

IMPLEMENTING THE DEEP LEARNING APPROACH FOR RELIGIOUS LITERACY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD: A CASE STUDY

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 **Abstract:** Early childhood education provides a crucial foundation for character development, including the cultivation of religious literacy. Within the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, which offers flexibility for early childhood education institutions, the Deep Learning approach has emerged as a promising strategy for fostering the holistic internalization of Islamic values. This study aimed to examine the implementation of the Deep Learning approach in fostering religious literacy among young children at IT Syntax Bubbly School Kindergarten. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected through participatory observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis involving purposively selected teachers, the principal, and students. Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model. The findings revealed that the Deep Learning approach was implemented through exploratory, reflective, and project-based strategies, which supported children's understanding, appreciation, and enactment of religious values. The integration of religious literacy into daily activities, along with collaboration with parents, further facilitated the internalization of these values. However, several challenges were identified, including limited learning media and insufficient teacher competence. The study highlights the potential of the Deep Learning approach to support the holistic development of religious literacy in early childhood. It underscores the importance of strengthening teacher capacity and learning resources to optimize its implementation.

Keywords: Deep Learning, Religious Literacy, Early Childhood Education, Merdeka Curriculum, Islamic Education.

A. Introduction

Early childhood education (PAUD) is a fundamental phase in a child's personality development. During this period, individuals enter a golden age, which significantly determines the direction of their cognitive, affective, and psychomotor development in the future. Islamic religious education at this level aims not only to convey religious information but also to instill spiritual and moral values as the basis for character formation in children (Suyadi & Ulfah, 2019).

As the challenges of modern life become increasingly complex, early childhood religious education can no longer be delivered solely through conventional, informative, and cognitive methods. Digital exposure, shifting societal values, and the acceleration of media have accelerated changes in children's mindsets and attitudes toward their surroundings (Zuhdi, 2020). Therefore, an in-depth, reflective, and contextual approach to learning is needed to equip children with strong religious literacy.

Religious literacy in the context of early childhood education can be understood as a child's ability to recognize, understand, internalize, and practice religious values in everyday life. In this context, an in-depth learning approach is a relevant pedagogical strategy because it emphasizes a deep understanding of the interrelationships among concepts and the ability to internalize values holistically (Syamsudin, 2021). Thus, religious education goes beyond mastering material and also touches on children's affective and spiritual domains.

The Merdeka Curriculum, as a new paradigm for education in Indonesia, provides educators with flexibility and freedom to design learning tailored to students' needs. The principles of differentiated, project-based, and contextual learning in the Merdeka Curriculum provide ample opportunities for implementing in-depth learning at the early childhood education (PAUD) level. The Deep Learning approach emphasizes learning through critical analysis that connects new information with existing knowledge and applies it in real-world contexts. The implementation of the Deep Learning approach at the elementary and secondary school levels is expected to positively impact student learning outcomes. The use of information and communication technology in in-depth learning contributes

to increasing the accessibility and effectiveness of education. Students' readiness to face the complexities of the modern world is a primary reason for implementing the Deep Learning approach, with a focus on developing critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving (Diputera & Zulpan, 2024).

The concept of Deep Learning is also relevant to Early Childhood Education (PAUD), where children's cognitive and social-emotional foundations are built. Learning through meaningful play and exploration of the surrounding environment can be likened to an early form of Deep Learning, where children actively construct understanding through hands-on experiences. The *Deep Learning* approach encourages students' deep understanding, knowledge integration, and application in real-life situations, and instills a lifelong learning mindset. Significant impacts are seen in increased participation, learning outcomes, and students' ability to apply knowledge in new contexts. In PAUD, this can be realized through activities contextualized to the child's world, such as storytelling, singing, and role-playing, which help children connect learning to their experiences. This creates space for Islamic education units, such as TK IT Syntax Bubbly School, to integrate religious education more meaningfully into daily learning activities.

Deep Learning emphasizes students' ability to construct meaning, connect knowledge, and apply it to real-life contexts. This approach focuses on conceptual understanding and critical reflection, rather than mere memorization (Fullan et al., 2018; Hattie, 2009). In the context of early childhood education, this approach is relevant because it supports children's holistic development through meaningful learning experiences.

As an integrated Islamic-based educational institution, TK IT Syntax Bubbly School has implemented a learning approach that combines Islamic values with modern pedagogical methods. The religious learning process at this school focuses not only on memorizing prayers and short verses and introducing religious figures, but also on experience-based activities, such as role-playing, value discussions, and Islamic-themed mini-projects. This approach aligns with the spirit of *Deep Learning*, which positions students as active subjects in the process of internalizing values.

Research (Qodratillah, 2021) shows that reflection-based learning activities, such as storytelling and discussion, have a significant impact on children's spiritual development. Children engaged in these processes demonstrate a deeper understanding of religious values and more consistent behavior in their daily lives. These results demonstrate that the Deep Learning approach is not only effective in higher education but also contextually adaptable to early childhood education.

Furthermore, the contextual learning approach studied (Damayanti, 2022) states that children's daily experiences can be an effective medium for instilling religious values. In practice, activities such as washing hands before eating, greeting children, or sharing toys become part of realistic and meaningful value-learning scenarios. Therefore, *an in-depth learning approach* in religious education must be designed to be integrated into children's lives, not as an activity separate from their reality.

The Deep Learning approach has not been systematically applied in early childhood religious education. Teachers' limited understanding of reflective learning design and minimal training related to values-based learning are among the obstacles. Therefore, strengthening teacher competencies is crucial to achieving holistic and sustainable religious learning (Mahmud, 2023).

Furthermore, teachers' competence in authentically conveying values is a determining factor in this approach's success. (Sari & Efendi, 2020) emphasize that teachers, acting as spiritual role models, have a significant influence in instilling religious values in children. Teachers are not only transmitters of information, but also facilitators and role models in bringing Islamic values to life in everyday practice.

The contribution of parents in supporting the implementation of religious values is also crucial. Research by Nuraini (2021) found that the continuity between values taught in school and reinforcement at home is positively correlated with the consistency of children's religious behavior. In this context, synergy between educational institutions and families is key to the success of an *in-depth learning approach* in Islamic religious education.

One major challenge is the lack of studies that explicitly explore the application of the Deep Learning approach in early childhood

religious literacy within the Merdeka Curriculum framework. This presents an important research opportunity to explore how good practices implemented in the field can be documented and replicated in other similar educational institutions. This study aims to fill this gap through a contextual qualitative approach.

Although various studies have examined contextual learning and religious education in early childhood, studies that specifically integrate deep learning approaches to improve early childhood religious literacy within the context of the Independent Curriculum remain limited. Therefore, this study offers a novel approach in examining the implementation of contextual deep learning in integrated Islamic-based early childhood education institutions.

This study will examine the practice of religious learning in SBS IT Kindergarten in depth using a qualitative approach, employing data collection techniques such as observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The main focus of this study is on how teachers implement *the in-depth learning approach*, children's responses to the strategy, and its impact on the understanding and appreciation of religious values in early childhood.

This exploration is expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of Deep Learning-based Islamic religious education practices that are appropriate to the characteristics of early childhood. This study aims to explore how the Deep Learning approach is applied to improve religious literacy in early childhood at the IT Syntax Bubbly School (SBS) Kindergarten. The results of this study are expected not only to contribute to the development of theory in early childhood Islamic religious education but also to serve as inspiration and guidance for early childhood teachers and educational institutions in designing meaningful, context-specific religious learning.

B. Method

This research uses a qualitative approach with an exploratory case study to gain a deeper understanding of the implementation of the *Deep Learning approach* to foster religious literacy in early childhood at the SBS IT Kindergarten educational unit. This approach was chosen because it aligns with the characteristics of

the phenomenon under study, namely, the exploration of values-based religious learning within the context of the Merdeka Curriculum. The case study is considered appropriate for uncovering social dynamics, teacher and child behavior, and the cultural context surrounding the learning process.

The research subjects consisted of three teachers, one principal, and 15 early childhood students. Informants were purposively selected for their direct involvement in the religious learning process and their ability to provide context-rich data. This research was conducted over two months during the even semester of the 2025/2026 academic year, using an approach that emphasized natural interaction processes without manipulative intervention from the researcher (Utami & Wahyuni, 2023).

Data collection techniques included participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observations were used to directly record religious learning activities, including teacher-student interactions, children's affective expressions, and the use of reflective learning methods. Interviews were conducted with teachers and the principal to obtain information on the learning design, objectives, and challenges faced. Documentation was conducted on teaching materials, teacher journals, children's portfolios, and the learning media used. Data validity was tested through triangulation of sources, techniques, and time. Data triangulation was conducted to increase the validity and reliability of the data (Miles et al., 2014).

The procedure was conducted through open coding, categorization, and theme extraction. Research ethics were maintained through obtaining consent from the school and parents, maintaining the confidentiality of informants' identities, and using the data solely for academic purposes. The researcher ensured that interactions with children were conducted within the ethical framework of early childhood education (PAUD) and did not cause emotional distress or disturbance. With these procedures, the research is expected to produce valid, contextual, and applicable findings in the development of a deep learning-based religious learning model.

Table 1. Research Instrument Table.

Exploring *Deep Learning Approaches* to Enhance Religious Literacy in Early Childhood

Technique	Indicator	Instrument
Interview	Learning strategies	Interview guidelines
Observation	Children's activities	Observation sheet
Documentation	Instructional Media	Document

C. Results and Discussion

Results

Deep Learning Applied in IT Syntax Bubbly School Kindergarten.

The study found that teachers implemented a reflection-based exploratory learning strategy. This finding indicates that the Deep Learning approach not only functions on the cognitive aspect but also strengthens children's affective and spiritual dimensions. This finding aligns with research (Hidayat et al., 2021), which states that children are encouraged to explore the meaning of each religious practice through open-ended questions and answers, role-playing, and social observation. For example, when studying the theme "I am a Muslim Child," children not only memorize the pillars of Islam but are also asked to describe their experiences of worship at home and observe their parents' worship behavior. This stage is followed by simple reflective activities such as describing how they felt while praying or helping others. This strategy aligns with *the constructivist-based Deep Learning model, which encourages students to explore meaning personally and in context.*

Research findings indicate that implementing in-depth learning can increase children's engagement with and understanding of religious values. This aligns with research (Hattie, 2009), which states that learning that emphasizes conceptual understanding has a significant impact on learning outcomes. Furthermore, a reflective approach to learning is effective in developing children's spiritual awareness, which is an essential part of

character development (Syaroh & Lubis, 2020).

Learning is also designed with a guided inquiry approach, where teachers provide thought-provoking questions and visual media such as videos of the Prophet's story, then invite children to discuss, summarize values, and reflect them in their behavior. For example, after watching a video of the story of the Prophet Ibrahim (peace be upon him), children are encouraged to emulate obedience and patience through role-playing activities and social games. This strategy deepens understanding because children process through observation, interpretation, and concrete actions. Teachers act as active facilitators, not just conveyors of information, so that religious literacy does not stop at cognitive understanding but also develops affective and psychomotor aspects.

One innovative strategy implemented is "Proyek Nabi Kita," a project-based learning approach that integrates Islamic values. Children are encouraged to explore the stories of the prophets, create Islamic-themed artwork, and convey their understanding through simple presentations. In addition to improving religious literacy, this strategy also builds self-confidence and communication skills at an early age. This project strategy also accommodates learning across developmental aspects and is a hallmark of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation at TKIT Syntax Bubbly School.

Forms of Religious Literacy Activities Integrated into the Daily Activities of SBS Kindergarten.

Religious literacy activities at Syntax Bubbly School Kindergarten are consistently integrated into the day's opening and closing, including morning prayers, short surah memorization sessions, and greetings and hand-kissing with teachers and friends. These activities form spiritual habits that serve as the foundation for children's religious literacy. Consistent spiritual habits from an early age can shape children's understanding of their relationship with God and with fellow human beings, while also honing moral awareness.

Teachers integrate Islamic values into play activities such as "kindness games," role-playing, or light-hearted discussions about the stories of the prophets. Children are encouraged to learn from these stories and emulate role models. These activities strengthen

the affective dimension of religious literacy, where children not only learn but also feel and experience it. When play activities are linked to Islamic moral messages, children tend to absorb and reflect on them more deeply and more sustainably.

Religious literacy activities are also evident in weekly projects, such as creating daily prayer posters, drawing stories of the prophets, or writing the names of Allah, under the teacher's guidance. These projects not only reinforce Islamic knowledge but also integrate language, motor skills, and art. This aligns with the holistic learning approach in the Merdeka Curriculum. The integration of art and spirituality into learning projects provides space for meaningful exploration and encourages children's active emotional engagement with religious values.

Teacher and Student Responses to the Deep Learning Approach.

Interview results showed that teachers at TK IT SBS responded positively to *the Deep Learning approach* because it allowed them to act more as facilitators than as sole instructors. Teachers felt freer to explore creative and contextual methods. A study by Wulandari (2020) showed that early childhood education teachers who implemented the Deep Learning approach felt more emotionally connected to their students and had the reflective space to evaluate the effectiveness of values learning.

From the students' perspective, the implementation of a deep learning approach elicited enthusiastic responses, especially when they engaged in discussions, simulation games, and story reflections. Children appeared more active in asking questions and sharing their spiritual experiences. Learning approaches that encourage open dialogue and exploration of values can significantly increase curiosity and cognitive engagement in childhood.

The deep interactions that arise from reflecting on and exploring values strengthen the emotional bond between teachers and students. Teachers not only teach but also serve as "spiritual companions" for children in understanding Islamic values. This aligns with the view (Syaroh & Lubis, 2020) that empathy-based and spiritual relationships in early childhood education play a crucial role in fostering the internalization of values (Rochmat & Zakiyah, 2020).

Technical Challenges and Implementation Solutions.

Teachers expressed challenges in designing learning activities that consistently engage the affective and spiritual domains. Time constraints, a dense thematic curriculum, and a lack of technical training were key obstacles. According to a study by Zubaidah (2020), early childhood education teachers in Islamic schools often need guidance in systematically integrating spiritual values into their teaching.

The lack of learning media specifically designed for *an in-depth learning approach grounded in Islamic values* poses a challenge. Teachers often rely on conventional teaching materials and need to innovate on their own. A study by Irchamni (2022) emphasized that providing project-based Islamic modules and media is crucial to support the internalization of religious values optimally.

As a solution, TK IT SBS began developing an internal learning community among teachers to share ideas and best practices. Furthermore, the school collaborated with parents to support children's reflective activities at home. This aligns with findings (Zulkarnain et al., 2023), which states that collaboration between educators and family involvement is an effective strategy for overcoming technical limitations and improving the quality of values learning in PAUD.

Discussion

Interpretation of Results on Deep Learning Theory and Religious Literacy.

Deep learning in early childhood education is rooted in constructivist and humanistic theories that emphasize the importance of active, reflective, and meaningful engagement in the learning process. Research at SBS Kindergarten shows that children can understand religious values not only cognitively but also through affective and spiritual experiences, which aligns with *the deep learning framework* by (Biggs, 2011) which states that deep understanding emerges when students connect learning to their personal lives (Anwar & Sari, 2024).

The results of this study strengthen the findings of Fullan et al. (2018), which confirm that in-depth learning not only improves cognitive aspects but also shapes 21st-century character and competencies. However, implementation at the PAUD level

requires adaptation according to the child's developmental stage.

In the context of religious literacy, this approach is not limited to introducing religious symbols and terms, but also fosters an understanding of the meaning of worship, moral values, and relationships with God. This suggests that religious literacy in childhood must be understood in multidimensional terms, encompassing cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects. These findings align with findings (Sabtina & Fauziyah, 2023) , which suggests that in-depth learning is effective in developing integral value literacy in childhood.

Thus, in-depth religious instruction contributes to the development of children's spiritual literacy, namely, the ability to understand and reflectively express religious values. It also strengthens the position of Islamic education as a crucial component of holistic and contextual character education in childhood.

Correlation Between Islamic Values and Deep Learning Approach.

Islamic values such as sincerity, honesty, mutual assistance, and belief in God have philosophical and spiritual dimensions that are well suited to in-depth learning. In practice, at SBS IT Kindergarten, these values are not taught verbally, but rather through reflective experiences and contextual activities. This demonstrates that in-depth learning and Islamic values reinforce each other as approaches and substance (Widodo & Sari, 2022) .

For example, when children learn about the value of honesty, they are not only taught its meaning but also encouraged to discuss their experiences with lying and the feelings that arise from them. This process simultaneously fosters emotional and moral understanding. Reinforcing Islamic values through a reflective approach significantly increases children's spiritual awareness (Maulana, 2021) .

This correlation suggests that the Deep Learning *approach* can be an effective method for internalizing Islamic values because both place "meaning" at the center of the learning process. The Deep Learning approach does not conflict with Islamic values and can even serve as a bridge to fostering children's natural personal piety.

The Contextual Influence of Integrated Islamic Schools on Literacy Effectiveness.

Integrated Islamic schools, such as TK IT SBS, have an educational ecosystem that intensively fosters a spiritual atmosphere, from greetings and congregational prayer to the use of Islamic narratives in games. This environment strongly supports the implementation of an *in-depth learning approach* oriented toward internalizing religious values, as spiritual stimulation is provided at every stage of a child's learning experience (Santoso & Fitria, 2022).

Religious literacy at SBS IT Kindergarten is part of the daily culture, not just a learning objective. This reinforces research findings (Maulida, NR, Sari, 2024), which shows that schools with an integrated Islamic context create a more conducive learning environment for internalizing values through meaningful, consistent, and repetitive practices.

The context of Islamic schools also allows for the integration of the roles of teachers, parents, and the school community in shaping children's religious character. In-depth learning in this context is enhanced because it is not isolated within the classroom but is also reinforced by daily social interactions (Mulyadi & Kurniasih, 2019).

A Critical Analysis of the Independent Curriculum in the Context of Islamic Early Childhood Education.

The Independent Curriculum (Curriculum Merdeka) provides significant flexibility for early childhood education (PAUD) educators to design character-based learning, projects, and local values. In the context of Islamic PAUD, this flexibility offers a valuable opportunity to integrate Islamic values in a contextual and developmentally appropriate manner. However, challenges arise when teachers lack resources, training, or implementation guidance appropriate to the characteristics of Islamic education (Adawiyah, 2020).

A study by Hidayati & Luthfi (2020) noted that many Islamic early childhood education (PAUD) teachers struggled to transform the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum into an Islamic-based learning model due to a lack of relevant modules or teaching tools. As a result, learning became inconsistent and reverted to conventional patterns (Hidayati, 2020).

Furthermore, the Independent Curriculum does not fully incorporate spiritual literacy into its developmental achievement indicators. Therefore, Islamic schools need to take the initiative to develop additional indicators and assessment methods that reflect the internalization of Islamic values. This is a crucial step to ensure that the Deep Learning approach remains relevant to the character and goals of Islamic education from an early age.

Implications of Research Results for Curriculum Policy and Learning Practices in Kindergarten.

The results of this study imply the importance of integrating a deep learning-based approach into Islamic Early Childhood Education (PAUD) curriculum policies. The national curriculum needs to begin considering religious literacy indicators not only from a cognitive perspective (such as memorizing prayers) but also from affective and spiritual perspectives, such as a sense of responsibility to God and empathy for others.

To support this, the government and curriculum development institutions are advised to develop values-based teaching materials, reflective modules, and teacher training in designing meaningful learning experiences. A study by Putri & Ramadhan (2025) found that early childhood education systems would be stronger if supported by policy instruments that integrate academic and spiritual goals.

At the school level, teachers need support in forming communities of practice that discuss values-based, in-depth learning strategies. Furthermore, evaluation of learning outcomes should include observations of children's daily religious behavior, rather than relying solely on test scores or cognitive portfolios.

Although the Deep Learning approach has demonstrated high effectiveness, its implementation in the early childhood education context is not without limitations, particularly regarding teacher pedagogical preparedness and suboptimal teacher-student ratios. This suggests that the success of this approach is determined not only by learning design but also by broader systemic support and educational policies.

D. Conclusion

The findings suggest that the Deep Learning approach has the potential to support the holistic development of religious literacy in early childhood by addressing cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions. Its implementation through exploratory, reflective, and project-based strategies facilitates the contextual internalization of Islamic values. However, the effectiveness of its implementation is influenced by several factors, including teacher competence, the availability of learning media, and family support. Therefore, strengthening teacher professional development and providing values-based learning resources are essential to optimize the implementation of the Deep Learning approach in early childhood education.

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