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A NARRATIVE OF THEACHER'S EXPERIENCES IN IMPLEMENTING DEEP LEARNING DURING THE KURIKULUM MERDEKA (INDEPENDENT CURRICULUM) ERA AT SMP NEGERI 4 BANTAN

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of deep learning within the Kurikulum Merdeka (Independent Curriculum) era requires teachers to translate concepts of meaningful, reflective, and learner-centered learning into classroom practice. Although the concept of deep learning is increasingly being introduced, studies regarding teachers' experiences in understanding, applying, and internalizing it remain limited. This study aims to describe and reconstruct teacher experiences In understanding and implementing deep learning at SMP Negeri 4 Bantan. A qualitative approach utilizing Narrative Inquiry was employed with five teachers. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, documentation, and field notes, with data validity ensured through source triangulation, technique triangulation, and member checking. Analysis was conducted via "restorying" to reconstruct participants' experiences based on the sequence of events and the meanings constructed. The results indicate that teachers' understanding evolved gradually through professional experience. Some teachers initially interpreted "deep learning" as a term related to Artificial Intelligence, but later understood it as a pedagogical approach emphasizing meaningful learning, critical thinking, and active learner engagement. This shift in understanding was shaped by teaching experiences, training, Subject Teacher forum (MGMP), learning communities, and professional reflection. Implementation was reconstructed across five phases: planning, initiation, exploration, reflection, mand internalization.
challenges evolved through phases of doubt, confrontation, adaptation, strategy reinforcement, and professional transformation. The findings confirm that the implementation of deep learning is a reflective, collaborative, continuous process of professional transformation, rather than merely the outcome of training.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education plays a central role in developing human resources and strengthening national competitiveness. In response to rapid social, economic, scientific, and technological changes, education systems need to continuously adapt their curricula to ensure the relevance of learning to contemporary demands. In Indonesia, this transformation is reflected in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, which promotes more flexible, learner-centered, and contextsensitive learning. Unlike previous curricula that were often characterized by content density and an emphasis on knowledge acquisition, the Merdeka Curriculum encourages students to develop meaningful understanding, critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication skills.

One important feature of this transformation is the emphasis on deep learning, which focuses on developing meaningful and conceptual understanding rather than merely acquiring or memorizing information. Deep learning encourages students to connect new knowledge with prior experiences, engage actively in learning, and apply their understanding to complex and real-life situations. Within the Merdeka Curriculum, this approach is consistent with a learnercentered and constructivist perspective, in which students actively construct knowledge through interaction, experience, and reflection (Astri, 2024; Piaget & Vygotsky, 1996).

Despite its potential, the implementation of deep learning remains challenging for teachers. Preliminary findings at SMP Negeri 4 Bantan indicate that some teachers have difficulty understanding the essence of deep learning and tend to associate it with previously familiar approaches, such as problem-based or cooperative learning. Limited professional training and mentoring further constrain teachers' ability to translate the concept into classroom practice. In addition, administrative demands and perceptions of increased workload may contribute to resistance toward adopting new pedagogical practices. These challenges are consistent with previous studies reporting inadequate teacher understanding, limited instructional preparation, insufficient facilities, and uncertainty regarding appropriate learning strategies in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and deep learning (Astri, 2024; Berliana et al., 2024; Hartawati & Karim, 2024).

Recent studies have provided further evidence that teachers' experiences are shaped not only by their individual understanding but also by the broader institutional context. Teachers have described deep learning as promoting conceptual understanding and active student engagement, while also reporting limited access to professional development (Mahardika & Jaya, 2025). Other studies indicate that teachers gradually adapt through contextual strategies, including projects, reflective questioning, and relevant learning media (Khofifah et al., 2025). At the secondary-school level, deep learning has also been associated with improved conceptual understanding, critical thinking, and connections between learning and real-life contexts, although its implementation remains constrained by technical factors, training, and facilities (Afwan et al., 2025). School readiness, pedagogical competence, continuous training, professional learning communities, and institutional support have therefore become important conditions for successful implementation (Rodhiyah et al., 2025; Susilowati et al., 2025).

However, existing studies have largely focused on teachers' perceptions, implementation challenges, or general pedagogical practices. Less attention has been given to how teachers experience and make sense of the transition to deep learning over time, how they negotiate changes in their pedagogical practices, and how these experiences shape their professional identities. In particular, research exploring teachers' experiences through a narrative perspective at the junior secondary-school level in Indonesia remains limited. This gap suggests the need to move beyond describing implementation barriers toward understanding the stories, meanings, adaptations, and reflections through which teachers experience educational change.

Therefore, this study employs a narrative inquiry approach to explore teachers' experiences in implementing deep learning within the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Negeri 4 Bantan. The study examines how teachers understand and interpret deep learning, the challenges and critical events they encounter, the strategies they develop in adapting their classroom practices, and the factors that support or constrain the implementation process. By reconstructing teachers' narratives, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of educational change from the perspective of teachers as its primary practitioners. The findings are expected to contribute to the growing literature on deep learning implementation and provide practical insights for teachers, schools, and policymakers in strengthening contextual and sustainable implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using a narrative inquiry design. This design was selected because the research focuses on teachers' experiences, the process of making meaning, changes in practice, and the evolution of professional experience during the implementation of deep learning. The participants consisted of five teachers from SMP Negeri 4 Bantan who had experience implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka (Independent Curriculum) and conducting indepth learning. Participant selection took into account their experience in implementing instruction and navigating implementation challenges, as well as their ability to recount their experiences reflectively. Data were collected through in depth interviews, classroom observations, documentation of instructional materials, and field notes. Interviews were used to explore the teachers' experiences and interpretations, while observations and documentation served to reinforce the narratives obtained from the interviews. Data analysis was conducted through transcription, in-depth. reading, open coding, categorization, thematic analysis, narrative interpretation, and restorying. The data were then reconstructed based on the teachers' experiential trajectories to identify patterns in the development of their experiences with implementing deep learning. Data validity was reinforced through the triangulation of sources, techniques, and time, as well as member checking. Triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from various teachers, data collection techniques, and timeframes. Member checking was employed to re confirm the researcher's interpretations with the informants

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Planning Phase: Translating Concepts into Learning Experiences

The first phase identified in the teachers' experience is planning. This is the stage where teachers begin translating the concept of deep learning into teaching modules, learning objectives, activities, guiding questions, and assessments.

Research findings indicate that changes at this stage are not merely about the format of instructional materials. Teachers are beginning to question what kind of experiences should be provided so that learners do not simply receive information, but are able to understand and connect knowledge to their own lives.

This experience aligns with the direction of deep learning policies, which position the learning experience as a process of understanding, applying, and reflecting. Within the formal framework of deep learning, instructional planning encompasses pedagogical practices, learning partnerships, the learning environment, and the use of digital technology.

In the thesis, a teacher explains that developing teaching modules for deep learning was initially challenging, as teachers had to alter their established lesson-design habits. The development process was subsequently carried out in stages, involving revisions and adjustments based on classroom experience. A shift is also evident in the use of guiding questions. Teachers are beginning to develop questions that go beyond merely asking students to recall definitions, instead connecting the material to their experiences.

This finding is supported by research conducted by Widiastini et al. (2023), which indicates that the implementation of Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) encourages teachers to utilize essential materials, project-based learning, and differentiated instruction. The study also reveals that the development of instructional materials is one of the challenges faced by teachers. Thus, the planning phase of this study demonstrates that changes in instruction begin with a shift in how teachers envision students' learning experiences. Planning is not merely an administrative activity, but rather the initial process of pedagogical transformation.

3.2 Initiation Phase: Building Student Engagement.

The second phase is initiation, which is when the lesson plan is put into practice in the classroom. At this stage, teachers' experiences show that the primary challenge lies not merely in delivering the planned activities, but in fostering student engagement. Some students are still accustomed to a learning model that positions the teacher as the primary source of information. When teachers begin using open-ended questions and discussions, some students do not respond immediately.

A teacher's experience shows that changes in students' responses occur gradually. When opening questions are linked to their experiences, students become more interested in speaking and connecting those experiences to the learning material. This experience aligns with the research by Prasetyo et al. (2023) regarding student-centered learning within the Kurikulum Merdeka (Independent Curriculum). The study indicates that a student-centered approach creates opportunities for students to participate more actively, although teachers continue to face challenges in altering established learning habits.

Deep learning policies also identify engagement as a key characteristic. Teachers are expected to foster learner engagement treating students as active subjects in the learning process so that they gain meaningful learning experiences.

Thus, the initiation phase demonstrates that transforming learning involves more than just a change in methods; teachers need to cultivate a new learning culture. Students need to become accustomed to asking questions, expressing their opinions, collaborating, and actively participating in the learning process. These findings also indicate that implementing deep learning requires patience. Teachers cannot immediately conclude that a strategy has failed simply because learners have not yet shown the expected response during initial sessions.

3.3 Exploration Phase: From Information Receiver to Knowledge Builder.

The third phase is exploration. In this phase, learners are given greater scope to build understanding through discussion, inquiry, problem solving, and projects. Research findings indicate a shift in the teacher's position. Teachers do not entirely abandon their role but rather alter the form of their intervention; when students encounter difficulties, teachers provide questions, hints, or scaffolding before offering the answer.

One of the teachers explained that they have started to cut back on the habit of immediately providing answers when students encounter difficulties. Students are guided to discuss with their groups and seek out information, turning to the teacher for assistance only if they still face obstacles. That experience demonstrates a shift from a teacher-centered model toward learning that is more learner-centered.

These findings align with Prasetyo et al. (2023), who found that student-centered learning within the Merdeka (Independent Curriculum) provides students with the opportunity to be more active and independent in the learning process. Furthermore, Widiastini et al. (2023) found that project-based learning is a form of implementing Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn), although teachers face challenges regarding time constraints, student readiness, and the distribution of participation within groups.

The findings of this study demonstrate that these challenges also hold pedagogical significance. When learners are not yet active, teachers do not revert entirely to old patterns; instead, they endeavor to provide questions, guidance, and time, allowing learners to gradually build independence. This aligns with the principles of deep learning, which position student. \

Exploration, therefore, cannot be interpreted merely as the activity of "letting students learn on their own." Teachers continue to play a vital role as facilitators, providers of feedback, guides, and creators of the learning environment.

3.4 Reflection Phase: Classroom Experience as a Source of Teacher Learning

The fourth phase is reflection. This phase represents a significant finding, as it demonstrates that changes in practice do not stop at the implementation of instruction. Teachers use students' work, responses during discussions, assessment results, and experiences during instruction as a basis for improving subsequent lessons.

Teacher E, for instance, explains that after the lesson, she reviews the students' work and their responses during the reflection. These findings are then used to modify how the lesson is introduced, incorporate more discussion activities, or use examples that are more relevant to the students' lives.Teacher C also demonstrated a similar shift. After gaining an understanding of deep learning, the teacher began reflecting after every lesson by questioning the students' level of engagement and identifying aspects of the instruction that were not yet optimal. These findings indicate that reflection serves as a bridge between experience and changes in practice.

In the context of deep learning, reflection is also part of the learner's learning experience. Official deep learning policies position "reflecting" as a stage of the learning experience that follows the understanding and application of knowledge. Interestingly, this study reveals that this reflective principle also applies to teachers. Teachers do not merely expect their students to become reflective learners; they themselves also undergo a process of professional reflection.

This is where the significant contribution of this research becomes evident. Deep learning not only transforms the learning experience of students but also has the potential to foster deep learning for teachers through their own teaching experiences.

3.5 Internalization Phase: Deep Learning Becoming a Professional Habit.

The final phase is internalization. In this phase, the change is no longer viewed by teachers as a completely new practice. Principles of deep learning begin to become part of how teachers make pedagogical decisions. Teachers begin to recognize when to provide explanations, when to ask questions, when to allow for discussion, and when to offer guidance. Teacher E describes how repeated experience helped him discover a teaching style that aligns with his own personality and the needs of his students. He began to determine when to provide guidance, when to allow space for discussion, and when simply using questions was sufficient to encourage students to think. This shift demonstrates that internalization is not merely the ability to employ learning strategies, but a transformation in pedagogical thinking.

These findings are relevant to recent research on the implementation of deep learning. A study by Asitah et al. (2026) on the experiences of elementary school teachers demonstrates that implementing deep learning within the Kurikulum Merdeka (Independent Curriculum) entails a shift toward learning that is more meaningful, reflective, and learner-centered, while simultaneously presenting dynamics and challenges for teachers. Research by Aprilia and Mukhlis (2026) also found that the implementation of deep learning in Indonesian language instruction requires changes in teaching practices and faces obstacles during execution. Thus, the findings of this study reinforce the view that the implementation of deep learning does not conclude once teachers have undergone training or are capable of developing instructional modules. Implementation reaches a more mature stage when these principles begin to be internalized within day to day pedagogical decision making.

Five-Phase Model of Teacher Experience Based on a narrative reconstruction of the experiences of five teachers, the following model was derived:

Based on a narrative reconstruction of the experiences of five teachers, the following model was derived:

Phase	Experience Focus	Core Practice	Changing Role Of Teachers
Planning	Translating Concepts	Learning Modules, Objectives, Prompt Questions, Assessments	Designer
Initiation	Building Engagement	Real World Context, Questions, Initial Discussion	Engagement Drivers
Exploration	Building Understanding	Inquiry, Projects, Discussions, Problems	Facilitator
Reflection	Evaluating Experience	Assessment, Feedback, Reflection	Reflective Practitioner
Internalization	Forming New Habits	Adapting Pedagogical Strategies And Decisions	Lifelong Learner

The model shows a pattern:

Planning → Initiation → Exploration → Reflection → Internalization → Re-planning

It is important to emphasize that these five phases are not linear stages to be traversed only once. Teachers may return to the planning phase after reflection, modify activities during the exploration phase, or revisit the initiation phase when working with a different group of students. Therefore, this model is best understood as a cycle of professional transformation for teachers.

Integrative Discussion

Research findings indicate that the implementation of deep learning involves two dimensions of change.

First, there is a pedagogical shift. Teachers move away from instructional patterns dominated by content delivery toward an approach that creates space for students to engage, explore, discuss, solve problems, and reflect on their learning experiences.

Second, there is a professional shift. Teachers begin to learn from their own practice, engage in reflection, accept feedback, discuss with peers, and adapt instruction based on classroom conditions.

The two dimensions are interconnected. Pedagogical changes give rise to new experiences, while these new experiences serve as material for reflection that subsequently leads to professional change.

In other words:

Changes in practice yield experience; experience yields reflection; reflection yields adaptation; and adaptation yields internalization.

This pattern emerges as a significant conceptual finding of the study.

Research by Widiastini et al. (2023) indicates that teachers implementing Merdeka Belajar (Emancipated Learning) indeed face various challenges regarding project-based learning, essential content, and differentiated instruction. However, the present study offers a different perspective by demonstrating that these issues do not merely remain "obstacles." For the five teachers studied, these challenges became integral to their learning process and professional adaptation.

This also highlights the importance of the Narrative Inquiry approach. If a study were to simply measure whether teachers utilized projects or discussions, the full scope of the transformation they underwent would not be visible. Through narratives, it becomes evident that teachers require time to: Grasp concepts; Translate them into lesson planning; Experiment with practices; Respond to student reactions; Engage in reflection; Refine strategies; and Establish new pedagogical habits

Thus, the implementation of deep learning is best understood as a professional journey rather than merely the execution of a program

Research Novelty

The novelty of this study lies in the reconstruction of five phases of teachers' experiences in implementing deep learning: planning, initiation, exploration, reflection, and internalization.

Previous research on the Kurikulum Merdeka (Independent Curriculum) has highlighted the implementation of project-based learning, a focus on essential content, and differentiated instruction, as well as the various challenges associated with them (Widiastini et al., 2023). Other studies have also underscored the importance of learner-centered instruction in the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka (Prasetyo et al., 2023). Meanwhile, recent research on deep learning has begun to examine teachers' experiences and challenges in greater detail (Asitah et al., 2026; Aprilia & Mukhlis, 2026).

This study offers a distinct contribution by illustrating the trajectory of teachers' transformative experiences, rather than merely focusing on forms of implementation or teacher perceptions. These five phases demonstrate that changes in pedagogical practice occur through a recurring cycle of experience and reflection.

The study's conceptual contribution can be formulated as follows:

Deep learning for students requires deep professional learning for teachers. This means that teachers also need to undergo the process of understanding, applying, reflecting on, and adapting their own teaching practices.

4. CONCLUSION

The experiences of five teachers in implementing deep learning at SMP Negeri 4 Bantan reveal a transformation process that unfolds gradually and continuously. This transformation can be reconstructed into five phases: planning, initiation, exploration, reflection, and internalization.

Planning is the phase where teachers translate deep learning concepts into instructional designs. Initiation involves building student engagement. Exploration provides students with the opportunity to construct understanding through active learning experiences. Reflection turns classroom experiences into a source for improvement. Meanwhile, internalization marks the stage where deep learning principles begin to become part of the teachers' habits and professional identities**.**

These five phases are not linear; rather, they form a cycle that enables teachers to continuously design, experiment with, evaluate, and refine their instruction. These findings indicate that the implementation of deep learning cannot be understood merely as the application of specific instructional strategies. Its success is heavily influenced by the teachers' professional learning processes—driven by experience, reflection, collaboration, and adaptation.

This conclusion aligns with the thesis findings, which characterize the implementation of deep learning as a professional transformation process that reshapes how teachers understand learning, conduct pedagogical practices, navigate challenges, and perceive the meaning of their profession**.**

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