

Deep Learning Policy and Character Education in Indonesian Madrasah: A Critical Policy Analysis

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Article History	Abstract
Received : 08-13-2026 Revised : 09-18-2026 Published : 10-01-2026	Indonesian basic and secondary education entered a new policy phase when the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education introduced the deep learning (pembelajaran mendalam) approach for the 2025/2026 academic year, accompanied by a revised process standard, while madrasah continue to operate under a parallel curricular regime administered by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. This article aims to analyse how the deep learning policy reconstructs the meaning of character education, to identify the regulatory and institutional conditions that govern its implementation in madrasah, and to assess the coherence of the two administrative regimes that jointly shape madrasah practice. The study employs qualitative document analysis of primary regulatory texts, read through implementation theory and the learning-approach literature, with content analysis conducted along three dimensions of policy design, namely goal clarity, institutional capacity, and the discretion of frontline educators. The results show that the policy shifts character formation from a programmatic add-on toward an outcome of instructional design, that the three pillars of mindful, meaningful, and joyful learning are pedagogically coherent but operationally underspecified, and that implementation risk in madrasah concentrates in three areas: dual regulatory reference, uneven teacher capability in designing deep tasks, and assessment instruments that continue to reward reproduction. It is recommended that ministerial coordination on curricular equivalence be formalised, that professional development be reoriented from document compliance toward task design, and that character outcomes be assessed through observable performance rather than administrative reporting.
Keywords: Character education; Deep learning; Educational policy; Madrasah; Policy implementation.	

I. INTRODUCTION

Character formation has occupied a declared place in Indonesian education policy for more than two decades, yet its operational meaning has changed repeatedly. The National Education System Law defines national education as the development of learners who are faithful, virtuous, knowledgeable, and responsible, placing character at the centre of the statutory purpose of schooling.¹ A presidential regulation subsequently established the strengthening of character education as a national movement, structured around religious, nationalist, independent, cooperative, and integrity values and implemented through classroom, school-culture, and community channels.² The national standards of

¹Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, Articles 1(1) and 3.

²Presidential Regulation Number 87 of 2017 concerning the Strengthening of Character Education, Articles 3 and 6.

education translate these commitments into graduate competency, content, process, and assessment standards binding upon all units of education, including madrasah.³

The policy landscape shifted again in the current period. After the Merdeka Curriculum was established as the national curriculum,⁴ the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education introduced the approach of deep learning, or *pembelajaran mendalam*, for the 2025/2026 academic year through a regulation amending that instrument, framed explicitly as a refinement of how the existing curriculum is to be enacted rather than as a replacement of the curriculum itself.⁵ A new process standard, effective from January 2026, replaced the earlier standard governing planning, implementation, and assessment of learning.⁶ The approach is organised around three pillars, namely mindful, meaningful, and joyful learning, and is accompanied by a habituation movement addressed to character formation.⁷

Madrasah occupy a distinctive position within this configuration. They are units of education within the national system, subject to the national standards, yet administered by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which issues its own curricular instruments for religious subjects and for the implementation of the national curriculum in madrasah.⁸ The result is a dual regulatory reference: a madrasah head and teacher must satisfy instruments issued by two ministries whose timing, terminology, and reporting requirements do not always coincide. This condition is not new, but the introduction of a pedagogical approach whose success depends on the quality of instructional design rather than on documentary compliance makes the coordination problem consequential in a way that earlier, more administrative reforms did not.

The scholarly literature offers substantial resources for analysing each element separately but little that connects them. Research on character education in Indonesia has largely evaluated programme implementation, reporting recurrent findings of ritualised compliance and weak integration into subject teaching. Research on the learning-approach tradition, from which the vocabulary of deep and surface learning derives, establishes that approach to learning is a function of the learner's perception of task demands and assessment rather than a stable trait,⁹ and that alignment between

³Government Regulation Number 57 of 2021 concerning National Education Standards, as amended by Government Regulation Number 4 of 2022, Articles 3–5.

⁴Regulation of the Minister of Education, Culture, Research and Technology Number 12 of 2024 concerning the Curriculum for Early Childhood, Basic and Secondary Education.

⁵Regulation of the Minister of Primary and Secondary Education Number 13 of 2025 concerning the Amendment to Regulation of the Minister of Education, Culture, Research and Technology Number 12 of 2024.

⁶Regulation of the Minister of Primary and Secondary Education Number 1 of 2026 concerning the Process Standard, replacing Regulation of the Minister of Education, Culture, Research and Technology Number 16 of 2022.

⁷Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, policy statement on the implementation of deep learning for the 2025/2026 academic year, Jakarta, 5 September 2025.

⁸Decree of the Minister of Religious Affairs Number 347 of 2022 concerning Guidelines for the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Madrasah; Decree of the Minister of Religious Affairs Number 183 of 2019 concerning the Curriculum of Islamic Religious Education and Arabic in Madrasah.

⁹Ference Marton and Roger Säljö, "On Qualitative Differences in Learning: I—Outcome and Process," *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 46, no. 1 (1976): 4–11.

intended outcomes, tasks, and assessment is the principal lever available to teachers.¹⁰ Implementation studies, in turn, show that policies depending on frontline discretion succeed or fail according to the capability and working conditions of those who enact them.¹¹ What is missing is an analysis that treats the deep learning policy as a character education policy, examines its implementability under the specific dual-administration conditions of madrasah, and derives design implications from that examination. That is the gap this article addresses.

The objectives of the study are threefold: to analyse how the deep learning policy reconstructs the meaning of character education relative to its predecessor instruments; to identify the regulatory and institutional conditions governing its implementation in madrasah; and to assess the coherence of the two administrative regimes that jointly shape madrasah practice. Three research questions follow. First, what conception of character does the deep learning policy presuppose, and how does it differ from the programmatic conception embedded in earlier instruments? Second, which features of the policy's design are sufficiently specified to guide practice, and which are not? Third, what conditions determine whether the approach can be enacted in madrasah rather than merely reported?

A. Conceptual Framework and Previous Research

Three bodies of work frame the analysis. The first is the learning-approach tradition initiated by Marton and Säljö, who distinguished a deep approach, in which the learner seeks meaning and relates ideas to prior knowledge, from a surface approach, in which the learner focuses on reproduction of information sufficient to meet an anticipated demand.¹² The critical finding of this tradition, frequently overlooked when its vocabulary is adopted in policy, is that the approach is situationally induced: learners adopt surface strategies when assessment rewards reproduction, regardless of the aspirations expressed in curricular documents. Biggs' principle of constructive alignment follows directly, holding that intended learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment tasks must be mutually consistent if deep engagement is to occur.¹³ A policy that proclaims deep learning while leaving reproduction-oriented assessment untouched is therefore internally contradictory.

The second body of work concerns character education. Lickona's formulation treats character as comprising moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action, and insists that the three develop through practice within a community rather than through instruction alone.¹⁴ Reviews of effective programmes converge on the finding that character outcomes depend less on dedicated programming than on the moral quality of

¹⁰John Biggs and Catherine Tang, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*, 4th ed. (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2011), 95–110.

¹¹Donald S. Van Meter and Carl E. Van Horn, "The Policy Implementation Process: A Conceptual Framework," *Administration & Society* 6, no. 4 (1975): 445–488.

¹²Marton and Säljö, "On Qualitative Differences in Learning," 7–10.

¹³Biggs and Tang, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*, 95–98.

¹⁴Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 51–62.

ordinary classroom interaction and on sustained adult modelling.¹⁵ Indonesian scholarship on Islamic education has long argued that the madrasah tradition possesses indigenous resources for this purpose, particularly the integration of adab into the teaching relationship, and that modernisation has tended to displace rather than develop them.¹⁶

The third body of work is implementation theory. Van Meter and Van Horn identified policy standards and resources, inter-organisational communication, and the disposition of implementers as the variables that mediate between a policy decision and its performance.¹⁷ Lipsky's account of street-level bureaucracy shows that where policy is ambiguous and resources are constrained, the operative policy becomes whatever the frontline worker can routinely accomplish.¹⁸ Fullan's synthesis of educational change adds that reforms fail most often not through resistance but through inadequate attention to capacity-building at the level of instructional practice.¹⁹ Taken together, these three strands generate the analytical expectation applied below: a policy that relocates character formation into instructional design will be implementable only where teachers possess the capability to design deep tasks, where assessment permits such tasks to count, and where reporting obligations do not consume the time that design requires.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative design with document analysis as its principal method. Document analysis is appropriate where the object of enquiry is a policy configuration rather than an observable behavioural population, and where the research aim is to reconstruct the logic of a policy and assess its internal coherence and implementability.²⁰ No human subjects were involved and no primary field data were collected; the conclusions are analytical rather than evaluative of any particular madrasah.

The corpus comprises primary regulatory documents and supporting secondary literature. Primary documents include the National Education System Law, the presidential regulation on the strengthening of character education, the government regulation on national education standards, the ministerial regulation establishing the Merdeka Curriculum as the national curriculum, the ministerial regulation introducing the deep learning approach, the process standard effective from January 2026, and the decrees of the Ministry of Religious Affairs governing madrasah curriculum implementation and the curriculum of Islamic religious education and Arabic. Secondary sources comprise peer-reviewed scholarship on learning approaches, character education, and policy implementation.

¹⁵Marvin W. Berkowitz and Melinda C. Bier, "What Works in Character Education," *Journal of Research in Character Education* 5, no. 1 (2007): 29–48.

¹⁶Azyumardi Azra, *Pendidikan Islam: Tradisi dan Modernisasi di Tengah Tantangan Milenium III* (Jakarta: Kencana, 2012), 55–70.

¹⁷Van Meter and Van Horn, "The Policy Implementation Process," 462–472.

¹⁸Michael Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*, 30th anniv. ed. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2010), 13–25.

¹⁹Michael Fullan, *The New Meaning of Educational Change*, 5th ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2016), 54–70.

²⁰Glenn A. Bowen, "Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method," *Qualitative Research Journal* 9, no. 2 (2009): 27–40.

Analysis proceeded in three stages. In the first, each document was coded for its treatment of three elements: the stated conception of character, the specification of instructional method, and the assessment expectations attached. In the second, codes were compared across documents to identify convergence, silence, and contradiction, with particular attention to points at which instruments of the two ministries address the same object. In the third, the resulting policy profile was assessed against the three implementation dimensions derived from the framework above, namely goal clarity, institutional capacity, and frontline discretion. Trustworthiness was pursued through the use of authoritative primary texts, explicit coding categories, and transparent reporting of the inferential steps connecting textual evidence to analytical claims. The principal limitation is that document analysis establishes what a policy requires and permits, not what practitioners actually do; the findings therefore identify implementation risk rather than measure implementation failure.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. From Programmatic Character to Character as an Outcome of Instructional Design

The first finding concerns a shift in the conception of character embedded in the successive instruments. The presidential regulation on character strengthening treats character as a set of values to be instilled through identifiable channels: integration into subject teaching, the cultivation of school culture, and engagement with the community.²¹ Its implementation logic is programmatic, in that fidelity is demonstrated by the existence of activities and the documentation of their conduct. This design has a predictable consequence, well documented in the implementation literature, namely that the observable output becomes the programme rather than the disposition, and reporting displaces formation.

The deep learning policy proceeds differently. By locating character within the quality of the learning process itself, through pillars requiring that learning be conducted with awareness, that it be meaningful in relation to the learner's experience, and that it be experienced as engaging,²² the policy makes character an outcome of instructional design rather than a parallel activity. This is a substantive improvement, and it aligns the Indonesian policy with the international evidence that character outcomes depend on the moral quality of ordinary classroom interaction. The accompanying habituation movement retains a programmatic element, but the centre of gravity has moved. The analytical significance of this shift is that the policy's success now depends on a capability, namely the design of tasks that require interpretation, transfer, and justification, rather than on compliance with a schedule of activities.

B. Coherent Pillars, Underspecified Operations

The second finding concerns the gap between the conceptual coherence of the three pillars and their operational specification. The pillars are defensible in terms of the

²¹Presidential Regulation Number 87 of 2017, Article 6.

²²Regulation of the Minister of Primary and Secondary Education Number 13 of 2025.

learning-approach literature: awareness corresponds to metacognitive engagement, meaningfulness to the relation of new material to prior knowledge and authentic context, and enjoyment to the motivational conditions under which sustained cognitive effort is possible. The policy is therefore not, as sometimes suggested in public commentary, a slogan without theoretical foundation.

The difficulty lies elsewhere. Constructive alignment requires that the three elements of outcome, task, and assessment be consistent, and it is assessment that exerts the strongest influence on the approach learners adopt.²³ The instruments examined specify the intended approach and, in the process standard, the expected structure of planning and implementation, but they leave the assessment of deep understanding largely to institutional discretion. Where existing assessment practice continues to be dominated by instruments that reward recall, the rational response of both teacher and learner is to retain surface strategies irrespective of the language used in planning documents. This is the classic pattern by which a well-founded pedagogical reform is neutralised: the reform changes the vocabulary of planning while leaving intact the incentive structure that governs behaviour.

A second underspecification concerns the unit of design. Deep tasks are demanding to construct; they require a teacher to identify a genuine problem, anticipate plausible misconceptions, and design a response format that makes reasoning visible. International experience with comparable reforms indicates that such capability develops through sustained collaborative work on actual tasks, not through briefing events.²⁴ The instruments examined do not establish a protected structure for that work, such as designated collaborative planning time with defined output. In the absence of such a structure, the capability gap will be filled by the most readily available substitute, namely templates circulated informally, which reproduces the document-compliance pathology the reform was designed to escape.

C. Dual Regulatory Reference and the Madrasah Condition

The third finding concerns the specific position of madrasah. Madrasah are bound by the national standards of education and by the national curriculum, while their religious subject curriculum and their implementation guidance are issued by the Ministry of Religious Affairs.²⁵ Three consequences follow for the present reform.

First, there is a problem of sequencing. Where a pedagogical approach and a revised process standard are issued by one ministry, the corresponding adaptation for madrasah requires a further instrument from the other. Any interval between the two produces a period in which madrasah practitioners must interpret national policy without authoritative guidance for their own institutional context, and the predictable interim response is literal transposition of instruments designed for schools, which discards the distinctive integrative potential of the madrasah setting.

²³Biggs and Tang, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*, 105–110.

²⁴Fullan, *The New Meaning of Educational Change*, 88–101.

²⁵Law Number 20 of 2003, Article 17(2); Decree of the Minister of Religious Affairs Number 347 of 2022.

Second, there is a problem of terminology. Character formation in madrasah has an established vocabulary of its own, grounded in the cultivation of adab and akhlaq within the teaching relationship. Where the new policy introduces a parallel vocabulary without explicit mapping, practitioners face a choice between maintaining two descriptive systems for the same practice, which increases documentary burden, and abandoning the indigenous vocabulary, which severs the reform from the tradition that would most readily support it. The analytically preferable course is explicit equivalence: a statement that the pillars of the approach describe, in contemporary terms, dispositions that the madrasah tradition already names.

Third, there is a problem of capacity distribution. Madrasah include a substantial private sector operating with resource constraints more severe than those of state schools, a condition that implementation theory identifies as decisive, since policies requiring discretionary professional judgement are enacted only to the extent that frontline capacity permits.²⁶ A reform whose principal demand is high-quality task design is therefore likely to produce widening rather than narrowing variation unless capacity-building is deliberately weighted toward institutions with the least of it.

Table 1. Implementation Risk Profile of the Deep Learning Policy in Madrasah

Dimension	Policy provision	Implementation risk
Goal clarity	Pillars stated; character located in process	Moderate: pillars coherent but operational indicators unspecified
Assessment alignment	Process standard revised; assessment largely devolved	High: reproduction-oriented instruments may neutralise the approach
Teacher capability	Professional development referenced	High: task design requires sustained collaborative practice
Inter-ministerial coherence	Parallel instruments for madrasah	Moderate to high: sequencing and terminology gaps
Administrative burden	Simplification declared	Moderate: reporting may recapture time intended for design

Source: Analysis of regulatory documents, 2026.

The profile in Table 1 supports a single interpretive claim. The principal threats to the reform are not conceptual but structural: the two dimensions carrying the highest risk, assessment alignment and teacher capability, are precisely those on which the learning-approach literature identifies success as depending. A policy of this design cannot be implemented by dissemination; it must be implemented by changing what counts as evidence of learning and by building the capability to generate that evidence.

D. Implications for Policy and Practice

Three implications follow. The first concerns coordination. The equivalence between instruments of the two ministries should be formalised rather than left to practitioner inference, through a joint statement mapping the pillars of the approach onto the established categories of madrasah character formation and specifying which national

²⁶Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy*, 18–23.

instruments apply directly and which require adaptation. This is a modest measure with a substantial effect on practitioner certainty.

The second concerns professional development. Reorientation is required from briefing on documents toward sustained collaborative work on tasks, organised around the production and critique of actual assessment items and their accompanying success criteria. The evidence that instructional capability develops through iterative practice on real artefacts rather than through exposition is robust, and the corresponding design implication, namely protected collaborative time with a defined output, is well established.²⁷

The third concerns assessment. If character is to be an outcome of instructional design, its evidence must be observable performance rather than administrative attestation. This favours instruments that require learners to justify a position, to apply a principle to an unfamiliar case, or to reflect on the adequacy of their own reasoning. Such instruments are also, not coincidentally, the instruments that induce the deep approach in the first place, which is why assessment reform is not an accompaniment to this policy but its precondition.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study examined how the deep learning policy reconstructs character education and what conditions govern its implementation in madrasah. It found, first, that the policy relocates character from a programmatic activity to an outcome of instructional design, a shift consistent with international evidence on character formation and with the internal logic of the learning-approach tradition. It found, second, that the three pillars of the approach are conceptually coherent but operationally underspecified at the two points that matter most, namely the assessment of deep understanding and the structure through which teachers develop task-design capability. It found, third, that implementation risk in madrasah is concentrated in dual regulatory reference, uneven capacity across the state and private sectors, and the persistence of documentary compliance as the operative measure of fidelity.

The theoretical implication is that policies borrowing vocabulary from the learning-approach tradition inherit that tradition's central finding, namely that approach is induced by perceived assessment demand; such policies cannot therefore be evaluated by the coherence of their stated conception alone. The practical implications are three: formalise inter-ministerial equivalence so that madrasah practitioners are not left to infer applicability; reorient professional development from document compliance toward sustained collaborative task design; and reform assessment so that evidence of character and understanding takes the form of observable performance. Subsequent research should test these propositions empirically through classroom observation and analysis of assessment instruments actually in use, and should examine whether the indigenous adab tradition of the madrasah, when explicitly mapped onto the new pillars, produces stronger implementation than literal transposition of instruments designed for general schools.

²⁷Fullan, *The New Meaning of Educational Change*, 94–99.

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