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Deep Learning as a Transformative Approach to Social Studies Education

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---- **ABSTRACT** ----

The deep learning approach is increasingly relevant in addressing the needs of 21st-century education, which demands the development of critical thinking skills, conceptual understanding, and emotional engagement in the learning process. This article aims to systematically examine the potential of deep learning as a transformative approach in Social Studies (IPS) education in elementary schools. Using a literature review method, this article analyses more than 30 academic sources published over the past five years that discuss the concepts, models, practices, and challenges of implementing deep learning in social studies. The study results indicate that this approach can improve students' reflective thinking skills, social awareness, and empathy for local and global issues. Deep learning also encourages a transformation of the teaching paradigm to make it more participatory and student-centered..However, the implementation of this approach still faces obstacles such as limited teacher understanding, rigid curriculum structures, and minimal resource support. Recommended strategies include practice-based teacher training, flexible curriculum development, and the creation of a collaborative and reflective school ecosystem. Learning social studies with an immersive approach impacts content mastery and shapes students' character as active, inclusive, and responsible citizens. Therefore, in-depth learning is a strategic approach to realising the transformative and contextual goals of social studies education within the framework of the Independent Curriculum.

Keywords: *Deep Learning, Elementary School, Independent Curriculum, Learning Transformation, Social Studies Education.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Social Studies (IPS) education plays a strategic role in developing knowledgeable, critical-thinking citizens with social awareness and responsibility. At the elementary school level, IPS introduces fundamental concepts of social life, history, geography, and citizenship, which serve as essential foundations for national character development (Rahman & Sari, 2021). However, traditional approaches that emphasise factual knowledge and memorisation still dominate IPS learning in elementary schools. As a result, students are less actively engaged in the learning process and develop a superficial understanding of social issues, which should provide opportunities for reflection and critical engagement (Nurhadi et al., 2021).

The problem with social studies learning, which remains verbal and textbook-based, is that it often leads students to memorise information without truly understanding its meaning and social context. This approach is no longer relevant to the challenges of the 21st century, which demand critical thinking, social literacy, problem-solving, and collaboration (OECD, 2021). In an increasingly complex, global, and uncertain world, students need a learning approach that encourages them to not only know but also understand, analyse, and apply social knowledge in everyday life in a reflective and contextual manner (Fullan & Langworthy, 2018).

One relevant pedagogical approach to address this need is deep learning. Deep learning emphasises more than just mastering content; it also encourages students to build meaningful conceptual understanding, integrate knowledge with life experiences, and develop higher-order thinking skills (Biggs & Tang, 2019). In the context of social studies education, this approach is particularly relevant because social studies subjects address the complex dynamics of social life, require cross-disciplinary understanding, and demand emotional engagement and social empathy from students (Zhang & Wang, 2020).

Deep learning is also closely related to transformative learning, which is rooted in the thinking of Jack Mezirow (2009), who emphasised the importance of critical reflection in shaping new perspectives on the world. Through this

process, students not only learn social facts but also learn to understand the meaning of social experiences and develop new attitudes that are more inclusive, just, and democratic (Illeris, 2018). In social studies, the term means that learning must provide space for students to analyse social issues in depth, develop arguments, and develop empathy and responsibility as citizens.

The newly launched Independent Curriculum (Curriculum Merdeka) by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia in 2022 provides a more flexible and contextual foundation for implementing an in-depth learning approach at various levels of education. This curriculum emphasises the importance of learning orientated towards developing competencies and character through meaningful, collaborative activities that are relevant to students' real-life contexts (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). This aligns with the concept of deep learning, which requires active student involvement in the learning process and the development of reflective thinking and contextual problem-solving skills.

Several studies have shown that the application of immersive learning in social studies education can improve students' analytical skills on social issues, strengthen argumentation skills, and encourage greater emotional engagement with social phenomena (Rahman et al., 2022; Saloviita, 2020). Students involved in social problem-based projects tend to better understand the importance of social values, such as justice, diversity, and solidarity. They also have a greater sensitivity to issues of inequality and sustainability, which are key concerns in contemporary social studies learning.

However, implementing deep learning in the context of social studies in elementary schools is not always simple. Many teachers lack a strong conceptual and pedagogical understanding of this approach. Additionally, the extra work, lack of resources, and a focus on traditional learning goals make it hard for teachers to use methods that truly support deep learning (Setiawan et al., 2023). Without adequate training and professional development support, teachers tend to revert to lecture and drill methods, which are easier to implement but less meaningful for students.

The implementation of immersive learning also requires a shift in the mindset and practice of learning evaluation. Conventional assessments that solely measure memorisation skills fail to reflect the success of the immersive learning process. Therefore, authentic assessment models that focus on complex learning processes and outcomes are needed, such as project assessments, portfolios, and reflective rubrics (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019). Students can demonstrate their understanding of social concepts through these types of assessments, not just cognitively, but in an applied and reflective manner.

This literature review is essential to offer an in-depth primer on how a deep learning approach can be implemented transformatively in social studies education. This review will look at different research studies, books, and academic articles from the last five years to find out the main features of deep learning, helpful learning models, challenges in putting it into practice, and ways to help teachers effectively use this approach in social studies classes for elementary students.

Drawing on various contemporary research findings, this study aims to demonstrate how immersive learning can be an approach that not only improves cognitive learning outcomes but also empowers students socially and emotionally. In the context of social studies learning, which is rich in values and social dynamics, this approach is believed to shape students into critical, tolerant, and responsible citizens toward their communities (Kozolanka, 2021). Transforming social studies education through immersive learning will also impact the quality of democracy and public civility in the future.

Furthermore, this study aims to advocate the importance of social studies learning that is not solely orientatededed toward cognitive achievement t rather focuses more broadly on developing social competence, character, and reflective civic awareness. In an increasingly pluralistic and complex society, students need to be prepared to address issues such as social inequality, globalisation, climate change, and intercultural conflict. Immersive learning can be an effective pedagogical approach to equip students with a critical and ethical framework for addressing these issues (OECD, 2021).

Based on the above description, this article will further examine the potential of immersive learning as a transformative approach in social studies education through a literature review. The author hopes this study can provide a conceptual and practical foundation for teachers, curriculum designers, and educational policymakers in developing more meaningful, contextual, and transformative social studies learning in the 21st-century educational era.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The Concept of Deep Learning

Deep learning *refers* to a learning approach that demands students' active cognitive, affective, and metacognitive engagement in building meaningful understanding of the material. Unlike surface learning approaches that emphasise memorising and repeating information, deep learning focuses on developing rooted conceptual understanding, applying knowledge in real-world contexts, and reflective and critical thinking skills (Biggs & Tang, 2019). According to *Fullan* and Langworthy (2018), deep learning requires students to explore relationships between concepts, solve authentic problems, and produce work relevant to their lives. In the realm of elementary education, this approach is important because it helps children build cross-disciplinary understanding that is not only theoretical but also applicable.

The emphasis on in-depth information processing also aligns with the demands of 21st-century learning, which prioritises mastery of higher-order thinking skills, collaboration, and effective communication. Deep learning is not simply the result of individual cognitive activity; rather, it stems from a learning environment rich in interaction, intellectual challenge, and reflective feedback. Within this framework, teachers act not merely as transmitters of material but as facilitators who guide students' meaning-construction process through open-ended questions, case

exploration, and argument-based discussions (Darling-Hammondt al., 2019). Therefore, deep learning is more than just a strategy; it is a holistic approach to how students experience and understand learning as a whole.

2.2. Characteristics of Deep Learning in the Context of Social Studies

In the context of social studies education, immersive learning facilitates students' in-depth, critical, and contextual understanding of social concepts. As an interdisciplinary subject encompassing aspects of history, geography, economics, and sociology, social studies is rich in issues that can be used for critical reflection and discussion. Immersive learning in social studies helps students explore the relationship between historical events and current social dynamics, understand the causes and impacts of social inequality, and develop alternative solutions to social problems through argumentative and value-based approaches (Zhang & Wang, 2020). This methodology is in line with Saloviita's (2020) findings, which confirm that students engaged in immersive social studies have higher social empathy and a stronger sense of citizenship.

The distinctive characteristics of this approach in social studies include the use of current issues as a starting point for learning, dialogue-based and collaborative learning, and the development of comprehensive social literacy. Furthermore, deep learning in social studies also involves understanding multiple perspectives and diverse socio-cultural values, which makes students more sensitive to the social dynamics around them. According to Kozolanka (2021), this approach can shape social understanding that is not only cognitive but also encompasses ethical awareness and responsible social action. Thus, deep learning can bridge elementary school students' connections between social concepts in social studies and their everyday life experiences.

2.3. Transformative Learning and Its Relation to Deep Learning

Transformative learning emphasises changes in students' perspectives, values, and behaviours through a process of critical reflection on their learning experiences. From Mezirow's perspective (2009), transformation occurs when individuals realise that their old ways of thinking are inadequate for explaining reality, leading them to reconstruct their perspectives in a new way. Both deep learning and transformative learning emphasise students' deep involvement in the learning process and foster the reconstruction of meaning. Illeris (2018) adds that transformative learning encompasses three main dimensions: cognitive, emotional, and social, all of which are also accommodated by the deep learning approach in its process.

In social studies education, this transformation can be seen when students begin to view social issues as not merely external phenomena but as something related to their identity and social responsibility. This process motivates students to transition from merely "knowing" to "understanding and acting." This transformation is supported by research by Rahman et al. (2022), which found that students engaged in deep social studies demonstrated improvements in reflective thinking skills and changes in attitudes toward cultural diversity. Transformative learning through deep learning also encourages the development of social change agents among students from an early age, especially when learning focuses on local issues relevant to their lives.

2.4. Learning Models that Support Deep Learning

Several learning models have been proven effective in supporting in-depth learning, including *Problem-Based Learning (PBL), Project-Based Learning (PjBL), and Inquiry-Based Learning*.These three models share a commonality in placing students at the centr of learning, providing them with space to explore, ask questions, and build understanding through real-world experiences. According to Pedaste et al. (2015), inquiry-based learning provides a foundation for students to learn through questioning, investigation, and reflection, thus strongly supporting in-depth instruction. On the other hand, PBL and PjBL encourage students to solve complex problems or projects that reflect real-world conditions (Barrows, 2020; Thomas, 2020).

In the context of social studies, the application of these models provides significant opportunities for students to build authentic social understanding. For example, through Project-Based Learning (PjBL), students can conduct mini-research on cultural diversity around them or create a simple social campaign on environmental cleanliness. Thus, students not only learn about abstract concepts but also directly experience social processes, make decisions, and collaborate with their peers. A study by Yuliana & Sari (2023) shows that the use of project-based learning models in social studies improves students' critical thinking skills and empathy for social issues. Therefore, developing meaningful social studies learning practices requires the integration of these learning models within an in-depth learning framework.

2.5. The Role of Teachers and Curriculum in the Implementation of Deep Learning

The implementation of in-depth learning in social studies cannot be separated from the crucial role of teachers as learning designers and facilitators. Teachers need to possess the competency to design intellectually challenging and contextually relevant learning activities, as well as facilitate constructive social interactions. According to Darling-Hammond et al. (2019), 21st-century teachers are required to be mentors capable of understanding students' learning needs, designing authentic formative assessments, and building a reflective and collaborative classroom environment. In the Indonesian context, teachers also need to understand the principles of the Independent Curriculum, which emphasises student-centered and project-based learning as a pathway to deeper and more transformative learning experiences (Kemendikbudristek, 2022).

In addition to teacher competency, a flexible and competency-based curriculum structure is also a key prerequisite for optimal implementation of deep learning. A curriculum that is too dense and rigid will make it difficult for teachers to explore innovative and contextual learning models. Therefore, curriculum design needs to provide space for the development of exploratory and reflective activities while strengthening the integration of local social and cultural values into learning. The OECD (2021) argues that a modern curriculum must emphasise the development of

cross-disciplinary competencies, social literacy, and critical thinking skills, all of which are core components of deep learning. Therefore, synergy between teacher training and curriculum development is a key strategy in transforming social studies education through a deep learning approach.

III. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a library research method as the primary strategy in exploring the concept and implementation of immersive learning in the context of Social Studies (IPS) education. This library research approach was chosen because it allows the author to review, organise, and analyse scientific findings from various academic sources related to the topic under study (Snyder, 2019). The primary focus of this method is to gather theoretical and empirical information from relevant publications, including journal articles, scientific books, conference proceedings, and institutional reports. This library research is systematic and structured with the aim of producing a comprehensive synthesis of immersive learning as a transformative approach in IPS education, particularly at the elementary school level.

The literature sources reviewed in this study were selected purposefully based on certain criteria: (1) scientific publications published within the last five years (2019–2024); (2) relevance to the topics of deep learning, educational transformation, and social studies education at the elementary level; and (3) academic credibility, namely originating from reputable national and international journals from well-known academic publishers. Data collection techniques were carried out by searching various academic databases, such as Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis, SpringerLink, and the repositories of leading universities in Indonesia. From this process, approximately 30 primary sources were collected, which served as the study material for compiling this article. Each document was analysed in depth to identify key themes, the learning models used, impacts on social studies learning, and implementation challenges in the field.

Data analysis was conducted using a thematic approach, grouping literature findings into relevant and interrelated themes, such as characteristics of deep learning, supportive learning models, teachers' roles, curriculum implications, and the transformation of social studies learning. The analysis step began with a comprehensive reading of all documents, coding each main idea and organising it into a logical discussion structure. This analysis process was interpretive and reflective, in accordance with the characteristics of a qualitative approach (Bowen, 2009). To maintain the objectivity and reliability of the analysis, the author used a source triangulation strategy by comparing various references that discuss similar topics from different perspectives. With this method, it is hoped that this literature review can provide a strong conceptual contribution to the development of deep learning practices in social studies education in a transformative manner.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Improving Critical and Reflective Thinking Skills

Research demonstrates that deep learning within the social studies context enhances students' critical and reflective thinking skills. A key characteristic of this approach is the encouragement to evaluate information in-depth, interpret meaning, and connect concepts within a social context. Research by Zhang and Wang (2020) shows that students who engage in deep learning have better abilities to ask critical questions, analyse social data, and construct logical arguments than students who learn using conventional methods. The evidence indicates that this approach can stimulate higher-order cognitive processes, which are at the heart of meaningful social studies education.

Furthermore, reflective thinking skills developed through in-depth learning enable students to not only passively receive information but also critique social reality and construct personal interpretations of events around them. According to Huber and Hutchings (2020), reflection in in-depth learning encompasses thinking about not only what is learnt but also how and why that knowledge has meaning for the student. In the context of social studies, this means students are able to place themselves within a historical framework, understand social dynamics, and project the social impact of individual or collective actions.

Critical and reflective thinking skills are vital to cultivating students' social literacy in this complex and disinformation-filled information age. Amidst the rapid flow of information, students need to be trained to independently sort, verify, and evaluate social information. An immersive learning approach provides space for this practice through discussion activities, problem-based assignments, and reflective assessments. Thus, social studies serves not only as a means of conveying information but also as a platform for the development of students' intellectual and moral character (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019).

4.2. Strengthening Social Awareness and Empathy

One significant impact of implementing immersive learning in social studies education is increased social awareness and empathy in students toward issues occurring in their surroundings. Learning based on authentic experiences and social projects allows students to directly experience the dynamics of community life. In a study by Rahman et al. (2022), students involved in community-based learning projects showed increased sensitivity to issues such as poverty, gender inequality, and cultural diversity. This demonstrates that immersive learning not only touches the cognitive realm but also develops students' affective dimensions.

The social awareness developed through this process makes students more aware of existing social conditions and fosters a participatory attitude within their communities. For example, when students are asked to examine the problem of waste in the school environment, they not only learn about its environmental impact but also develop a sense of social responsibility. Saloviita (2020) argues that a learning approach that encourages social engagement and

empathy is key to developing inclusive and democratic citizens. Social studies, as a subject steeped in humanitarian values, serves as a strategic medium for internalising these values contextually.

On the other hand, social empathy also develops through dialogue and collaboration between students from diverse social backgrounds. In immersive learning, students learn to listen to others' perspectives, understand the reasons behind social actions, and appreciate diversity. These experiences strengthen social relationships in the classroom and create a healthy learning climate. Teachers play a crucial role in facilitating this process by encouraging open discussions, values-based case studies, and individual and group reflection. Therefore, this approach aligns closely with the goal of social studies education, which is to develop socially empowered and morally upright individuals.

4.3. Transformation of Teaching Paradigms

The application of in-depth learning in social studies education automatically drives a paradigm shift in teaching from the traditional teacher-centred perspective to a student-centered approach. In this new paradigm, teachers no longer act as the sole source of knowledge but rather serve as facilitators and mediators of the learning process, creating an environment where students can construct their own understanding (Fullan & Langworthy, 2018). This change requires teachers to be more creative in designing contextual, enjoyable, and intellectually challenging learning activities.

This transformative teaching paradigm permits students the freedom to explore topics relevant to their lives, conduct simple research, and develop projects with real impact. This process enables more meaningful and personalised learning, as students feel emotionally engaged and responsible for their learning. Yuliana and Sari (2023) emphasise that in social studies learning, this approach strengthens student ownership of the learning process and fosters independent learning from an early age. Students become not only recipients of information but also creators of social meaning through the realities they experience.

The transformation of the teaching paradigm also impacts how teachers assess learning success. Evaluation is no longer limited to written exam results but encompasses learning processes such as discussions, active participation, project presentations, and students' personal reflections. This creates a more democratic and collaborative learning culture. However, this transformation requires teacher readiness, policy support, and ongoing training to ensure it doesn't stop at the rhetorical level. Stepping out of pedagogical comfort zones and consistently building inclusive, open, and reflective classrooms requires courage.

4.4. Implementation Barriers in Elementary Schools

Despite its enormous potential, the implementation of deep learning in social studies in elementary schools still faces various challenges. One major obstacle is teachers' lack of understanding of deep learning principles and strategies. Many teachers are still accustomed to traditional learning approaches focused solely on curriculum targets and grade achievement (Setiawan et al., 2023). The lack of adequate training and professional mentoring makes it difficult for teachers to integrate deep learning into their daily practices. This dilemma is exacerbated by the high administrative burden and lack of access to diverse and contextual learning resources.

Another obstacle is the rigid and dense curriculum structure, which puts teachers under pressure to complete all material within a limited time. This situation tends to lead them to opt for faster, less effective lecture methods. Furthermore, limited learning resources such as classrooms, technology, and learning media also hinder the creation of a learning environment that fosters exploration, dialogue, and collaboration. In the elementary school context, these limitations are more pronounced due to differences in managerial capabilities within each educational unit and minimal support from regional education stakeholders.

These obstacles demonstrate that the implementation of immersive learning cannot be separated from comprehensive improvements to the education system. We need educational policies that facilitate curriculum flexibility, offer practice-based teacher training, and provide resources for project-based learning and reflection. Schools also need to build a collaborative learning culture among teachers, allowing them to share best practices in implementing this approach. Systemic and collaborative efforts can minimise existing obstacles and maximise the potential for transforming social studies learning through an immersive approach.

4.5. Implementation Strengthening Strategy

To optimise the implementation of deep learning in social studies education in elementary schools, several strengthening strategies are needed that target teachers, the curriculum, and the learning ecosystem. First, systematic and ongoing teacher training is needed on the design and implementation of learning based on reflection, projects, and local social issues. This training should prioritise direct classroom practice and be based on case studies so that teachers are able to design contextual and meaningful learning (Sagala, 2022). Furthermore, providing modules, teaching tools, and assessment guides that support deep learning is also important because it makes sure teachers do not feel like they are working alone in implementing it.

Second, strengthening strategies need to include the development of a flexible, adaptive, and competency-based curriculum. The curriculum should not only list materials but also design learning experiences that enable students to explore their own social realities. Project-*based learning* and problem-*based learning* are effective approaches to connecting social studies concepts to students' real lives (Thomas, 2020). The curriculum should also provide space for authentic assessments such as portfolios, reflective journals, and performance assessments, which are more aligned with the goal of in-depth learning.

Thirdly, we require a collaborative and reflective school ecosystem. School leadership that encourages pedagogical innovation, parental involvement, and partnerships with local communities can strengthen the implementation of transformative social studies learning. Schools can develop learning communities among teachers

to share and reflect on their experiences implementing immersive learning. Furthermore, regular evaluation of the effectiveness of this approach is also crucial for continuous improvement. With these strategies, transforming social studies learning through an immersive learning approach is not just an ideal idea; it can be realised in elementary school classrooms.

V. CONCLUSION

Deep learning has proven to be a transformative pedagogical approach in Social Studies (IPS) education, particularly at the elementary school level. This approach encourages mastery of factual knowledge and emphasises the development of meaningful, reflective, and contextual conceptual understanding. Through deep learning, students can develop critical thinking skills, social reflection skills, and empathy for humanitarian and diversity issues. Furthermore, this approach can shift the teaching paradigm from teacher-centred to student-centred, creating a dialogic and collaborative learning environment. In the context of IPS, deep learning is a strategic tool for shaping the character of socially conscious, inclusive, and responsible citizens. By using models such as project-based learning, problem-based learning, and inquiry-based learning, students not only learn "about society" but also learn "in and for society."

However, the implementation of in-depth learning in social studies is not without challenges, such as limited teacher understanding, curriculum rigidity, limited resources, and a learning culture that does not yet support pedagogical transformation. Therefore, strategies to strengthen implementation are crucial, including ongoing teacher training, flexible and contextual curriculum development, and the creation of a collaborative school ecosystem. The success of transforming social studies learning through this approach depends heavily on the synergy between teachers, the curriculum, educational policies, and the support of the school community. With a consistent and systematic commitment, in-depth learning can be the key to realising that social studies education not only fosters intellectual intelligence but also fosters early social awareness and sensitivity in children as they navigate an increasingly complex world.

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