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Research Article

The Implementation of Fun-Based Learning as a Deep Learning Approach Strategy in 21st Century Education: A Perspective Study of Social Studies Teachers in Bandung City

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ABSTRACT

In the era of globalization and the Fourth Industrial Revolution, 21st-century education demands a transformation towards learner-centered approaches that are enjoyable, meaningful, and reflective. Fun-Based Learning (FBL) is a strategy that supports the implementation of deep learning, especially in Social Studies (IPS) education. This study aims to explore the perspectives of Social Studies teachers in Bandung City regarding the application of FBL as a strategy for deep learning. A descriptive qualitative method was employed involving 30 Social Studies teachers as respondents through questionnaires and in-depth interviews. The results indicate that most teachers have yet to fully understand that FBL can effectively support deep learning. However, those who have implemented FBL acknowledge that this approach enhances students' emotional engagement, motivation, and deep understanding of Social Studies material. These findings align with constructivist and humanistic learning theories emphasizing active, enjoyable, and reflective learning experiences. In conclusion, FBL is a relevant and effective strategy to strengthen deep learning in Social Studies education today, but improved teacher understanding and training are needed for optimal implementation in accordance with the Merdeka Curriculum and 21st-century education demands.

Keywords: Deep Learning; Fun-Based Learning; Social Studies; 21st-Century Education

1. INTRODUCTION

Entering the era of globalization and the Fourth Industrial Revolution, education faces significant challenges in shaping a generation that is not only academically proficient but also equipped with critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration skills (4C) (Syerlita & Siagian, 2024). 21st-century learning requires a transformation of instructional approaches that move beyond teacher-centered methods, placing greater emphasis on active and meaningful student learning experiences (student-centered learning). This shift reflects a paradigm change in education, demanding that teachers not only deliver content but also create learning environments that are contextual, enjoyable, reflective, and conducive to deep understanding (Putriani & Hudaidah, 2021). One approach that emphasizes the importance of deep understanding is deep learning. In the educational context, deep learning refers to a learning process that enables students to develop a profound comprehension of the material, relate it to real-life experiences, and reflect on and apply it in real-world situations (Wijaya, Haryati & Wuryandini, 2025). According to Biggs & Tang (2011), deep learning does not occur merely through the transmission of information but requires learning conditions that promote active engagement, reflection, and meaningfulness. Within the deep learning framework, three core pillars are emphasized: joyful learning (learning in an enjoyable environment), meaningful learning (learning that carries personal significance), and mindful learning (full awareness of the learning process).

In response to these needs, the Merdeka Curriculum was introduced, offering a more flexible and student-centered approach. This curriculum emphasizes adaptive, contextual, and enjoyable learning by granting teachers the autonomy to design instructional processes that align with students' characteristics and needs. The core principles of the Merdeka Curriculum are consistent with the deep learning approach, emphasizing the importance of emotional, intellectual, and social engagement in the learning process (Rizkiyah, Aulia & Rachman, 2025). In this context, one relevant and effective approach to support the implementation of deep learning is Fun-Based Learning (FBL). FBL is an instructional approach that integrates elements of enjoyment, emotional engagement, and students' intrinsic motivation. According to Hamzah (2019), fun-based learning not only enlivens the learning process but also enhances information retention, student engagement, and understanding of the subject matter. Fun-Based Learning plays a crucial role in creating an interactive, participatory, and pressure-free classroom environment, allowing students to learn under optimal conditions.

The FBL approach is also highly relevant to various learning theories proposed by prominent educational theorists. Jean Piaget emphasizes the importance of concrete and exploratory experiences in the learning process; Vygotsky, through his concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, highlights learning through social interaction; John Dewey advocates for learning by doing within contextual learning environments; Carl Rogers asserts that effective learning occurs when students feel comfortable and are intrinsically motivated; and Howard Gardner introduces the theory of Multiple Intelligences, suggesting that instruction should address the diverse intelligences possessed by learners. FBL accommodates all these theories through its varied, collaborative, and enjoyable nature (Budiyanti, Zaini & Effendi, 2023). In Social Studies (IPS), engaging and meaningful instructional approaches are particularly essential. Social Studies education is not merely concerned with transmitting social facts but aims to shape students' character and social awareness, enabling them to critically understand and respond to social issues. According to Komalasari (2015), effective Social Studies instruction should be value-based, contextual, and capable of fostering students' active participation in social life. Therefore, integrating FBL into Social Studies not only creates an enjoyable learning environment but also activates students' potential for critical thinking and reflective understanding of social contexts.

However, in reality, many Social Studies teachers have yet to fully understand that the FBL approach is not merely a form of entertainment but a learning strategy that can effectively support the implementation of deep learning. Some teachers still perceive FBL simply as a supplementary method or a way to fill spare time, rather than as a strategic approach to strengthen students' emotional and intellectual engagement and understanding (Hastuti & Sufianti, 2025). In fact, under the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers are expected to facilitate learning processes that are enjoyable, meaningful, and profound, enabling students to relate the subject matter to their daily lives. Teachers' development and adaptation to instructional methods and approaches must be grounded in the idea that education should provide students with new directions for developing life skills, critical thinking, and openness to change (Jayatri, Safitri & Sujarwo, 2025). Technological advancements offer great opportunities to enhance creativity, access to information, and problem-solving capabilities. The synergy between education and technological development in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and Society 5.0 enables students to become intellectually capable individuals (Parhan, 2024). This study was conducted in Bandung City, a region characterized by dynamic educational activities, with the aim of examining Social Studies teachers' perspectives on the implementation of Fun-Based Learning as a deep learning approach strategy in 21st-century education. This research is crucial for illustrating the extent to which teachers understand and implement FBL, as well as its implications for the effectiveness of Social Studies instruction in alignment with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using an exploratory qualitative descriptive method (Sugiyono, 2020), aimed at thoroughly exploring the understanding, perceptions, and practices of Social Studies (IPS) teachers at the junior high school (SMP) level in Bandung City regarding the implementation of Fun-Based Learning (FBL) as a strategy that supports deep learning in 21st-century education. The qualitative descriptive method was chosen as it enables the researcher to obtain direct information from a sufficiently large and diverse group of respondents, while systematically uncovering their thoughts, attitudes, and experiences, yet remaining open to the complexities of the social-pedagogical contexts faced by teachers in the field. The study focused on Social Studies teachers at junior high schools in Bandung City, considering that this city is one of Indonesia's educational centers that has progressively implemented the Merdeka Curriculum and possesses a dynamic educational environment. The sample consisted of 30 Social Studies teachers selected through purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) currently teaching Social Studies at the junior high school level, (2) having a minimum of one year of experience in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, and (3) willing to participate as respondents and complete the research instruments honestly and reflectively. The instruments used included open-ended and semi-structured questionnaires designed to explore teachers' understanding of the FBL concept, its forms of implementation in Social Studies instruction, and teachers' views on the extent to which FBL supports the three pillars of deep learning: joyful learning, meaningful learning, and mindful learning. In addition, the interview instruments contained questions regarding the challenges and opportunities in implementing FBL in Social Studies classrooms. The data analysis technique used in this study was thematic analysis, which involved categorizing respondents' answers into main thematic categories, followed by qualitative interpretation to identify patterns of thought, general tendencies, and variations in experiences among the participating teachers. Through this approach, the researcher aimed to provide a comprehensive depiction of the realities of Fun-Based Learning implementation in Social Studies instruction and its contribution to realizing the principles of deep learning in 21st-century education, aligned with the values of the Merdeka Curriculum.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Fun-Based Learning (FBL) is an instructional approach that emphasizes students' positive emotional engagement through enjoyable, interactive, and motivating activities. According to Lee and Hammer (2011), FBL is rooted in the principle that learning becomes more effective when the learning environment is not monotonous and provides space for creativity,

exploration, and enjoyment. This strategy is often implemented through educational games, simulations, interactive quizzes, and gamification, all designed to achieve specific learning objectives. FBL also accommodates the motivation theory of Deci & Ryan (2000) within the framework of Self-Determination Theory, which posits that when students perceive learning as enjoyable and relevant, their intrinsic motivation increases naturally. Komalasari and Saripudin (2018) emphasize that fun-based approaches in Social Studies learning can foster a participatory and flexible learning environment while simultaneously enhancing the quality of interaction both among students and between students and teachers.

In the educational context, deep learning refers to a learning process that involves profound understanding of concepts, critical thinking skills, and contextual application of knowledge. According to Fullan (2014), deep learning is not merely about memorizing facts but emphasizes students' active engagement in constructing meaning and connecting knowledge to real-life situations. Within the Merdeka Curriculum, deep learning is practiced through three main pillars: joyful learning (learning with positive emotions and happiness), meaningful learning (learning that is relevant to students' lives), and mindful learning (learning that is reflective and fully attentive). These three elements encourage students not only to understand content at a surface level but also to apply it in real contexts, evaluate it, and develop attitudes and values (Fitriani & Santiani, 2025). Biggs and Tang (2007) further state that the deep learning approach requires high cognitive engagement, which is strengthened by interactive, collaborative, and reflective teaching strategies.

Social Studies (IPS) is a subject aimed at equipping students with an understanding of social, economic, historical, cultural, and political phenomena, while fostering social awareness and civic responsibility (Saragih et al., 2024). According to Komalasari (2010), as an integrative subject, Social Studies seeks to develop students' social competencies so that they are able to understand and solve societal problems. The content of Social Studies is dynamic and contextual; therefore, ideally, Social Studies instruction should actively engage students through learning activities closely related to real-life situations. In this regard, an approach that creates an engaging and contextual learning atmosphere is essential, enabling students not only to acquire knowledge but also to internalize the social values being taught. These three concepts are closely interconnected in improving the quality of 21st-century learning. FBL functions as an operational strategy capable of realizing the three pillars of deep learning in Social Studies instruction. In the context of Social Studies, which is rich in values and social skills, joyful learning can spark students' interest in social issues; meaningful learning helps students connect content with their personal life experiences; and mindful learning trains students to reflect on humanitarian and national values. As Supriatna (2016) states, Social Studies learning should create learning experiences that transform students' perspectives on social life, rather than merely fostering conceptual understanding. Through the implementation of FBL, teachers can create a learning environment that invites students' emotional and cognitive engagement, thus allowing for deeper learning processes to occur. This is further supported by the findings of Mahdum et al. (2019), who discovered that fun-based learning incorporating technology and creativity significantly enhances students' motivation and understanding in Social Studies instruction. Therefore, FBL represents a highly relevant strategy for supporting the implementation of deep learning in Social Studies classrooms, in line with the demands of the *Merdeka Curriculum* and the paradigm of 21st-century education.

The findings obtained from interviews and observations indicate that most Social Studies (IPS) teachers in Bandung City do not fully understand the significant potential of the Fun-Based Learning (FBL) approach in supporting the creation of deep learning. Among the 30 junior high school Social Studies teachers who participated in this study, 70% admitted that they had never explicitly used the term FBL in their teaching activities, although some reported frequently incorporating enjoyable activities such as educational games, interactive quizzes, simulations, and group discussions as part of instructional variation. This suggests a gap between classroom practices and theoretical knowledge concerning contemporary instructional approaches. Some teachers even equated FBL with the general notion of "learning while playing," without fully comprehending its philosophical and pedagogical characteristics within the framework of student-centered learning. From the in-depth interviews, it was found that some teachers tended to position enjoyable learning activities merely as "fillers" or "ice breakers," rather than as the core instructional strategy. This indicates that the concept of FBL has not yet been fully internalized within their instructional design framework. In fact, as explained by Gagne & Merrill (in Slavin, 2015), effective learning is learning that stimulates students' intrinsic motivation through enjoyable and meaningful experiences. When asked whether the enjoyable methods they employed had supported the realization of joyful, meaningful, and mindful learning, most teachers were unable to respond from a theoretical standpoint. Nevertheless, through deeper exploration in the interviews, it was revealed that teachers who actively employed problem-based educational games, storytelling, or digital media-based challenges (gamification) were more capable of describing students' active engagement, deep understanding of the subject matter, and critical reflection on social values within Social Studies instruction.

In the open-ended instrument administered, several recurring keywords emerged as teachers described enjoyable learning: "interactive," "non-monotonous," "contextual," and "aligned with students' interests." This aligns with the perspective of Komalasari & Saripudin (2018), who state that Social Studies instruction becomes more effective when designed using contextual and participatory approaches that engage students emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally. Such learning aligns with the three pillars of deep learning within the Merdeka Curriculum: joyful learning, meaningful learning, and mindful learning. Furthermore, the FBL approach has been empirically shown to be associated with the strengthening of joyful learning. In a comfortable learning environment, students are more encouraged to participate

actively without feeling pressured. This is supported by the findings of Mahdum, Hadriana, & Safriyanti (2019) in the International Journal of Instruction, which demonstrated that enjoyable learning significantly enhances students' learning motivation and active classroom participation. In the context of Social Studies, when students are invited to explore social issues through simulation games, such as role-playing government and citizens in deliberation sessions—they do not merely learn concepts, but also experience and reflect upon real social processes.

The connection between FBL and meaningful learning is also reflected in teachers' experiences, as many reported that students are better able to recall and relate the learning material to their daily lives when engaged in activities that incorporate creativity and collaboration (Hafidzoh et al, 2023; Tarmidzi, 2018). This aligns with Ausubel's (1968) view, which emphasizes the importance of linking new information to students' pre-existing cognitive structures. Several teachers noted that when Social Studies content is connected to social realities through project-based or game-based case study methods, students more easily grasp concepts such as diversity, social justice, and interpersonal conflict. Meanwhile, the element of mindful learning emerges from teachers' reflections, revealing that through deliberately designed FBL activities, students begin to demonstrate the ability to focus, evaluate, and reflect on their learning experiences. One teacher reported that during a "Village Council Simulation" game session, students exhibited changes in attitude after realizing the consequences of the social decisions they made within the game. This demonstrates that FBL not only stimulates affective and cognitive aspects but also supports reflective awareness in learning, in line with Langer's (1997) concept of mindful learning.

In the implementation of Fun-Based Learning (FBL) as an instructional strategy that supports deep learning in Social Studies (IPS), teachers identified both advantages and challenges experienced during the learning process. Based on interview and observation data, most teachers acknowledged that FBL significantly enhances students' motivation and engagement. This is consistent with the findings of Hamari, Koivisto, and Sarsa (2014), who state that gamification in learning can increase students' intrinsic motivation and participation. With a more enjoyable and interactive classroom atmosphere, students become more active and responsive in following the lessons, making the learning process more effective and enjoyable. In addition, FBL helps connect abstract Social Studies concepts with students' real-life contexts, making learning more meaningful and easier to comprehend (Wang, 2015). However, several teachers reported notable difficulties in implementing FBL optimally. One of the main obstacles is the limited resources and supporting facilities, particularly in public schools that do not yet have full access to technology and interactive learning media. According to Sailer and Homner (2020), the success of instructional methods involving technology and gamification is highly dependent on the school's infrastructure readiness. Furthermore, teachers also face challenges related to the longer preparation time required and the need for specific competencies to design fun-based learning activities that still meet instructional objectives and curriculum standards. Research by Chou (2019) indicates that teachers require intensive training to be able to design learning experiences that are both engaging and educational.

Another challenge encountered in implementing FBL is classroom management. Highly enthusiastic students may sometimes become difficult to control, leading to unintended disruptions. This issue is also highlighted by Landers and Landers (2014), who state that overly "fun" learning activities may divert students' focus if not accompanied by effective classroom management. Additionally, some teachers feel pressured when attempting to balance academic content with entertainment elements, requiring specific expertise to align both aspects so that learning remains meaningful and profound. Nonetheless, several practical challenges have been identified in the field. Some teachers mentioned limited time, lack of training, and the perception that enjoyable learning tends to be "playful" as major obstacles (Sappaile et al., 2024). This highlights the need to strengthen teachers' capacity through more targeted training and mentoring to effectively integrate the FBL approach with deep learning principles. In this regard, both the government and schools should provide support through policies and innovation spaces that encourage happiness- and meaning-based learning approaches. Despite these challenges, teachers who successfully overcome them reported that FBL brings positive changes to the teaching-learning process and student learning outcomes, particularly in the development of critical thinking, collaboration, and communication skills—core competencies in 21st-century education. Continuous professional development and school support are essential to enhance teachers' understanding and ability to utilize FBL effectively. This is also supported by the study of Suh et al. (2018), which emphasizes the importance of teacher training in gamification implementation to maximize learning outcomes.

In the implementation of Fun-Based Learning (FBL) as a deep learning approach strategy in Social Studies instruction, teachers encounter various challenges that must be addressed to ensure effective and meaningful learning. One of the primary issues is the limited understanding among teachers regarding the FBL concept and its connection to deep learning. Many teachers still perceive FBL merely as an entertainment method, failing to recognize its potential to enhance students' cognitive and emotional engagement at a deeper level (Hamzah, 2019). Therefore, capacity building for teachers through training that integrates learning theories and FBL practices is essential. Furthermore, in line with Piaget's (1973) constructivist theory, students learn most effectively when they are actively involved and construct knowledge based on concrete experiences. FBL, which emphasizes enjoyable and interactive activities, aligns well with this principle; thus, teacher training that highlights these aspects can assist teachers in designing more meaningful and contextual learning experiences (Eggen & Kauchak, 2012). However, limited time and high administrative workloads often hinder teachers from

preparing creative and enjoyable learning materials. A proposed solution is for school management to provide support by reducing administrative burdens and allocating dedicated time for teachers to collaborate and develop innovative learning media (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

The next issue concerns the limitations of resources and supporting facilities, such as teaching aids, interactive media, or technology that facilitate the implementation of FBL. These constraints often make it difficult for teachers to create learning environments that are truly fun and engaging. As a solution, schools and education authorities need to provide adequate facilities and offer training on the appropriate use of educational technology (Mahdum et al., 2019). In addition, teachers are encouraged to innovate by utilizing available local resources to ensure that learning remains relevant and engaging. In terms of interpersonal competence, some teachers struggle with managing the classroom in a more relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere without losing control. The FBL concept, which prioritizes active participation and freedom of student expression, requires strong classroom management skills. Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the Zone of Proximal Development emphasizes the teacher's role as a facilitator who provides appropriate guidance; thus, teachers need to develop adaptive and supportive classroom management abilities. FBL-based classroom management training and peer coaching can serve as effective solutions to address this issue. Furthermore, negative perceptions toward FBL still persist among some teachers who feel that this method does not align with the traditionally teacher-centered, rote memorization-based learning culture. Changing this mindset requires a reflective and collaborative approach, where teachers are encouraged to reflect on their teaching practices and share successful experiences in implementing FBL (Schön, 1983). Teacher Learning Communities and discussion forums can serve as effective platforms for transforming such educational paradigms.

Another challenge lies in the lack of appropriate evaluation methods for assessing learning outcomes within FBL. Many teachers still rely on conventional assessment methods that are insufficient in measuring deep learning aspects such as critical thinking, creativity, and reflection. Authentic assessment approaches and rubrics aligned with deep learning indicators need to be introduced and developed to enable teachers to comprehensively evaluate student learning outcomes (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Overall, a comprehensive solution includes intensive training based on constructivist learning theory, Vygotsky's sociocultural approach, and Schön's reflective practice; provision of adequate resources and technology; strengthening of adaptive classroom management; paradigm shifts through teacher learning communities; and the development of assessment methods that align with deep learning principles. These steps are expected to enhance teachers' understanding, confidence, and competence in implementing Fun-Based Learning as a joyful, meaningful, and profound 21st-century instructional strategy. Thus, FBL holds great potential as a learning strategy that aligns with the demands of the *Merdeka Curriculum* and deep learning. However, its implementation requires serious attention to teacher training, provision of learning facilities, and effective classroom management to ensure its full benefits are achieved sustainably. Additionally, knowledge is formed through the combination of two main elements: the object being observed and the individual's ability to interpret that object. Both components play an equally important role in knowledge construction, making knowledge dynamic and dependent on how each individual perceives and constructs meaning. This perspective forms the foundation of contextual learning. Through contextual learning, students are guided to construct their own understanding based on real-life observations and experiences. This demonstrates that knowledge becomes meaningful and useful when actively constructed by the individual (Parhan & Sutedja, 2019). Based on all the collected data, it can be concluded that the FBL approach is highly relevant and holds great potential in supporting the implementation of the three pillars of deep learning in Social Studies classrooms. However, improvements in teachers' conceptual understanding and pedagogical skills are necessary for its optimal application. Instruction designed with a joyful, meaningful, and mindful approach has the potential to transform learning—not only in mastering knowledge but also in shaping students' character and social awareness within the context of 21st-century education.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the research conducted through observations and interviews with Social Studies (IPS) teachers in Bandung City, it can be concluded that the implementation of Fun-Based Learning (FBL) as an instructional strategy plays a significant role in supporting the implementation of deep learning in 21st-century education. Although it was found that 70% of teachers have not yet fully understood that FBL can effectively facilitate deep learning, the majority acknowledged that this enjoyable learning method significantly enhances student engagement and motivation. This aligns with contemporary theories of motivation and learning, which emphasize that positive emotional engagement and enjoyable learning environments are key factors in promoting active and reflective learning processes. Furthermore, Fun-Based Learning (FBL) has been proven to actualize the three main pillars of deep learning integrated into the *Merdeka Curriculum*, namely joyful learning, meaningful learning, and mindful learning. Through joyful learning, students experience learning with enthusiasm and excitement, making Social Studies no longer perceived as boring or merely an academic obligation. The meaningful learning aspect of FBL encourages students to connect Social Studies content to real-life contexts they encounter daily, thereby making the acquired knowledge more relevant and applicable to social life. The pillar of mindful learning, which focuses on awareness and self-reflection, is also enriched through FBL, as it provides opportunities for

students to critically and deeply reflect on their learning experiences. This study also highlights the importance of enhancing Social Studies teachers' capacity to understand and apply FBL optimally so that they can fully integrate the deep learning approach into the instructional process. To achieve this, continuous training and mentoring are necessary to ensure that teachers not only employ enjoyable methods but also foster meaningful and mindful learning. The current lack of teachers' knowledge and understanding of FBL and deep learning remains a major barrier to optimizing Social Studies learning in accordance with the demands of 21st-century curricula. In addition, FBL as an instructional strategy has also been found effective in simultaneously developing students' social and cognitive competencies, particularly in the context of Social Studies, which requires a holistic understanding of social phenomena and societal values. Thus, the use of FBL not only enhances students' cognitive abilities but also strengthens their capacity for collaboration, critical thinking, and conscious decision-making—core aspects of deep learning. As a recommendation, schools and education authorities should give special attention to developing Social Studies teachers' competencies in implementing innovative instructional methods such as FBL. Policy support and adequate resources are key factors in the successful implementation of learning approaches capable of producing graduates with comprehensive 21st-century competencies, namely critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration skills, which are integrated into Social Studies learning through the deep learning approach. Overall, the findings of this study affirm that Fun-Based Learning is not merely an enjoyable instructional strategy but also a highly effective tool in actualizing deep learning principles in Social Studies classrooms, thus facilitating a more meaningful, reflective, and impactful learning process that contributes to improving the quality of education in today's digital and globalized era.

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