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Deep Learning Practices in the Merdeka Curriculum in Elementary Schools: A Field Study at SDIT Najaahan

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to investigate the practice of immersive learning in the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools, highlighting the learning process, assessment, and documentation as key aspects that still leave gaps in curriculum implementation. This study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics of implementing immersive learning as a pedagogical practice in the context of elementary education.

Design/Methodology/Approach – This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach with a field study design. Data were collected through triangulation of methods, including observation of the learning process, semi-structured interviews, and analysis of learning documents, including teaching modules, assessment instruments, and student project results. Data were analyzed using an analytical model encompassing data reduction, data presentation, and the drawing and verification of conclusions.

Findings – The results indicate that the practice of immersive learning in the Merdeka Curriculum has been implemented effectively across aspects of the learning process and student learning outcomes, characterized by active student engagement, the use of tasks oriented towards higher-order thinking skills, collaboration, and the role of teachers as learning facilitators. However, this study also identified challenges with the consistency of portfolio documentation and the governance of learning projects, particularly in the upper grades, with implications for the ongoing monitoring of student learning progress.

Originality/Value – This study offers an empirical perspective on deep learning as a pedagogical practice in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools. The findings broaden understanding of the importance of integrating learning processes, authentic assessments, and portfolio documentation in supporting meaningful and sustainable learning, and provide practical implications for schools and teachers in strengthening the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Keywords: Merdeka Curriculum; deep learning; elementary schools; pedagogical practice; authentic assessment; learning portfolios

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Merdeka Curriculum is a strategic policy of the Indonesian government designed to address the challenges of 21st-century education through more flexible, contextual, and student-centered learning. This curriculum emphasizes strengthening essential competencies, character, and higher-order thinking skills that students need to adapt to increasingly complex social, technological, and cultural changes (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). At the elementary school level, the Merdeka Curriculum is expected to encourage learning that is not only oriented toward academic achievement, but also toward character development, independence, and critical reasoning skills from an early age.

In line with this spirit, the Merdeka Curriculum positions students as the primary subjects of learning, while teachers act as facilitators who design meaningful learning experiences. Student-centered learning is seen as capable of creating a collaborative, reflective, and conducive learning ecosystem for the development of students' full potential (Dwijayanti, 2021). In this context, learning is no longer understood as a one-way process of knowledge transfer, but rather as a dynamic, interactive process involving experience, reflection, and active student involvement in building understanding.

One approach relevant to this principle is pedagogical deep learning. Deep learning is a learning process that encourages students to understand concepts substantively, relate knowledge to real-world

contexts, and develop higher-order thinking skills, such as analysis, evaluation, and creation (Biggs, J., & Tang, 2011; Ridwan & Nasrulloh, 2022). Through deep learning, students not only memorize information but also use that knowledge reflectively and meaningfully in various situations.

In elementary education practice, deep learning in the Merdeka Curriculum is generally implemented through project- and problem-based learning, and authentic assessments that assess learning processes and outcomes holistically. This approach aligns with efforts to strengthen the Pancasila Student Profile, which emphasizes critical thinking, creativity, mutual cooperation, and independence (Inayati, 2022). However, several studies indicate that implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools still faces various challenges, particularly in teacher readiness, the consistency of authentic assessments, and the lack of optimally managed learning documentation (Arafat et al., 2025; Sucipto et al., 2024).

Several studies report that although classroom learning processes demonstrate innovative, student-centered practices, the learning process is often not systematically documented through portfolios or project documentation. Learning documentation plays a crucial role in documenting student learning progress, supporting formative assessment, and serving as a basis for teacher reflection to improve learning quality (Sucipto et al., 2024). This situation indicates a gap between the ideals of the Merdeka Curriculum and the field's learning practices, particularly in the context of in-depth learning in elementary schools.

Research on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools has been conducted from various perspectives. Inayati (2022), examines the Merdeka Curriculum conceptually as an educational policy aligned with 21st-century learning. Meanwhile, Arafat et al., (2025) and Sucipto et al., (2024) highlight the readiness of schools and teachers to adapt to curriculum changes, particularly in lesson planning and assessment. These studies show that the Merdeka Curriculum encourages more flexible, student-centered learning but still faces implementation challenges at the classroom level. Furthermore, Dwijayanti, (2021) and Ridwan & Nasrulloh (2022) emphasize the importance of learning oriented toward higher-order thinking skills and active student engagement in elementary schools.

On the other hand, several empirical studies have also examined project-based learning as a key strategy in the Merdeka Curriculum. Nurwiyati & Yulianto (2024) found that implementing Project-Based Learning (PjBL) increased student engagement and learning activities through contextual tasks. Furthermore, Zulhijrah et al., (2024) showed that PjBL contributed to increased independence and learning motivation in elementary school students. Both studies emphasize that PjBL is a key approach in responding to 21st-century learning needs, but most studies still focus on mathematical and pedagogical aspects without in-depth studies of integrated learning documentation and authentic assessment. Therefore, this study presents a comprehensive, in-depth analysis of learning practices encompassing the learning process, assessment, and documentation, as a new contribution to the literature on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools. However, most previous studies still focus on aspects of learning planning, specific learning strategies, or partial learning outcomes. Empirically examining deep learning as an integrated pedagogical practice encompassing the interrelationships between the learning process, authentic assessment, and learning documentation is still relatively limited, particularly at the elementary school level. Therefore, this research aims to fill this gap by comprehensively examining deep learning practices in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum through fieldwork in elementary schools.

In this context, SDIT Najaahan in Garut Regency is a relevant research site because the school actively implements the Merdeka Curriculum by integrating project-based learning, Islamic character values, and a deep learning approach. SDIT Najaahan emphasizes not only academic achievement but also strengthening students' character, spirituality, and social skills. The evolving learning practices at this school provide an opportunity to empirically examine how deep learning is implemented as a pedagogical practice within the Merdeka Curriculum at the elementary school level.

Based on this description, this study aims to analyze the practice of deep learning in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SDIT Najaahan. The research focuses on the learning process, teacher strategies, student learning experiences, and aspects of assessment and learning documentation. Theoretically, this research is expected to enrich the study of deep learning as a pedagogical practice within the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools. Practically, the research findings are expected to serve as a reference for schools and teachers in strengthening the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum to make it more consistent, measurable, and sustainable.

II. METHOD

This study was designed as a descriptive qualitative study to gain an in-depth understanding of the practice of deep learning in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore the processes, experiences, and meanings of learning in a natural, contextually relevant way without manipulating variables (Creswell, J. W., & Poth, 2018).

Research Design and Subject

This study was designed as a descriptive qualitative study to gain an in-depth understanding of the practice of deep learning in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore the processes, experiences, and meanings of learning in a natural, contextually relevant way without manipulating variables (Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, 2014). The research was conducted at SDIT Najaahan in Garut Regency, which was purposively selected because it has comprehensively implemented the Merdeka Curriculum and integrated project-based learning and immersive learning into its teaching and learning activities. The research subjects were selected using a purposive sampling technique, with consideration given to their direct involvement in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Subjects included the principal, first and fourth-grade teachers, and first- and fourth-grade students. The selection of these two grade levels aimed to obtain a comparative overview of immersive learning practices in the early and advanced stages of elementary education.

Research Procedures

This research was conducted in stages, with the development of research instruments comprising interview guidelines, observation sheets, and document analysis. After obtaining permission, data collection was conducted through learning observations, semi-structured interviews, and the collection of learning documents. During this process, the researcher conducted initial analysis and verified findings through triangulation and member checking. The final stage of the research involved drawing conclusions and systematically compiling a research report (Creswell, J. W., & Poth, 2018).

Data Collection Techniques

Research data were collected through triangulation, including semi-structured interviews with the principal, teachers, and students; direct observation of classroom learning; and analysis of learning documents such as teaching modules, assessment instruments, and student project results. The use of triangulation methods aimed to increase the credibility and completeness of the research data (Creswell, J. W., & Poth, 2018).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using the interactive analysis model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which comprises three main components: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing and verifying conclusions. The analysis process was carried out iteratively and continuously from the data collection stage to the preparation of the final report. Data from various sources are compared to find themes, patterns, and relationships relevant to the research focus (Creswell, J. W., & Poth, 2018).

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

This research is conducted at SDIT Najaahan, which was established in July 2008. SDIT Najaahan is a superior private school with a vision of "Better Education for Better Life", and a mission of "Creating a Qur'anic Generation and noble morals". The total number of students is 422. School activities consist of core activities Monday to Friday, and Saturday activities focus on self-development and extracurricular activities. SDIT Najaahan strives to stay up to date on educational developments and is at the forefront of implementing the curriculum in line with the direction of the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (Kemendikdasmen). Schools as formal institutions need to have clear, measurable plans for implementing each educational program (Musnaeni, 2022). The educational plan has an important sequence throughout the educational process. SDIT Najaahan strives to shape the

character of students who are not only academically intelligent but also have noble morals and love the Qur'an, which is in line with the school's vision and mission.

Figure 1. SDIT Najaahan School Environment

Furthermore, SDIT Najaahan also facilitates student self-development and skills development by organizing an extracurricular program called KBP (Talent Development Class). This KBP offers various branches, including memorization of the Quran (tahfidz), Quran Recitation (MTQ), LCC (Lecturer's Club), weaving, drawing, English Club, and various KBP sports such as silat, karate, and swimming. KBP plays a significant role in shaping student character. Extracurricular activities are an element of the school curriculum that support academic achievement and strengthen student character (Rahayu & Dong, 2023). Through participation in extracurricular activities, such as sports, arts, literature, technology, and organizations, students acquire valuable skills, including teamwork, leadership, discipline, and responsibility (Angraini et al., 2023; Iskandar et al., 2024; Manda et al., 2025).

SDIT Najaahan is an integrated Islamic elementary school with an educational orientation that builds character and literacy and strengthens 21st-century skills. Based on field findings, SDIT Najaahan has proactively adopted the merdeka curriculum. Although its implementation is still in the adoption process, there is a strong commitment from principals, teachers, and the school community to adopt a deep learning approach through a project-based learning model that focuses on student conceptual mastery, problem-solving, and independent thinking. Project-based learning is highly relevant to the Merdeka Curriculum, which, when implemented, can improve student learning outcomes (Lapase, 2021).

Figure 2. Implementation of Project-Based Learning

Figure 2 shows the learning process in a first-grade class that implements Project-Based Learning (PjBL), where students are actively involved in creating and presenting simple project products. The teacher acts as a facilitator, providing guidance and scaffolding as students explain their work to the class. This activity reflects student-centered learning, encouraging conceptual mastery through hands-on experience, developing communication skills, and cultivating reasoning and reflection from an early age.

Figure 3. Learning Process in Grade IV with Deep Learning Approach

Figure 3 depicts the learning process in grade IV, which takes place in a structured, conducive environment, with the teacher acting as a facilitator who guides students' learning activities. Learning demonstrates students' cognitive engagement through listening, taking notes, and responding to teacher directions, reflecting efforts to systematically build conceptual understanding. Orderly classroom interactions and a supportive learning environment demonstrate the implementation of learning that deepens understanding of the material, strengthens learning discipline, and develops students' thinking skills in accordance with the characteristics of grade four.

Furthermore, according to the school curriculum document, during the adaptation phase of the new curriculum approach implemented in grades 1 and 4, two grade levels adopted a deep learning approach, leading to better implementation than in other grades. Some of the learning modules used were independently created by teachers, while others were adapted from the Merdeka Mengajar platform provided by the Ministry of Education. This demonstrates a creative, adaptive process, not simply document reproduction. With government support through a platform that can be independently studied, it is hoped that teachers will be prepared and skilled at adapting to teaching and learning activities, implementing learning methods and strategies that must be tailored to students' learning needs and linking them to the Pancasila learner profile or P5 (abdul latip; frasetyo angga saputra; alia usman; abdul munim al basmelah; herdianto wahyu pratomo, 2024; Nurkhairunnisa et al., 2024; Supardi U.S. & Rosdiana Rosdiana, 2024).

The principal emphasized that the Merdeka curriculum is an opportunity to strengthen learning quality, particularly in literacy, creativity, and collaborative skills. School policy directs teachers to use exploratory, problem-based, project-oriented teaching, conducted in a fun and meaningful manner. Fun learning can make learning more meaningful and encourage students to be more active in their learning (Rohani et al., 2021). Learning that is carried out in a fun way will provide positive feedback from students, both in the process and in the learning outcomes and character that is built (Fakhrunnisa et al., 2025; R. & Bin Jamaludin, 2025). Interviews with the principal showed that the policy direction emphasizes the implementation of in-depth, independent learning and character-building to reinforce the school's vision. The principal emphasized that the school strives to provide students with space to learn in depth, engage in critical and creative thinking, and understand concepts holistically, so that the Merdeka Curriculum and deep learning are seen as aligned with the goals of meaningful, life-relevant learning.

> The school's vision is to create a learning environment that provides students with space to think deeply, critically, and creatively. We want every child to understand concepts holistically, not just memorize them. The Merdeka Curriculum and the deep learning approach are considered aligned

with the school's development direction toward meaningful, life-relevant learning. (November 25, 2025)

School support to strengthen the implementation of deep learning includes training through teacher working groups (KKG), teacher reflection forums, providing open time for project learning, and mentoring from teachers who have participated in official training from the education office.

The school provides internal training through KKG, as well as mentoring from teachers who have participated in deep learning training. Furthermore, we collaborate with supervisors and resource persons from the office to reinforce teaching practices that align with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. (November 25, 2025)

In addition to the principal, field findings indicate that teachers, particularly first and fourth-grade teachers, have a sufficient understanding of the concept of deep learning, despite challenges related to time management and the heterogeneity of student abilities. A first-grade teacher defines deep learning as learning that requires students to practice and understand it down to its roots, not just memorize it. For example, understanding animals through movement and sound, as well as being able to define and create. First-grade teachers have actively implemented project-based learning. As quoted in interviews with first- and fourth-grade teachers:

Deep learning is learning in-depth. Children need to understand the material in depth by practicing, not just memorizing. (G1, November 25, 2025)

In deep learning implementation, the PBL and PjBL models are the main strategies that encourage active student involvement. Direct instruction is used contextually as an introduction, while the learning process focuses on developing conceptual understanding through analysis, comparison, and reflection activities, so that students can understand the material in depth rather than simply passively receiving information. (G2, November 25, 2025)

Project-Based Learning aligns with the student-centered learning principles in the Merdeka Curriculum, as it provides students with opportunities to tackle real-world projects, explore their own ideas, and develop creativity and 21st-century skills. Empirical research shows that PjBL significantly supports student engagement, critical thinking skills, and academic achievement (Ayu Wulandari et al., 2025; Fariza & Kusuma, 2024; Fitriyani et al., 2023; Widodo, 2024). Observations conducted in two classes using an in-depth learning rubric indicated excellent implementation, with several specific notes. The "Observing the Learning Process" component had strong indicators, clear objectives and challenges, students actively sought information, assignments were HOTS (analyze, evaluate, create) oriented, teachers acted as facilitators, assignment differentiation, effective collaboration, and learning reflection were present. The Merdeka Curriculum was designed to encourage learning oriented toward concept mastery, scientific reasoning, and the development of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) by providing teachers with flexibility to design learning based on student characteristics (Musyaffa & Atno, 2025; Utami et al., 2024).

Document analysis showed that the learning modules were aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum elements (objectives, sequence of learning objectives, measurable activities, assessment rubrics), there was evidence of project-based learning, teacher journals showed regular formative assessments, and the learning flow tended to be meaningful and enjoyable despite the module's simple appearance. In addition, class in grade one demonstrated warm, contextual, in-depth learning initiatives that stimulated causal relationships through open-ended questions. In contrast, class in grade four demonstrated structured learning and strong but suboptimal cognitive interactions in the classroom during the P5 project portfolio. In other aspects, namely lesson plan documents, learning outcomes, and project portfolios, the quality of the documents indicated that they were already good, showing variations in achievement that were still consistent within a reasonable limit..

Discussion

Field findings indicate that SDIT Najaahan has grasped the basic principles of the Merdeka Curriculum by using a deep, meaningful, and enjoyable learning model. Teachers in first and fourth grades have adjusted learning objectives to align with learning outcomes (Kemendikbudristek, 2022), although the depth of implementation varies and depends on each teacher's classroom characteristics. This aligns with research by Rahmawati et al., (2025), who stated that applying deep learning principles

within the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools not only promotes memorization but also fosters a deeper understanding of concepts. Meaningful principles can holistically strengthen the quality of learning. They integrate material with real life, foster learning awareness, and create excitement, thus increasing student motivation.

First graders demonstrated better, more natural implementation as they engaged in projects. The initial activity involved linking learning to students' daily experiences, a strong characteristic of contextual learning. This aligns with the contextual learning perspective, which asserts that learning becomes meaningful when linked to students' daily life experiences. In this context, social interaction, reflection, and active student involvement in real-life activities serve as entry points for improving their understanding and thinking skills (Lubis et al., 2025; Suhermi et al., 2025). Similarly, field observations indicate that first-grade teachers successfully integrated elements of deep learning in functional ways.

Meanwhile, in fourth grade, the learning framework structure was quite well-structured, but the documentation aspect, namely the learning portfolio, was less prominent. The portfolio refers to the overall results of each project that has not yet been fully displayed in class, despite strong cognitive interactivity between teachers and students. Therefore, the deep learning-based Merdeka Curriculum is still in the process of being fully implemented, particularly in the areas of student projects and portfolios. In Merdeka Curriculum theory, projects are a crucial component for developing higher-order thinking skills and the Pancasila Student Profile character. This incomplete documentation indicates that implementation still falls short of fully encompassing the curriculum components.

Analysis of field findings indicates alignment with several previous studies examining the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum using an immersive learning approach. Research by Oktami et al., (2025) revealed that although elementary schools have implemented authentic assessment as part of the Merdeka Curriculum, significant challenges remain in understanding, planning, implementing, and evaluating these assessments, resulting in a lack of systematic learning documentation. The study's findings indicate that documentation of the learning process and authentic assessments are not yet fully consistent or well managed. This finding is relevant to the situation at SDIT Najaahan, particularly in fourth-grade learning, where student portfolio records and project documentation have not been consistently presented as part of the learning reflection and assessment process.

Furthermore, strengthening immersive learning within the Merdeka Curriculum requires learning experiences that encourage students to actively construct their reasoning through challenging, meaningful activities. The development of critical reasoning skills can be facilitated through the application of problem-based learning strategies, class discussions, and case studies, which enable students not only to understand the material conceptually but also to become accustomed to analyzing situations, evaluating various alternative solutions, and making decisions reflectively and responsibly (Muttaqin et al., 2025). Thus, in-depth learning is not only oriented toward cognitive achievement but also toward the development of sustainable higher-order thinking skills.

In line with these findings, research by Arafat et al., (2025) shows that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at the elementary school level occurs at various stages across educational units, leading to inconsistent outcomes. This variation in implementation is evident in technical aspects, such as the design of the Educational Unit Operational Curriculum (KOSP), the development of the Learning Objectives Flow (ATP), learning and assessment planning, the use and development of teaching materials, and the implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5). These differences are influenced by the level of teacher preparedness and the depth of their understanding of curriculum concepts. In this context, the findings at SDIT Najaahan, which demonstrate strengths in the learning process and outcomes, but still require strengthening the consistency of portfolio and project documentation, particularly in fourth grade, can be understood as part of the dynamics of gradual implementation, which requires restructuring the school system to make pedagogical practices more stable, structured, and measurable.

From the assessment and documentation perspective, this research finding reaffirms that portfolio strengthening cannot be positioned merely as an administrative complement, but rather as an essential part of in-depth learning practices. Portfolios serve to authentically and sustainably record students' learning processes, progress, and evidence. Research by Oktami et al., (2025) shows that although elementary schools have implemented authentic learning and assessment in the Merdeka Curriculum, challenges remain in the consistency of documentation and management of learning evidence, resulting in learning process traces not always being systematically recorded. Within this framework, the unstable condition of portfolios and project documentation in grade IV of SDIT Najaahan can be understood as a priority for improvement, enabling learning outcomes and the development of students' critical reasoning to be monitored more measurably. Moreover, strengthening critical

reasoning requires student involvement in meaningful activities such as discussions, case studies, and problem-solving, where the entire process and learning outcomes need to be supported by adequate documentation (Muttaqin et al., 2025). Overall, these field findings reinforce the literature that implementing the Merdeka Curriculum requires a consistent assessment and documentation ecosystem, ongoing teacher collaboration, and integrated learning managemen.

Based on field findings and a review of previous studies, it can be concluded that SDIT Najaahan is in the developing implementation stage of the Merdeka Curriculum. This stage is characterized by strong supportive interactions between teachers and students, the application of learning differentiation, the use of media and projects as learning stimuli, and efforts to create meaningful and enjoyable learning. To move toward a more mature level of implementation, recommendations that directly flow from the research findings include consistently strengthening project documentation and portfolios, particularly in fourth grade, given the crucial role portfolios play in supporting process-based formative assessment and documenting deep learning tracks. Furthermore, teaching modules need to be streamlined, both in structure and presentation, to make deep learning more explicit and facilitate consistent implementation across teachers. The school is also advised to strengthen the integration of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) as a daily classroom culture, rather than merely a periodic program. The limited presentation and process of P5 in classrooms indicates that strengthening 21st-century character and skills has not been fully internalized in daily learning practices. Considering the challenges of varying teacher competencies and limited collaboration time, ongoing support, such as KKG, learning reflection, and coaching supervision, needs to be structured more systematically and sustainably to support the stability of pedagogical practices at the school level.

IV. CONCLUSION

This research shows that SDIT Najaahan has implemented the Merdeka Curriculum with a deep learning approach at the developing implementation stage. Field findings demonstrate the school's commitment to providing meaningful, enjoyable, and conceptually mastery-oriented learning through project-based and contextual learning, and by strengthening supportive interactions between teachers and students. The implementation of deep learning appears stronger in grades I and IV, particularly in aspects of active student engagement, the use of project stimuli, the development of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS), and the role of teachers as learning facilitators.

However, this research also identified key challenges in assessment and learning documentation, including portfolio and project documentation consistency, particularly in grade four. These findings confirm that portfolios serve not only as administrative tools but are essential elements of deep learning, authentically and sustainably recording students' learning processes, progress, and achievements. Variations in implementation across grades reflect the dynamics of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation, which are influenced by teacher readiness, understanding of curriculum concepts, and the school's support system.

The implications of this research indicate that strengthening the deep learning ecosystem should focus on structuring a more consistent documentation and authentic assessment system, streamlining teaching modules to make the deep learning flow more explicit, and integrating the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) into everyday classroom culture. For further research, it is recommended to conduct a longitudinal study examining the impact of consistent portfolios and project documentation on the development of critical reasoning and student character, as well as comparative research across schools to examine variations in the implementation stages of the deep learning-based Merdeka Curriculum at the elementary school level.

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