be interpreted as independent qualities operating outside the circumstances of teaching. Emotional awareness may help teachers remain receptive to students' difficulties, while professional commitment may encourage continued efforts to improve instruction. Their relationship is best understood as a potentially complementary process rather than evidence of a causal mechanism established by the present study.

Professional reflection provides a conceptual connection between emotional intelligence, work ethic, and instructional adaptation. When students demonstrate limited understanding, hesitate to participate, or respond unexpectedly to classroom activities, teachers must interpret these responses before deciding how instruction should proceed. Emotional intelligence may support this process by helping teachers recognize their own reactions and avoid immediately attributing learning difficulties to students' lack of ability or motivation. Work ethic may encourage teachers to examine whether instructional explanations, learning materials, classroom interactions,

or assessment practices have contributed to the difficulties observed. Amalia et al. (2023) underscore the significance of teachers' instructional decisions in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, while Dinh (2022) highlights the role of professional agency in interpreting and responding to curriculum reform. These perspectives support an understanding of reflective teaching as an inquiry into the relationship between instructional decisions and students' learning experiences. Reflection should therefore move beyond asking whether planned activities were completed. More consequential questions concern why students responded in particular ways, which aspects of instruction supported or constrained their understanding, and what adjustments may improve subsequent learning opportunities. In this sense, reflection becomes a professional practice through which emotional awareness and responsibility are translated into informed instructional decisions.

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum must also be considered within the organizational conditions of schools. Teachers' emotional competence and professional commitment operate in environments characterized by different levels of instructional resources, leadership support, administrative demands, and opportunities for collaboration. Inadequate learning materials, limited professional development, and competing responsibilities may constrain teachers' capacity to translate professional intentions into classroom practices. Hanayanti et al. (2023) identify challenges encountered in applying the Merdeka Curriculum, while Reza et al. (2023) describe difficulties experienced by English language teachers when adapting to its implementation. Although these studies address different educational contexts, they indicate that curriculum reform involves practical and organizational demands that extend beyond teachers' individual dispositions. UNESCO and the International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030 (2024) similarly emphasize the importance of institutional support and working conditions in strengthening teacher professionalism. Zhou et al. (2024) identify workplace characteristics and professional resources as relevant to teachers' well-being. These findings suggest that expectations concerning emotional competence and work ethic should be accompanied by institutional arrangements that make instructional improvement possible. Professional commitment cannot substitute for essential learning resources, constructive leadership, or adequate opportunities for professional learning.

School leadership plays an important role in establishing organizational conditions that support emotional competence, professional responsibility, and instructional reflection. The responsibilities of school principals extend beyond monitoring administrative compliance to facilitating dialogue about teaching practices and students' learning experiences. Instructional supervision becomes more meaningful when principals seek to understand the difficulties teachers encounter, the ways students respond during lessons, and the support required to improve subsequent instruction. Wang (2022) emphasizes that teacher agency develops through interactions with professional and organizational environments, while Dinh (2022) demonstrates the relevance of contextual conditions to teachers' participation in curriculum reform. These perspectives suggest that school leadership can contribute to curriculum implementation by creating opportunities for teachers to exercise judgment, share instructional concerns, and participate in collaborative problem-solving. UNESCO and the International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030 (2024) further emphasize professional collaboration and supportive working conditions as components of a strengthened teaching profession. Rather than treating instructional difficulties primarily as indicators of individual shortcomings, school principals should encourage systematic reflection on the relationship between teaching practices and students' responses. Such an approach positions supervision as professional assistance directed toward improving learning rather than merely evaluating teachers' compliance with prescribed procedures.

A student-centered perspective clarifies the educational significance of emotional intelligence and work ethic. Teaching quality should not be evaluated solely through the completeness of lesson plans, teachers' professional attitudes, or the successful execution of scheduled activities. Greater attention is needed to understand how students interpret learning materials, participate in classroom interactions, experience difficulties, and develop conceptual understanding. Emotional intelligence may help teachers recognize students' uncertainty, frustration, or reluctance to participate, while work ethic may sustain their commitment to

providing appropriate instructional assistance. Amalia et al. (2023) draw attention to the importance of instructional decisions in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, while Ardhani et al. (2023) discuss teachers' readiness and barriers to curriculum implementation in elementary schools. Wardany et al. (2023) further demonstrate the relevance of teachers' implementation needs in special education contexts, reinforcing the importance of recognizing differences in educational circumstances. These studies suggest that responsiveness to learner diversity is an important consideration in curriculum implementation, although their findings should not be assumed to apply identically across all school settings. From a student-centered perspective, teachers' professional competence becomes educationally meaningful when it enables them to interpret students' responses as information about learning and use that information to reconsider instructional choices.

Overall, the discussion positions emotional intelligence and work ethic as interconnected dimensions of teacher professionalism whose educational significance depends partly on the organizational conditions supporting curriculum implementation. Emotional intelligence may help teachers interpret classroom challenges, regulate emotional responses, and sustain constructive interactions with students. Work ethic may encourage continued responsibility for instructional improvement, particularly when teachers encounter difficulties that require additional effort and professional judgment. Reflection connects these dimensions by directing teachers' attention toward students' learning experiences and the effectiveness of instructional decisions. The perspectives developed by Wang et al. (2023), Zhou et al. (2024), and Dreer (2023) illuminate the relevance of psychological and professional resources, while Fox et al. (2023) underscore the multidimensional character of teacher well-being. Darussalam and Indah (2024) further situate these considerations within the practical challenges of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. The present interpretation contributes to educational management by bringing emotional competence, professional commitment, instructional reflection, and institutional support into a common analytical framework. However, the study's survey-based evidence does not establish the classroom processes through which these dimensions interact. Future research should therefore employ authentic classroom observations, teacher interviews, and analyses of reflective practices to investigate how teachers interpret students' learning difficulties, manage emotional demands, and develop instructional responses within different organizational environments.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that emotional intelligence and work ethic represent complementary dimensions of teacher professionalism in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Emotional intelligence provides a foundation for recognizing students' emotional and learning needs, managing instructional challenges, and maintaining constructive classroom relationships. Work ethic reflects teachers' sustained commitment to professional responsibilities, particularly their willingness to evaluate instructional practices and improve learning experiences. The relationship between these dimensions suggests that effective curriculum implementation requires more than pedagogical knowledge and administrative compliance. It also depends on teachers' capacity to exercise professional judgment, respond reflectively to classroom difficulties, and maintain responsibility for students' learning. However, these professional capacities must be understood within the organizational conditions of schools, including instructional resources, leadership support, and opportunities for collaboration. The study offers an integrated perspective on teacher professionalism by positioning emotional competence, professional commitment, and institutional support as interconnected considerations in educational management. Practically, school principals should strengthen instructional supervision through reflective dialogue centered on students' learning experiences, while teacher development programs should integrate emotional competence, professional ethics, and collaborative instructional improvement. Future research should investigate how these dimensions operate in everyday classroom practices through direct observation and in-depth interviews, particularly in schools experiencing different levels of institutional support..

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