

Principal Strategies for Implementing Merdeka Belajar through a Deep Learning Approach at SD Negeri 35 Talang Kelapa

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Abstract: This study aimed to describe the principal's strategies in implementing Merdeka Belajar through a deep learning approach at SD Negeri 35 Talang Kelapa. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed involving one principal, one school supervisor, six teachers, and six students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data credibility was ensured through source and technique triangulation. The findings revealed that the principal implemented several strategies, including strengthening teacher competence, conducting academic supervision, optimizing school facilities, and fostering a collaborative school culture. The study also identified challenges related to teachers' understanding of deep learning, limited facilities, and adaptation to educational reforms. These challenges were addressed through continuous mentoring, internal training, and collaborative professional development. This study contributes to educational leadership literature by providing an empirical description of principal strategies for implementing deep learning within the Merdeka Belajar policy in elementary schools.

Keywords: Principal Strategy, Freedom to Learn, Deep Learning, Independent Curriculum, Educational Leadership, Meaningful Learning.

A. Introduction

Although previous studies have examined the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, deep learning approaches, teacher readiness, and instructional strategies, empirical studies focusing on principals' strategic leadership in implementing deep learning at the elementary school level remain limited. Most previous research emphasizes classroom practices rather than school leadership processes. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by examining how school principals formulate, implement, and evaluate strategies to support deep learning within the Merdeka Belajar framework

Before implementing the Independent Curriculum, schools need to understand this curriculum thoroughly, starting from the changes contained in it, the preparations needed, to how to implement it (Restanti, 2022). With the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, it is hoped that the learning crisis can be overcome and the quality of education in Indonesia can improve (Suwandi, 2020). One important direction in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum is the integration of a deep learning

approach, namely a learning approach that emphasizes in-depth understanding of concepts, active student involvement, and the ability to apply knowledge to real-world contexts (*meaningful learning*) (Jauharah & Aulia, 2025).

The deep learning approach is considered relevant to the principles of the Independent Curriculum because it focuses on meaningful learning and contextual learning experiences. Research shows that implementing deep learning strategies in Indonesian language learning during the Independent Curriculum era increases student participation, strengthens literacy skills, and develops students' critical and reflective thinking skills (Fithriyah et al., 2025). However, the implementation of this approach in schools still faces various challenges, such as limited teacher understanding, readiness of learning facilities, and the ability of school principals to manage educational change effectively (Marsona et al., 2025).

A number of previous studies have discussed the implementation of the Independent Curriculum and the deep learning approach. Hasan et al., (2025) found that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum based on deep learning in economics subjects requires teacher understanding, learning planning, and structured learning strategies. Hidayat et al., (2025) showed that the integration of deep learning through project-based learning increased the creativity and engagement of elementary school students. Satria et al., (2025) emphasized that teacher readiness is the main factor in the successful implementation of the Independent Curriculum based on deep learning. Study Marsona et al., (2025) shows that the support of the principal is an important factor in the successful implementation of deep learning-based learning. Furthermore, the research (Fithriyah et al., 2025) explains that deep learning-oriented learning strategies can improve students' literacy and reflective thinking skills.

Besides that, (Rahmawati et al., 2025) found that the principles of mindful, meaningful, and joyful learning effectively increased students' motivation and conceptual understanding. Mujtahid et al., (2025) stated that the integration of the Independent Curriculum and deep learning can create more collaborative and contextual learning. Study Muntatsiroh & Hendriyani, (2023) shows that the principal has a strategic role in facilitating the implementation of the Independent Curriculum through flexible curriculum management. Mastur, (2023) explains that the principal's leadership influences the improvement of teacher professionalism in implementing the curriculum. Widiyanto & Egar, (2023) found that the democratic and transformational leadership style of the principal can encourage learning innovation. Furthermore, (Arnov et al., 2024) emphasizes the importance of digital leadership of school principals in supporting technology-based educational transformation, while (Putra et al., 2025) emphasized that academic supervision and collaborative school culture increase teacher readiness in implementing adaptive learning.

Although various studies have addressed the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and the deep learning approach, most studies still focus on teacher readiness, learning strategies, or implementation in specific subjects. Research specifically examining principals' strategies in implementing Merdeka Belajar with a deep learning approach, particularly at the elementary school level, is still relatively limited. Therefore, this study was conducted to fill this research gap by describing the principals' strategies

in implementing Merdeka Belajar based on deep learning at SD Negeri 35 Talang Kelapa, including the obstacles encountered and the solutions implemented to support more meaningful and effective learning.

B. Methods

This study used a descriptive qualitative method with a field study approach to describe the principal's strategy in implementing Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) with a deep learning approach at SD Negeri 35 Talang Kelapa. The study was conducted from September 2025 to March 2026. The qualitative approach was used because the research focused on an in-depth understanding of phenomena through the natural conditions of the school environment (Annasthasya et al., 2025). This method is used to obtain data regarding the planning, implementation, evaluation, obstacles, and strategic solutions of school principals in implementing deep learning-based learning. (Maulana et al., 2026). The participants consisted of one principal, one school supervisor, six teachers, and six Grade V students selected using purposive sampling because they were directly involved in the implementation of deep learning.

The research informants consisted of the principal as key informant, the school supervisor and teachers as confirmatory informants, and students as general informants. Informants were selected purposively based on their ability to provide information relevant to the research focus (Himam & Anam, 2026). Data collection techniques are carried out through observation, interviews and documentation (Thalib, 2022). Observations were made directly on the activities of the principal, teachers, and students in implementing the Independent Curriculum based on deep learning (Asyauqiya et al., 2025). Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner to obtain in-depth information regarding the principal's strategies, while documentation was used to support data in the form of school programs, learning tools, and school activity documents (Sulistiyarini et al., 2024).

The research instruments consist of observation guidelines, interview guidelines, and documentation compiled based on the research focus (Rozikin & Anam, 2026). The focus of the observation includes the principal's strategic planning, learning implementation, deep learning implementation, program evaluation, as well as obstacles and solutions in the implementation of Independent Learning (Hasan et al., 2025). This study uses educational leadership theory, instructional leadership, and the concept of the Independent Curriculum based on deep learning as the basis for the analysis. Data analysis was conducted using the Miles and Huberman model, which consists of data reduction, data presentation, and systematic conclusion drawing. Observation sheets, interview guides, and documentation checklists were developed based on the dimensions of instructional leadership and deep learning implementation.

The research was conducted under natural conditions without any experimental treatment, so data were obtained based on real-world situations in schools. No special software was used for data analysis, but supporting research equipment included stationery, a mobile phone for documentation and recording interviews, and a computer or laptop for data processing. The entire research process was conducted while maintaining data validity through source triangulation, technical triangulation, and cross-checking of interview results with informants to ensure the accuracy of the research data.

Data credibility was ensured through source triangulation, technique triangulation, member checking, and prolonged engagement.

C. Results and Discussion

The research results show that the principal's strategy in implementing Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) with a deep learning approach at SD Negeri 35 Talang Kelapa is carried out through several main aspects, namely school program planning, strengthening teacher competency, academic supervision, optimizing infrastructure, and creating a school culture that supports meaningful learning. The principal plays an active role in developing a learning program based on the Merdeka Curriculum by involving teachers in the planning process so that learning implementation is more focused and aligned with student needs. These findings indicate that the principal's leadership is not only administrative but also emphasizes the function of instructional leadership to improve the quality of the teaching and learning process. The results of this study are in line with the opinion of (Haryaka, 2024) which states that an effective principal is able to direct the school's vision, build teacher commitment, and create a learning environment that supports improving the quality of learning.

During the implementation phase, the principal implemented strategies through coaching and mentoring teachers in implementing deep learning-based instruction. Teachers were given guidance on developing learning that encouraged active student engagement, critical thinking, problem-solving, and reflection on the learning material. Furthermore, the principal encouraged the use of contextual learning methods and learning media that support in-depth conceptual understanding. These results support the research Hasan et al., (2025) which explains that the successful implementation of the deep learning-based Independent Curriculum is influenced by teacher readiness, lesson planning, and adequate learning resources. This finding also aligns with research (Fithriyah et al., 2025) which states that deep learning-oriented learning strategies are able to improve critical thinking skills, participation, and students' understanding of learning materials. These findings indicate that the principal exercised instructional leadership by emphasizing teacher professional development and collaborative planning. According to Hallinger's instructional leadership framework, effective principals influence learning quality through curriculum coordination, teacher supervision, and instructional support. Therefore, the principal's strategy reflects not only administrative leadership but also instructional leadership that directly affects classroom practices.

Furthermore, the research results show that school principals conduct regular academic supervision as a form of evaluation of the implementation of deep learning-based instruction. Supervision is carried out through observation of the learning process, providing feedback to teachers, and evaluating any obstacles that arise during the implementation. Principals also provide motivation and support to teachers to continuously improve their pedagogical and professional competencies in implementing the Independent Curriculum. This finding aligns with research (Putra et al., 2025) which states that structured academic supervision and collaborative communication between the principal and teachers can improve teachers' pedagogical readiness in implementing adaptive learning. Academic supervision functioned not merely as an evaluation mechanism but as continuous professional support that encouraged teachers to improve

instructional quality. This finding supports the concept of developmental supervision, which emphasizes coaching rather than inspection.

However, this study identified several obstacles in implementing deep learning-based Independent Learning, including teachers' limited understanding of the concept of deep learning, limited learning support facilities, and adaptation to changes in education policy. Some teachers still experienced difficulties in designing learning that encourages deep understanding and active student engagement. These obstacles indicate that implementing the Independent Curriculum requires adequate human resource readiness and facility support. These findings support the research findings Satria et al., (2025) which states that teacher readiness is a key factor in the successful implementation of deep learning in schools. In addition, (Marsona et al., 2025) also explained that limited technological facilities and teacher understanding are obstacles in implementing deep learning-based learning. The identified challenges suggest that successful implementation of deep learning depends on organizational readiness rather than individual teacher competence alone. School leadership therefore becomes a mediating factor between educational policy and classroom implementation.

To address these challenges, the principal implemented various solutions, such as internal training, teacher mentoring, ongoing supervision, and strengthening collaboration among teachers to share best learning practices. The principal also sought to optimize the use of available school facilities to support more interactive and meaningful learning. This strategy demonstrates the principal's commitment to creating a school culture that is adaptive to educational change. The results of this study reinforce this view (Alhabsyi et al., 2022) that the principal must act as a manager, leader, innovator, and motivator so that educational policies can be implemented effectively and sustainably.

Overall, the research results indicate that the principal's strategy plays a crucial role in the successful implementation of Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) using a deep learning approach. Successful implementation is influenced not only by school policies but also by the principal's ability to develop teacher competencies, build a collaborative culture, conduct academic supervision, and systematically address learning barriers. Therefore, the principal's strategy is a key factor in creating more meaningful, contextual learning that is oriented toward developing student competencies in accordance with the demands of the Merdeka Curriculum.

D. Conclusions

This study concludes that the research objective has been achieved, namely describing the principal's strategy in implementing Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) using a deep learning approach at SD Negeri 35 Talang Kelapa. The principal plays a crucial role in the successful implementation of learning through school program planning, teacher competency development, academic supervision, infrastructure optimization, and the creation of a collaborative school culture that supports meaningful learning. This strategy can encourage teachers to implement more active, contextual, and student-centered learning in accordance with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. This study concludes that effective implementation of Merdeka Belajar through a deep learning approach requires principals to exercise instructional leadership by

strengthening teacher competence, conducting continuous academic supervision, optimizing school resources, and fostering collaborative school cultures. Despite challenges related to teacher readiness and infrastructure, adaptive leadership strategies enabled schools to support meaningful learning. These findings provide practical implications for school leaders seeking to implement educational reforms through sustainable professional development and collaborative leadership. Future studies should involve more schools and different educational contexts to provide broader evidence regarding principal leadership in implementing deep learning.

This study also found that the implementation of deep learning still faces several obstacles, such as limited teacher understanding, limited learning support facilities, and the adaptation process to changes in education policy. To overcome these obstacles, principals provide training, mentoring, ongoing supervision, and strengthen collaboration between teachers. Thus, the principal's strategy has proven to be a key factor in supporting the successful implementation of deep learning-based Freedom to Learn (Merdeka Belajar) to improve the quality of learning in elementary schools.

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