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Rural Teachers' Perspectives on Deep Learning Implementation in Indonesia: A Critical Policy Theory Study with Urban Comparisons

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Abstract

The Indonesian government implemented a new educational strategy known as Deep Learning in 2025. Participation in the associated training programme is limited to selected teachers. This study primarily explores the perspectives of educators in rural Indonesia to identify potential inequities arising from current policy practices, with urban teachers included for comparison. Drawing on Critical Policy Theory, the study analysed the views of 15 educators from rural and urban settings through semi-structured interviews. The interview data were transcribed and analysed using inductive thematic analysis. The findings show that rural educators experience limited access to training, insufficient institutional support, and perceive discriminatory effects linked to the policy. Rural teachers also reported a limited understanding of the policy and described classroom practices as sub-optimal due to inadequate support. Overall, the findings suggest that current policy practices disproportionately disadvantage rural educators while privileging those in urban settings. These results highlight the need to revise existing policy frameworks to ensure more equitable and inclusive implementation, with particular emphasis on the development of rural education.

Keywords: *Rural and urban teachers, teachers' perspectives, Deep Learning, critical policy theory, education policy*

Introduction

The phrase 'The new minister, the new curriculum' is a popular paradox in Indonesia, often used to signify the onset of a new regime's governance. In early 2025, the government officially launched a new approach, known as Deep Learning (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2025a). This approach does not alter the entire curriculum system; rather, it introduces a new philosophy, strategies, and classroom practice designs (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2025b). This initiative was implemented four months after the new ruling minister commenced duties in the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in Indonesia. Certain segments of the public, scholars, and media intermittently critiqued the policy, raising questions regarding the rigor of the plan and the robustness of the approach in addressing the nation's current challenges, as well as the potential for discrimination in its implementation (Hidayat, 2025; Olga, 2025; Waliyadin, 2025). One critical concern is the selection process for educators eligible to join the training (Shabrina, 2025).

Based on the Regulation of the Minister of Primary and Secondary Education of the Republic of Indonesia Number 8 of 2025 concerning Technical Guidelines for the Management of the School Operational Assistance Fund (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2025c) and the Decree of the Director General of Teachers, Education Personnel, and Teacher Education, Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education Number 13/B/Hk.03.01/2025 regarding Technical Guidelines for Deep Learning Training for Teachers, School Principals, and School Supervisors, only schools that receive the Performance-Based Operational Assistance Funds or have a minimum enrolment of 400 students are prioritised for Deep Learning training (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2025d). Furthermore, each eligible school will submit a representative consisting of only two to three educators. Consequently, not all instructors could receive the training, and those who did might not be equipped to teach their students using the current approach.

In contrast, according to the Decision of the Minister of Primary and Secondary Education of the Republic of Indonesia Number 30/P/2025 concerning the Recipients and Allocation amounts of Performance-Based Operational Assistance Funds for Early Childhood Education, Performance-Based School Operational Assistance Funds, and Performance-Based Operational Assistance Funds for Equivalency Education for Fiscal Year 2025, only approximately 8,811, or around 2%, of the 443,462 schools qualify for participation in the training (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2025e). This indicates that if a single school were to submit two teachers, only 17,622, or 0.5%, of the 3,468,313 teachers would be eligible for training, which is predominantly available in urban areas. Consequently, this may create a knowledge disparity among educators, especially between those from urban and rural Indonesia.

The study examines the perspectives of educators in rural Indonesia, with urban teachers included for comparison purposes. It explores how social and geographical contexts shape teachers' experiences and seeks to identify inequities in policy design and implementation, particularly those that affect rural schools. The research also considers the adverse effects of current policy practices on rural educators. Guided by Critical Policy Theory (CPT), a framework widely used in the sociology of education (Diem et al., 2014; Rata, 2014), the study aims to inform policy recommendations that strengthen the systemic and structural implementation of Deep Learning regulations in Indonesia, especially in rural contexts.

CPT analyses public policy by questioning the view of policy as a neutral, rational, or objective mechanism for social transformation and reform (O'Connor and Rudolph, 2023). Fischer et al. (2015) emphasise "*the importance of contextual understanding, ordinary knowledge, narrative storytelling, emotional expression, and communicative practices in general*" (p. 6). This approach has gained broad acceptance and is used by researchers in the field of education (O'Connor and Rudolph, 2023; Molla, 2021; Diem et al., 2014; Fischer et al., 2015). Utilising the CPT in this study context provides opportunities for policy reform and systemic improvement in education in Indonesia. Globally, it serves as a case study demonstrating how CPT can be employed to challenge current policy design and its implementation in the Indonesian context, thereby offering insights and enriching the discussion.

Research on teachers' perspectives on Deep Learning implementation remains limited in Indonesia. Furthermore, CPT has rarely been applied to analyse how policy design and implementation shape unequal access, support, and equity. Existing studies mainly address Deep Learning from pedagogical or conceptual perspectives rather than examining differential policy impacts across spatial; and temporal contexts. For example, Dinata et al. (2025) reviewed epistemological

challenges in policy implementation, while Hendrianty et al. (2025) and Isnayanti et al. (2025) focused on teacher development and curriculum integration. Although these studies contribute to the Deep Learning discourse, they offer limited insight into how policy enactment affects rural educators.

To address this gap, the present study uses CPT to examine teachers' perceptions of Deep Learning policy implementation in rural and urban Indonesia. The primary aim of the study was to support rural education development by revealing the structural conditions and policy mechanisms that limit rural teachers' access to training, support, and professional recognition. By centring rural educators' experiences alongside urban comparisons, the research seeks to inform more inclusive and context-sensitive policy designs. The inclusion of urban contexts serves an analytical purpose rather than a balanced, comparative design. Therefore, prioritise rural experiences and should not be interpreted as a comprehensive rural–urban comparison. The findings are intended to guide equitable Deep Learning policies that better address the needs of rural education systems.

Literature Review

The literature review offers succinct contextual information on diverse theoretical perspectives and approaches relevant to the study context. The aim is to present a clear overview, contextual background, and significance of the current research. The literature review provides insights into the discourse on Deep Learning, urban and rural contexts, and CPT perspectives.

Deep Learning

The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of the Republic of Indonesia (2025b) characterises Deep Learning as a comprehensive approach to education that emphasises the establishment of a mindful, meaningful, and enjoyable learning atmosphere and process through the unified and thorough advancement of intellectual, emotional, and physical abilities. This method emphasises the significance of comprehension and application in education, aligning with the phases of Deep Learning—understanding, applying, and reflecting. Consequently, learning transcends mere memorisation to encompass the understanding and practical use of knowledge, rendering it pertinent and beneficial in everyday life (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education Republic of Indonesia, 2025f). Deep Learning is projected to disrupt conventional teaching practices in Indonesia and equip future generations with key competencies, character development, social skills, and welfare preparedness. Indonesian youth are expected to be prepared for the demographic bonus by 2045 (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2025b).

Additionally, in the Academic Document published by the government, educators are key to the execution of this approach, making it essential to guarantee that they are adequately prepared to adopt Deep Learning concepts through suitable training. Improving teacher competence can be accomplished through comprehensive professional development, mentoring, and coaching that emphasise the Deep Learning approach. These activities allow educators to integrate this paradigm into learning practices that are pertinent, contextual, monodisciplinary, and/or interdisciplinary (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, Republic of Indonesia, 2025b).

The implementation is further delineated in the Regulation of the Minister of Primary and Secondary Education of the Republic of Indonesia Number 8 of 2025, which pertains to Technical Guidelines for the Management of the School Operational Assistance Fund (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2025c), as well as the Decree of the Director General of Teachers, Education

Personnel, and Teacher Education, Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education Number 13/B/Hk.03.01/2025, which addresses Technical Guidelines for Deep Learning Training for Teachers, School Principals, and School Supervisors (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2025d), specifying the criteria for schools and educators eligible to participate in the training that only schools that receive the Performance-Based Operational Assistance Funds or have a minimum enrolment of 400 students are prioritised for Deep learning training.

In this study, Deep Learning constitutes the theoretical framework mandated by the Indonesian government for all educators. It underscores the development of mindful, meaningful, and joyful educational environments and procedures according to the stages of comprehension, application, and reflection in the process of classroom practices.

Rural and Urban Education

According to Government Regulation of the Republic of Indonesia Number 59 of 2022 regarding Urban Areas, regions primarily engaged in non-agricultural activities serve as centres for urban settlement, governmental administration, social services, and economic activities, all supported by requisite infrastructure and facilities (Government Republic of Indonesia, 2022). It encompasses kindergartens, junior high schools, senior high schools, markets, shops, cinemas, hospitals, hotels, entertainment venues, and electricity (BPS RI, 2010). Rural areas in Indonesia primarily engage in agriculture, encompassing the management of natural resources, and serve as sites for rural habitation and the provision of services related to agricultural operations (Government Republic of Indonesia, 2024).

Furthermore, as stipulated in Presidential Decree No. 131 of 2015, rural areas are formally designated as regions with restricted access to economic opportunities, human resource development and transportation (Yansyah & Dwintan, 2024). Finally, in this research context, urban schools are situated in areas with access to administration, social services, and economic activities, and are supported by adequate infrastructure and facilities. In contrast, rural schools experience significant limitations in accessibility across various dimensions, including infrastructure and facilities. Additionally, previous studies have found that rural teachers usually face challenges during their teaching activities due to several constraints, including limited information on the policy, while those in urban areas have better access (Yansyah & Dwintan, 2024; Yansyah, 2020; Hermawan et al., 2018; Husin, 2018). This condition has persisted over time (Widiastuti, 2025; Mujiburrohman & Putri, 2024; Mukminin et al., 2019; Azzizah, 2015).

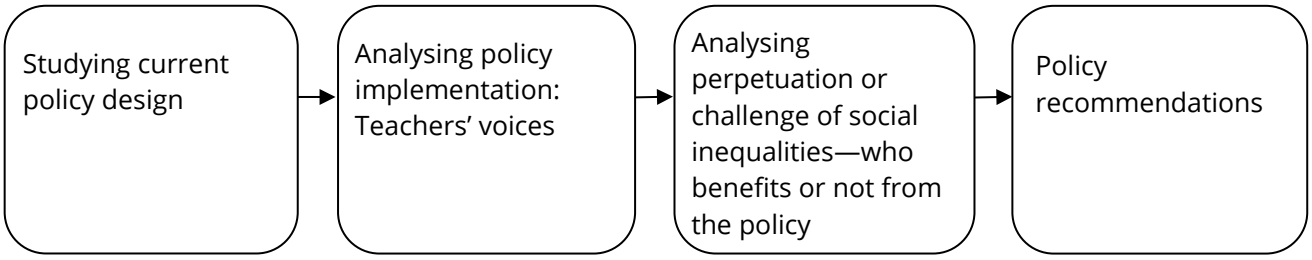
Critical Policy Theory

Critical policy theory (CPT) has its roots in critical theory, which has been widely employed in the education domain (Diem et al., 2014). This approach analyses the influence of social, cultural, and political contexts—specifically power relations, discourses, and values—on policy development from conception to outcome. It critiques the notion of impartial and rational policymaking and seeks to identify opportunities for social transformation and reform (O'Connor and Rudolph, 2023). Critical approaches in educational policy studies examine the gap between policy rhetoric and implementation, the historical and ideological underpinnings of policies, the allocation of power and resources, the perpetuation or challenge of social inequalities, and the agency and resistance of marginalised groups within educational systems (Diem et al., 2014).

This study utilises this theory as a foundational framework to enhance and improve policy, given its limited application in the Indonesian context. The application of CPT varies according to

researchers' adaptations and contextual decisions in analysing policy processes and outcomes (Joo & Kwon, 2010). Despite its increasing attention and application in research, CPT has also faced criticism from scholars worldwide. A prevalent critique is the hidden agenda of scholars who primarily focus on critiquing educational policy while often neglecting its emancipatory and transformative purposes (Molla, 2021; Diem et al., 2014). In addition to highlighting potential inequalities, a policy recommendation is presented to ensure that critiques are accompanied by suggestions for policy reform. The study examines the current policy design to investigate a fundamental concern: The perpetuation or challenge of social inequalities. A comprehensive framework for the application of this policy is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. ***Critical Policy Theory Analysis Framework***



Developed by the researchers (adapted from Segal, 2018)

Participants were selected based on their rural or urban geographical backgrounds, consistent with the current policy framework governing the selection procedure for training participation in Deep Learning. The perspectives of educators from both locations were examined. Subsequently, the policy was analysed for any potential perpetuation of social disparities to determine who gains or suffers unfavourable impacts from the policy design and its current implementation. By employing this approach, the research tests the hypothesis that the current regulation Number 13/B/Hk.03.01/2025 for Deep Learning training produces inequalities.

To examine the policy's potential implications for inequality, this study adopts three interrelated analytical dimensions: access to training, institutional support, and educators' perceptions. Within a Critical Policy Theory (CPT) framework, these dimensions are understood as mutually constitutive rather than discrete factors (Young et al., 2024; Young & Diem, 2018; Diem et al., 2014). Access to training represents the structural conditions through which educators are included or excluded from policy initiatives and thus serves as a foundational dimension of educational equity. Institutional support—encompassing material, technological, and pedagogical resources—shapes educators' capacity to translate policies into classroom practice. Educators' perceptions capture the interpretive and affective dimensions of policy enactment, reflecting how grassroots-level policy experiences, negotiations, and evaluations are conducted.

Together, these dimensions provide an integrated analytical lens for examining how policy design and implementation may reproduce or challenge inequalities across rural contexts in comparison to urban areas. In line with CPT, this framework foregrounds power relations, access to resources, and educators' lived experiences, with particular attention to the narratives and emotional responses associated with policy processes (Diem et al., 2014; Fischer et al., 2015). The following table summarises how these dimensions guided the qualitative analysis.

Finally, this project aims to address several questions: 1) How does the current policy of Deep Learning potentially contribute to inequality? 2) What are the impacts of current policy practices? 3) Who gains advantages or suffers detriments from policy implementation?

Table 1. ***Critical Policy Theory Analytical Dimension***

Dimension	Analytical Focus	Observed Patterns
Access to training	Who is included/excluded	High access: regular and timely participation in training opportunities;
		Moderate access: partial or delayed participation;
		Limited access: exclusion or absence of training opportunities
Support	Material and pedagogical assistance	Consistent support: sustained access to resources, mentoring, and instructional materials;
		Uneven support: irregular or partial assistance;
		Absent support: minimal or no institutional support
Perception	Emotional and interpretive responses	Perceived as equitable: policy viewed as fair and inclusive;
		Ambivalent: mixed or uncertain perceptions;
		Perceived as discriminatory: policy viewed as unfair or marginalising

Methodology

The research team adopted a qualitative multiple-case study design (Köhler, 2024; Alam, 2021; Schwandt & Gates, 2018; Marc, 2024) within an interpretivist paradigm, treating each participating school as a bounded case of Deep Learning policy implementation. Cases were geographically situated across Java and Sumatra and temporally bound to the 2025 academic year. Each school was analysed as a distinct case to capture contextual variation in teachers' policy interpretation, negotiation, and enactment. Cross-case analysis identified patterns of convergence and divergence while preserving each case's contextual integrity, yielding nuanced insights into the social processes shaping implementation across diverse institutional and regional contexts.

Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted to provide flexibility in exploring context-specific practices, and the resulting data were analysed using thematic analysis with an inductive approach (Taherdoost, 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), enabling themes to emerge from participants' accounts. Critical Policy Theory (CPT) was then applied as an interpretive lens to situate the themes within a broader theoretical framework (Molla, 2021: Diem et al., 2014). Rather than treating inductively derived themes as neutral descriptions, they were re-examined through CPT's focus on analytical dimensions (access to training, support and perception) and other aspects such as policy rhetoric and enactment and power and resource distribution, ensuring epistemological coherence and methodological rigour. All research procedures and ethical protocols were reviewed and formally approved by Yayasan TEACH

Indonesia prior to data collection. Additionally, detailed descriptions of the participants, data collection, and analysis procedures are provided to ensure the transparency of the study. To protect anonymity, identifying information was removed, and pseudonyms were used.

Site, Setting and Research Participants

The study examined schools in rural and urban areas across Java and Sumatra, purposively selected to capture contrasting socio-educational conditions within the bounded case of Deep learning regulation implementation. Beyond merely documenting contextual differences, this multi-site design investigates how structural factors shape policy interpretation and enactment. Rural-urban contrasts offer analytical leverage to reveal mechanisms such as uneven resource allocation, institutional hierarchies, and decision-making authority patterns that influence policy understanding and operationalization. Aligned with theory-building approaches in qualitative evaluation (Guenther et al., 2023), the study leverages this variation to generate analytically generalizable insights into the uneven distribution of policy power and implementation capacity across school contexts.

Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative research to intentionally recruit participants who possess specific characteristics relevant to a study (Campbell et al., 2020). The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) teaching in a rural or urban school in Indonesia, (2) at least one year of teaching experience, and (3) willingness to participate in the study. A total of 15 teachers participated (three male and 12 female) across Java and Sumatra. Detailed participant information is provided in Table 2. In line with ethical research procedures, all names are pseudonyms.

Table 2. ***Research Participants***

Name	Teaching tenure	Sex	Designation	Site
Rissa	4 years	Female	Urban	Sumatra
Lia	5 years	Female	Urban	Sumatra
Ayla	2 years	Female	Urban	Sumatra
Ani	20 years	Female	Rural	Sumatra
Sela	12 years	Female	Rural	Sumatra
Yani	20 years	Female	Rural	Sumatra
Lika	18 years	Female	Rural	Sumatra
Ardi	15 years	Male	Rural	Sumatra
Tari	10 years	Female	Rural	Sumatra
Eka	10 years	Male	Urban	Java
Ain	10 years	Female	Urban	Java
Bujang	20 years	Male	Urban	Java
Mavi	16 years	Female	Rural	Java
Dati	13 years	Female	Rural	Java
Widi	20 years	Female	Rural	Java

Data Collection

The research explored educators' perspectives, for which interviews were considered the most appropriate data-collection method. Interviews enable the collection of in-depth insights into participants' experiences and their interpretations (Taherdoost, 2022). To allow flexibility beyond predetermined questions, semi-structured interviews were employed, enabling the researchers to probe emerging issues and relevant topics during the interview process (Elhami and Khoshnevisan, 2022). Additionally, this method allowed for flexible exploration of context-specific practices, supporting the depth required in a case study.

Interviews were conducted through both online and face-to-face sessions to accommodate the participants' availability and preferences. The interview protocol was guided by key research questions related to policy implementation, ensuring that data collection remained focused on the bounded case. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted between October and November 2025.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. The researchers repeatedly read the transcripts and used colour-coding to support initial familiarisation and preliminary analysis. Initial codes were generated inductively, leading to the identification of potential themes in the data. These themes were then reviewed for coherence, relevance, and completeness, including the consideration of any overlooked themes. The research team discussed and refined the definitions and labels of the final themes. Following theme identification, CPT guided the analytic procedure. Participants were systematically coded on three dimensions: access to training (high: regular and timely participation; moderate: partial or delayed; limited: exclusion), support for classroom practice (consistent: sustained resources and mentoring; uneven: irregular or partial; absent: minimal or no institutional support), and perception (equitable: policy experienced as fair and inclusive; ambivalent: mixed or uncertain; discriminatory: unfair or marginalising). Coded patterns were then compared across rural and urban contexts, alongside additional axes of inequality (e.g., student level taught and minority status), to identify differential inclusion, support, or marginalisation. Through a CPT lens, this analysis interrogated gaps between policy rhetoric and enactment, underlying historical–ideological formations, power and resource distribution, and modes of agency and resistance available to marginalised groups (Diem et al., 2014).

Consistent with an inductive approach, themes were derived from the data rather than being predetermined (Neuendorf, 2017; Liu, 2016). The complete process is summarised in Figure 2. To enhance trustworthiness, the interview transcripts were returned to the participants for member checking to confirm their accuracy and relevance.

Figure 2. ***Data Analysis Process***

Developed by the researchers

Findings and Discussion

Several core themes emerged from the analysis. This section examines three aspects: potential inequality, educators' perspectives, and possible disparities resulting from policy formulation and execution. The viewpoints of both rural and urban educators were examined concurrently. All relevant previous studies and corresponding theoretical frameworks were linked to each discussion.

Potential Inequality

Interview data showed marked differences in educators' experiences across rural and urban contexts. Most rural educators reported limited access to Deep Learning training and the absence of institutional support for integrating the policy into classroom practice. Several participants described feeling discriminated against during policy implementation and perceived unequal treatment compared to their urban counterparts. By contrast, educators working in urban areas consistently reported access to multiple training opportunities, consistent support, and perceived policy implementation as equitable.

Interpreted through the lens of critical policy theory which emphasises access, support structures, and perceptions of discrimination, these patterns suggest the presence of power domination in policy enactment. The concentration of policymakers and key decision-makers in urban settings appears to shape policy priorities in ways that privilege urban contexts while overlooking rural educators' lived realities. This dynamic reinforces structural inequalities and limits the inclusion of rural perspectives in the policy process (Young et al., 2024; Molla, 2021; Young & Diem, 2018; Diem et al., 2014). A detailed summary of these findings is presented in the following table.

Table 3. ***CPT-Informed Analytical Patterns Across Participants***

Name	Description	Access	Support	Perception
Rissa	Rissa has been instructing for around four years in a private school in an urban region on Sumatra Island. She stated that she participated in the Deep Learning training sessions multiple times. The training was administered internally by inviting experts to the schools or from the government office. She acquired the resources and methodology for integrating Deep Learning into teaching activities. She believed that the government treated her fairly.	High	Consistent	Equitable
Lia	Lia has been instructing for almost five years at a private school in an urban region of Sumatra. She participated in several Deep Learning training sessions. She received assistance from resources and specialists to implement Deep Learning. She felt that she received access to comprehensive support from the stakeholders.	High	Consistent	Equitable

Name	Description	Access	Support	Perception
Ayla	Ayla's teaching tenure is the shortest among the other participants, totalling two years. She received Deep Learning training from her school, the Ministry of Education, and the local community. She received assistance in the form of resources and guidelines to implement the method. She felt that everything was positive.	High	Consistent	Equitable
Ani	Ani has taught for 20 years at a rural school in Sumatra. Due to her role in teaching lower grades, she did not have the opportunity for Deep Learning training. She received no assistance in implementing the strategy in teaching activities. Ultimately, she wants to receive training, as she is solely seeking knowledge online.	Limited	Absent	Discriminatory
Sela	Sela has taught for 12 years in a rural school in Sumatra. She is instructing lower grade pupils and did not receive training or support for Deep Learning. She wants to receive training like that of her fellow educators.	Limited	Absent	Discriminatory
Yani	Yani has taught for 12 years at a rural school in Sumatra, Indonesia. Similar to Ani and Sela, she is instructing a lower grade for which she did not receive comprehensive training on Deep Learning. She received no assistance in implementing the technique. She felt that it would be beneficial for her to receive training.	Limited	Absent	Discriminatory
Lika	Lika has taught for 18 years in a rural school in Sumatra. She participated in an introductory session on Deep Learning once. However, she felt insufficiently supported with the resources and modules necessary for implementation, as they merely introduced the concept. She believed that funding should be equitable for individuals from urban areas.	Moderate	Absent	Discriminatory
Ardi	Ardi has been instructing for about 15 years at an elementary school in a rural area of Sumatra. He received introductory Deep Learning training. He did not receive assistance with tools and modules for implementing Deep Learning in classroom practices. He felt that training should be equitable.	Moderate	Absent	Discriminatory

Name	Description	Access	Support	Perception
Tari	Tari has been instructing for approximately 10 years at a public rural school. She had undergone introductory training in Deep Learning. However, she did not receive guidance on implementing Deep Learning in classroom practices. She expressed her belief that additional training for educators in rural regions is necessary.	Moderate	Absent	Discriminatory
Eka	Eka has been instructing for about 10 years in a public elementary school located in an urban region on the island of Java. Eka is a public servant in Indonesia. The school is classified as an eligible institution for Deep Learning training. He participated in several training sessions. He acquired the materials, modules, and additional resources necessary for implementing Deep Learning. He explicitly stated that the regulation had been adopted in accordance with the conditions of teachers from diverse backgrounds.	High	Consistent	Equitable
Ain	Ain is a civil official at a public school in an urban area of Indonesia. She has approximately a decade of teaching experience in the field. Ain's school is qualified to participate in the training. She participated in multiple Deep Learning training sessions and received assistance with the design and implementation processes of Deep Learning instruction. She stated that she would adhere to government regulations, including the criteria for eligibility to participate in the program.	High	Consistent	Equitable
Bujang	Bujang has been instructing for almost 20 years in a public school located in an urban region. He is a public servant. Bujang has participated in multiple training sessions on Deep Learning, as his school qualifies for the program. Bujang received help in the form of resources and modules to implement the method in classroom activities. He also received help from his school. He did not explicitly discuss the regulation, although he anticipated its continuation in his institution.	High	Consistent	Equitable

Name	Description	Access	Support	Perception
Mavi	Mavi has been instructing for 16 years in a public school in a remote district of Java, Indonesia. She is a civil servant who instructs at the elementary school level. Mavi stated that she had never had the opportunity to participate in Deep Learning training due to the constraints of the current regulatory structure. She received no support, including educational resources or technological gadgets to facilitate Deep Learning. She wants to receive the instruction, as she is entitled to it.	Limited	Absent	Discriminatory
Dati	Dati has been instructing for almost 13 years at a public elementary school on the island of Java. Dati is a civil servant pursuing a master's degree. Consequently, she had the opportunity to acquire knowledge about Deep Learning through one of her classes but did not receive it from government officials. She lacked the resources to instruct on Deep Learning regarding the content. She explicitly stated that she felt discriminated against by the current regulations.	Moderate	Absent	Discriminatory
Widi	Widi has over 20 years of teaching experience in a public school in a remote area. He is also a civil servant. Widi stated that he had never had the opportunity to participate in Deep Learning training. He explicitly stated that help from materials and technological equipment was limited. He aspired to participate in the course, believing it would enhance his pedagogical skills and should be accessible to all.	Limited	Absent	Discriminatory

A salient finding concerns the experiences of Ani, Sela, and Yani, who were unable to participate in the training despite their schools meeting the eligibility criteria for the program. All three participants reported exclusion on the basis that they taught lower-grade levels, rendering them ineligible for participation. This exclusion highlights how the policy differentially affects teachers within the same institutional context and intensifies perceptions of discrimination among certain groups. Interpreted through the lens of critical policy theory, these findings suggest that the current policy framework inadequately accounts for intra-school inequalities and fails to ensure fairness and equity across diverse teaching roles in Indonesia (O'Connor & Rudolph, 2023; Diem et al., 2014).

Teachers' Perceptions

The findings indicated that rural teachers were predominantly marginalised by the existing policy, as previously indicated (refer to Table 3 regarding participants' experience and perception). Subsequent investigations examined the potential adverse effects of this. The investigation identified three primary concerns: understanding, teaching procedures and policy

recommendations. Comprehensive details regarding the codes and themes are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. *Code and Theme*

Code	Theme
Access to Deep Learning training	Gap in policy understanding
Support to implement the approach	Limited support for classroom practices
Feeling discriminated	Policy suggestions

Access to Deep Learning Training: Gap in Policy Understanding

Both rural educators from the islands of Sumatra and Java exhibited a limited understanding of Deep Learning compared to their urban counterparts. The following statements, especially from Mavi, revealed apparent ambiguity on the concept of Deep Learning. *"I myself still don't understand what Deep Learning actually looks like."* (Mavi)

Furthermore, several participants completely misunderstood the notion of Deep Learning; when queried about it, their responses were unrelated to the fundamental principles of the Indonesian government. For example: *"In terms of performance and types of data, Deep Learning is more accurate, more precise compared to traditional."* (Ardi) and *"Honestly, I still don't really understand it. But I've started to try to understand it."* (Widi)

These accounts highlight a limited and uneven understanding of Deep Learning among educators in rural Indonesia, which diverges from the definition articulated by the Indonesian government (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of the Republic of Indonesia, 2025b). Notably, Ardi demonstrated a limited grasp of the concept despite having participated in the training programme, suggesting that training access alone does not necessarily translate into conceptual understanding. In contrast, Dati articulated a more nuanced interpretation of Deep Learning during the interview. This divergence points to differences in access to knowledge resources, as Dati attributed her understanding to interactions with subject matter experts during her master's studies. Collectively, these findings indicate variations in educators' conceptual understanding, which is shaped not only by training participation but also by broader professional learning opportunities. From a CPT perspective, policy dissemination may reproduce inequalities by privileging educators with greater professional access and constraining teachers in resource-limited or isolated contexts (Molla, 2021; Young & Diem, 2018; Diem et al., 2014). For example: *"What I understand is that this PM [Deep Learning] is learning that I would say is more contextual … What sticks in my memory are several principles, namely meaningful, mindful, and also joyful."* (Dati)

In contrast, most participants from urban contexts demonstrated a strong understanding of the concept, clearly linking it to their professional perspectives in ways consistent with the definition provided by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of the Republic of Indonesia (2025f). The following excerpts illustrate this pattern:

> *The concept is to honour [the students]. In planning, there are principles that we must implement: mindful, meaningful, and joyful. Then in the stages of the learning process, it must also be sequential, starting from understanding, applying, and reflecting.* (Ain)

> *Deep Learning is more connected to the process in daily life. For example, the photosynthesis material is not just about memorizing how the process works, but how it is applied in everyday life, what the effects.* (Ayla)

The findings revealed a clear disparity in the levels of understanding between educators in rural and urban contexts. Many rural educators demonstrated limited comprehension of the concept; some articulated uncertainty indirectly, while others omitted key elements of the concept. In contrast, educators in urban settings generally demonstrate an understanding of the foundational principles and rationales underpinning Deep Learning. These patterns suggest that the current implementation approach may be insufficient to foster a shared and consistent understanding of the policy across diverse educational contexts (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of the Republic of Indonesia, 2025b). This disparity may reflect CPT's concern with uneven distribution of knowledge and professional resources, where policy dissemination processes inadvertently privilege educators with greater access to training, academic networks, and institutional support, thereby reinforcing structural inequalities in policy enactment (Molla, 2021; Young & Diem, 2018; Diem et al., 2014).

Support to Implement the Approach: Absence of Support for Classroom practices

Following our analysis, we discerned the instructors' strategies for implementing Deep Learning in classroom environments. Rural instructors encounter challenges in classroom practices due to insufficient support. In contrast to their urban counterparts, they possessed a defined strategy for implementing Deep Learning in their classrooms, bolstered by the support they received. The following assertions represent these ideas.

> *It [teaching] was not very optimal due to the earlier conditions, including the children's condition and the internet signal and network conditions.* (Tari)

> *I thought that children from mountainous areas do not really follow technology, because they are far from urban areas.* (Mavi)

The comments from Tari and Mavi clearly demonstrate their situation resulting from little help. In contrast, educators in urban areas report their use of Deep Learning facilitated by technological support; for example: *"Along with the development of technology, we can explore information, and children are also active, and Deep Learning is very much in line with current technological developments."* (Eka)

Eka's account illustrates that educators in urban contexts receive institutional support to implement Deep Learning approaches in their instructional practices. In contrast, the absence of comparable support appears to constrain classroom implementation among educators working in more remote areas, highlighting how uneven support structures shape instructional practices (Young & Diem, 2018). From a CPT perspective (Diem et al., 2014; Molla, 2021), this disparity reveals policy enactment as a mechanism of inequality reproduction, where uneven resource distribution privileges urban voices and capacities while marginalising rural educators.

Feeling Discrimination: Policy Suggestions

The study participants clearly expressed their sentiments regarding the application of the Deep Learning approach. Educators in remote environments shared similar perspectives underscoring the need for equity in training. For example:

> *Provide simultaneous training maybe, yes. Or maybe at least for representatives. Not limited to having differences, for example in the speakers—separating those for teachers in the city and in the village. That way it can be made more equal.* (Tari)
>
> *Information to institutions that indeed have not yet received Deep Learning, it would be wonderful if everyone were given it without discrimination.* (Dati)

Ultimately, several participants called for greater equity and reported perceived discrimination arising from current regulations. These perspectives are particularly significant as they reflect the experiences of grassroots-level educators, who are often marginalised and insufficiently represented in policy processes. These silenced grassroots voices exemplify CPT's core concern (Diem et al., 2014; Molla, 2021): policy hierarchies that privilege dominant actors while reproducing structural disadvantage for rural educators. The findings of this study align with those reported by Yansyah (2020), who similarly indicated that educators in urban contexts tend to benefit more from policy implementation than their rural counterparts.

Inequality: Disadvantaged Group

Considering the above, it is essential to evaluate which group faces discrimination under the current regulations regarding the government's new strategy for Deep Learning. Most rural educators lack training, receive little or no support, and experience discrimination. Teachers' understanding of teachers from rural areas is notably deficient. Numerous participants directly expressed their lack of comprehension of the fundamental concept of Deep Learning, while others exhibited total disengagement. Moreover, participants from urban regions received all the advantages and understood the implementation of Deep Learning concepts in their instructional practices. Ultimately, the application of CPT, which evaluates policy processes and outcomes (O'Connor and Rudolph, 2023; Diem et al., 2014), demonstrates that the rural educators in this study are disadvantaged by existing policy practices, whereas their urban counterparts are likely to benefit.

Implication and Policy Recommendations

Guided by CPT (O'Connor & Rudolph, 2023; Molla, 2021; Diem et al., 2014), the study examined teachers' perspectives on current Deep Learning policy practices across rural and urban contexts in Indonesia, with a primary focus on rural education development. The analysis revealed disparities in access to training, institutional support, and perceptions of policy fairness, alongside differences in teachers' understanding of Deep Learning and challenges in classroom implementation, particularly among educators in rural settings.

Interpreted through the CPT lens, these patterns suggest the presence of power domination in policy design and enactment, as policymaking processes appear to be predominantly shaped by actors situated in urban contexts. This dynamic may contribute to policy frameworks that better align with urban realities while insufficiently addressing rural educators' needs (O'Connor & Rudolph, 2023; Molla, 2021; Diem et al., 2014). Within this context, some urban educators perceive policy implementation as equitable, a perception that CPT helps explain as a product of the prevailing social and institutional structures embedded in policy processes (Fischer et al., 2015). Thus, current policy implementation inadvertently reproduces inequalities, revealing a gap between policy rhetoric and practice. This is evident in mandates from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, such as Regulation Number 13 of 2025 and Government Regulation Number

13/B/HK.03.01/2025 on technical guidelines for Deep Learning training, which require all educators to be equipped with Deep Learning approaches (Diem et al., 2014).

The findings also indicate the presence of intra-school exclusion, which appears more prevalent in rural school contexts. Intra-school exclusion refers to unequal access to professional learning opportunities, decision-making processes, and institutional support within the same school (Yansyah and Dwintan, 2024). Several rural educators reported limited involvement in training and school-level policy discussions, suggesting that disparities are reproduced not only across regions but also within school organisational structures. From a CPT perspective, this pattern reflects how institutional hierarchies may privilege certain educators while marginalising others, reinforcing unequal capacity to interpret and enact policy reforms (O'Connor & Rudolph, 2023; Molla, 2021; Diem et al., 2014). From a CPT perspective, the application of emancipatory and transformative purposes is essential. Schools should thus establish educator-led forums for co-designing reforms alongside critical reflection workshops that draw on historical–ideological critiques to expose hierarchies. Complementing this, governments could mandate policies requiring schools to co-design all reforms, thereby empowering marginalised voices through an emancipatory approach (Molla, 2021; Diem et al., 2014).

These findings are consistent with previous studies, indicating that educators in rural areas often demonstrate a limited understanding of policy initiatives and experience constrained access to training and institutional support within the Indonesian context (Yansyah & Dwintan, 2024; Yansyah, 2020). These results also align with broader scholarship highlighting the persistent marginalisation of grassroots perspectives, particularly those of rural educators within Indonesian education policy discourse (Mukminin et al., 2019; Azzizah, 2015). Such patterns are longstanding and have been documented over time, often with limited corrective interventions (Widiastuti, 2025; Mujiburrohman & Putri, 2024). Moreover, several studies suggest that inadequate policy communication and dissemination contribute to uneven policy understanding and implementation across regions (Yansyah & Dwintan, 2024; Hermawan et al., 2018; Husin, 2018). Thus, Indonesia's education policy still requires further attention to ensure equality, particularly through strengthened inclusive education regulations, resources, and monitoring systems (Kartiko et al., 2025; Indrasti & Jalil, 2019; Manan, 2015). Collectively, these findings contribute to ongoing international debates that emphasise how rural educators have been positioned at the margins of dominant policy power structures for extended periods (Walker-Gibbs et al., 2015; Massey, 1994).

This qualitative study provides context-specific insights into how Deep Learning policies are interpreted and enacted across diverse educational settings. The findings suggest that policymakers would benefit from conducting more comprehensive contextual analyses prior to policy implementation, particularly regarding equitable access, support mechanisms, and communication strategies for educators in rural and urban areas alike. Clearer staging of policy design, implementation, and evaluation processes may help mitigate unintended inequalities. In addition, future policy design and implementation should consider how teachers' gender, school type, teaching tenure, and educational background may shape perceptions of policy discrimination. These factors were not fully explored in this research. While not prescriptive, the study highlights considerations that may inform the revision of existing guidelines, such as Indonesian Government Regulation Number 13/B/Hk.03.01/2025 on Technical Guidelines for Deep Learning Training, to promote more inclusive and context-responsive policy enactment.

Limitations and Future Research

The study focuses on teacher perspectives, which restricts the generalisability of the findings. Additionally, the gender distribution, school type (public vs. private), teaching tenure, and educational backgrounds of the participants were only briefly discussed and not examined in depth, as this might shape perceptions of policy discrimination. Therefore, a study involving a larger participant pool with diverse and proportionate backgrounds and employing diverse methodologies, including surveys, interviews, classroom observations, and student assessments, to examine the extent to which the regulation affects teachers' practices and students' learning outcomes is highly advisable. Furthermore, the policy remains in the first phase of implementation. New research or evaluation should be undertaken after the policy has been in effect for an extended period within three years of implementation of the approach. More participants from diverse regions, particularly from Eastern Indonesia, may provide deeper and more comprehensive insights for future policy recommendations.

Conclusion

The research presented in this paper utilised Critical Policy Theory (CPT) to examine the perspectives of rural teachers in Indonesia, with urban teachers included as a comparative reference. The findings indicate that rural teachers face limited access to training, insufficient institutional support, and perceptions of unequal treatment, which contribute to a weaker understanding of the Deep Learning policy and challenges in classroom implementation. Interpreted through CPT, the findings suggest that current policy design and implementation inadequately consider the needs and contexts of rural educators. Rather than producing generalisable conclusions, this study offers context-specific insights that emphasise the need for more inclusive, rural-centred policy approaches. Policymakers should consider strategies that address geographical and contextual differences to ensure equitable policy enactment across Indonesia's diverse educational settings.

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