

Efforts of Islamic Education Teachers in Optimizing Students' Critical Thinking Skills at SMP Negeri 1 Aikmel

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Abstract: Critical thinking is a core 21st-century skill that must be developed through effective learning processes, particularly in Islamic Education (PAI). This study aims to describe the efforts of PAI teachers in optimizing students' critical thinking skills at SMP Negeri 1 Aikmel. Using a qualitative approach with a case study method, data were obtained through classroom observations, interviews with PAI teachers, and documentation analysis of learning instruments. The findings show that PAI teachers employ various strategies—such as group discussions, case studies, and reflective questioning—to encourage students' critical thinking. These efforts are supported by teachers' readiness in designing contextual learning models, though challenged by limited instructional time and differences in student motivation. It is concluded that the structured and purposeful strategies of PAI teachers play a significant role in fostering students' critical thinking, yet further support from educational stakeholders is still needed.

Keywords: Critical Thinking Skills, Islamic Education, Student Learning, Teacher Strategy

INTRODUCTION

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) plays a vital role in shaping students' character and mindset—not only to become religious individuals but also to be rational and critical thinkers. In the context of 21st-century education, critical thinking skills are fundamental competencies that students must develop to navigate the increasingly complex challenges of modern life (Elder, 2022a; Hitchcock, 2017; Nasri, 2020c, 2020b). Unfortunately, PAI learning in many schools still adheres to a conventional, teacher-centered model that emphasizes rote memorization rather than deep comprehension and analytical reasoning (Nasri, 2020b, 2020a; Paul, 2018; Vincent-Lancrin, 2024a). Critical thinking, as defined by Ennis, is the process of reflective and rational thinking directed toward deciding what to believe or do (Floridi, 2019; Nasri, 2022; Wittgenstein, 1953). In the context of PAI, this ability is essential for fostering a flexible understanding of religion that responds to contemporary issues through logical reasoning. Ideally, PAI teachers should act as facilitators who encourage students to question, analyze, and evaluate religious matters critically. However, in practice, this ideal has yet to be fully realized in many classrooms (Nasri, 2016a, 2016b).

Several previous studies have emphasized the importance of teaching strategies in

developing students' critical thinking skills. For instance, Cayud-ong and Futralan (2024) found that mathematics teachers who employed open-ended questions, problem-based learning, and reflective discussions were able to significantly enhance their students' analytical thinking. Although their study was in the context of mathematics, the findings highlight the transferable nature of strategic approaches across disciplines. Furthermore, a meta-analysis by Abrami et al. (2015) confirmed that explicit instructional strategies designed to teach critical thinking have a significant positive effect on students' reasoning abilities across educational levels.

Additional research by Mirza and Jabeen (2024) revealed that an open learning environment—where questioning and critique are encouraged—along with the use of interactive methods such as role plays and debates, effectively promotes reflective thinking among students. Similarly, Xie (2024) argued that giving students space to construct arguments and evaluate multiple perspectives within the classroom significantly contributes to their critical thinking development. While these studies have contributed valuable insights into the teaching of critical thinking, most of them focus on general education subjects or urban school settings. There is a noticeable gap in the literature regarding how Islamic Education teachers, particularly in rural junior high schools,

apply strategies to develop students' critical thinking. This gap provides a compelling rationale to explore the practices of PAI teachers at SMP Negeri 1 Aikmel, a public school located in East Lombok, Indonesia. The school presents a diverse student population with various academic abilities and socio-religious backgrounds, making it an appropriate context to examine the challenges and innovations in PAI pedagogy.

The novelty of this study lies in its specific focus on the strategies used by PAI teachers to foster critical thinking in students through contextual and reflective classroom approaches in a rural Indonesian junior high school. Moreover, this research incorporates cultural and local educational dimensions that have rarely been explored in previous studies, contributing new insights to the discourse on critical Islamic pedagogy. Therefore, the contribution of this study is twofold. Theoretically, it expands the literature on contextualized Islamic Religious Education that aligns with 21st-century competencies. Practically, it offers valuable references for educators, school administrators, and policymakers to design more effective, student-centered religious learning environments that support the development of critical thinking skills.

METHODS

Research Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach with a case study design (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Moleong, 2017; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The objective was to gain an in-depth understanding of the strategies used by Islamic Education (PAI) teachers in fostering students' critical thinking skills at SMP Negeri 1 Aikmel. A qualitative method was selected to capture natural, holistic, and contextual phenomena occurring within the classroom setting. It also enabled the researcher to interpret the meanings and experiences from the teachers' perspectives (Marshall & B. Rossman, 2016; Patton, 2002).

Research Setting and Duration

The research was conducted at **SMP Negeri 1 Aikmel**, East Lombok, Indonesia, from **January to March 2025**. This school was selected purposively due to its diversity of student backgrounds and the active implementation of Islamic Education programs

that emphasize the development of thinking skills.

Participants (Population and Sample)

The participants included two Islamic Education (PAI) teachers teaching Grades VII to IX and several students who were involved in classroom observations. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, where participants were selected based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives (W. Creswell & N. Poth, 2018).

Research Procedures

The research process followed these steps:

1. **Planning:** Determining the research focus, instruments, and participants.
2. **Data Collection:** Conducting observations, interviews, and collecting documents.
3. **Data Analysis:** Reducing, displaying, and drawing conclusions from the data.
4. **Validation:** Verifying findings through triangulation and member checking.
5. **Reporting:** Compiling the research results into a comprehensive report.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected using three primary techniques:

1. Observation

Non-participatory classroom observations were carried out during PAI lessons to identify learning activities that promote critical thinking (Walsh, 2009). An observation checklist was used to focus on teacher-student interactions and instructional methods (P. Spradley, 1980).

2. Interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the PAI teachers using open-ended questions. The aim was to explore their teaching strategies, challenges, and planning processes. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for thematic insights (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

3. Documentation

Documents such as lesson plans (RPP), student worksheets, and teaching materials were collected and analyzed to determine how critical thinking components were embedded in the learning design (De Sordi, 2024; Phillips, 1999; Raja Sree & Mary Saira Bhanu, 2020).

Data Analysis Techniques

The data were analyzed using **Miles and Huberman’s** (1994) interactive model, which consists of:

- 1. **Data Reduction:** Selecting and simplifying raw data from interviews, observations, and documents to focus on relevant aspects of teaching strategies.
- 2. **Data Display:** Organizing data into matrices and thematic charts to facilitate analysis and interpretation.
- 3. **Conclusion Drawing and Verification:** Identifying patterns, themes, and drawing conclusions, which were verified through triangulation and member checking (B. Miles, et al., 2014; Saldana, 2011, 2016).

Trustworthiness of Data

To ensure the rigor of the study, four criteria by Lincoln and Guba (2011) were applied:

- 1) **Credibility:** Achieved through prolonged engagement, triangulation, and peer debriefing.
- 2) **Transferability:** Ensured by providing rich, detailed descriptions of the context and participants.
- 3) **Dependability:** Maintained through a documented audit trail of the research process.
- 4) **Confirmability:** Ensured by minimizing researcher bias and validating data with participants.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, the researcher secured official permission from the school and obtained informed verbal consent from participants. Participants were informed of their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study (Afiyanti, 2008; Arslan, 2022; Liubyva & Maksymenko, 2023; Porter, 2007; Zilinski & Nelson, 2014).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This study found that Islamic Education (PAI) teachers at SMP Negeri 1 Aikmel used a variety of strategies to foster students’ critical thinking skills. These strategies were identified across three major aspects: lesson planning, classroom implementation, and assessment methods. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation and were categorized thematically.

1. Integration of Critical Thinking in Lesson Planning

The teachers consciously designed lesson plans that integrated critical thinking indicators such as analyzing values, formulating arguments, and problem-solving. This was evident from the learning objectives written in the lesson plans, which included verbs such as "evaluate," "analyze," and "compare" that align with higher-order thinking skills in Bloom’s taxonomy.

Table 1. Examples of Learning Objectives Promoting Critical Thinking

Grade	Topic	Learning Objective
VII	Faith in Angels	Students are able to evaluate the role of angels in the context of daily life.
VIII	Islamic Brotherhood (Ukhuwwah)	Students are able to analyze social problems based on the value of brotherhood.
IX	Leadership in Islam	Students are able to compare Islamic leadership principles with modern practice.

Source: Analysis of lesson plans (RPP), 2025

2. Use of Interactive and Reflective Teaching Methods

Teachers employed methods such as group discussions, case studies, questioning techniques, and real-life problem analysis to stimulate students’ reasoning and argumentation. For instance, in a lesson on Islamic ethics, the teacher asked students to reflect on a real incident from the local community and discuss it in light of Islamic teachings. Observation showed that

students were more engaged when the teacher allowed open dialogue and provided space for differing opinions. These dialogic strategies created a more democratic classroom environment and encouraged students to articulate and defend their thoughts (Nasri, 2016b).

Based on the classroom observation conducted at **SMP Negeri 1 Aikmel**, it was found that Islamic Education (PAI) teachers actively

employed interactive and reflective teaching methods as part of their efforts to enhance students' critical thinking skills. The teachers used approaches such as group discussions, case studies, open-ended questioning techniques, and real-life problem analysis that were relevant to students' daily lives. For example, in a lesson on Islamic ethics, the teacher introduced a real incident from the local community and encouraged students to reflect on and discuss it in light of Islamic principles. The observation revealed that this strategy significantly increased student engagement. Students became more active in discussions, confidently expressed their opinions, and demonstrated the ability to formulate logical and structured arguments.

These dialogic strategies also contributed to the creation of a more democratic classroom atmosphere, where students felt valued and had the freedom to voice their thoughts. This shows that the teacher acted not merely as a transmitter of knowledge but as a facilitator who fostered meaningful and contextual learning to cultivate students' higher-order thinking skills (Nasri, 2024; Nasri & Mulyohadi, 2023). In conclusion, the Islamic Education teacher at SMP Negeri 1 Aikmel has taken strategic and progressive steps in nurturing students' critical thinking abilities. These efforts align with the demands of 21st-century education, which emphasizes the importance of developing critical thinking to address complex social and moral challenges.

3. Contextualization and Local Relevance

Teachers adapted Islamic values to local sociocultural issues. For example, during a lesson on honesty, the teacher connected the material to the issue of corruption in village institutions. This approach made the discussion more relevant and pushed students to think beyond memorization, linking Islamic values with real-world problems (Nasri, 2016a). At **SMP Negeri 1 Aikmel**, the Islamic Education teacher effectively contextualized lesson content by linking Islamic values to local sociocultural issues. For instance, in a lesson on honesty, the teacher connected the material to cases of corruption in village institutions. This strategy made the lesson more meaningful and encouraged students to apply Islamic teachings to real-life situations, thereby strengthening their critical thinking and moral awareness beyond rote learning.

4. Challenges Encountered

Despite the success in implementing some strategies, teachers faced several challenges:

- a. **Time constraints** due to the density of the curriculum.
- b. **Uneven student motivation**, where only some students actively engaged in reflective tasks.
- c. **Limited access to varied teaching resources**, making it difficult to design diverse activities.

At **SMP Negeri 1 Aikmel**, teachers experienced several notable challenges while promoting students' critical thinking through Islamic Education. First, the dense curriculum limited the time available for reflective and interactive activities. Second, student engagement was uneven—only a portion of the class actively participated in critical discussions, while others remained passive. Third, the limited availability of diverse instructional resources hindered the teacher's ability to create varied and stimulating learning experiences. These challenges highlight the need for curriculum flexibility, differentiated instruction, and improved resource support.

Discussion

The findings of this study affirm that critical thinking development is possible within the Islamic Education (PAI) classroom when teachers intentionally incorporate it into their planning and teaching strategies. The deliberate use of learning objectives targeting higher-order thinking aligns with the recommendations by Abrami et al. (2015), who emphasize that explicit instruction in critical thinking has a significant impact on student outcomes. *In the case of SMP Negeri 1 Aikmel, this deliberate planning was evident in several classroom sessions observed by the researcher.*

The use of contextual and reflective teaching strategies is in line with Cayud-ong & Futralan (2024), who found that engaging students in real-world problems through discussions and analysis fosters deeper critical thinking. Similarly, the dialogic approach observed in this study resonates with Mirza & Jabeen (2024), who highlight the importance of promoting classroom interactions that support open inquiry. *In the observed classrooms at SMP Negeri 1 Aikmel, teachers who encouraged open-ended questions and respected students' diverse opinions contributed significantly to a more democratic and participative learning environment.*

A distinctive feature in this study is the integration of local issues into religious instruction, which not only made the lessons

more relatable but also served as a meaningful stimulus for critical reflection (DiYanni et al., 2020; Elder, 2022b; Vincent-Lancrin, 2024b). This approach demonstrates how PAI can transcend the traditional cognitive paradigm and evolve into a transformative pedagogical space. *Based on observations, students were more engaged and willing to connect Islamic values with community realities when learning was grounded in their own sociocultural context.*

However, the challenges identified also mirror those found in the literature. Xie (2024) notes that even when teachers are equipped with strategies, factors such as classroom size, time limitations, and diverse learning readiness can hinder optimal implementation. The issue of student motivation—particularly in rural contexts—is also a consistent barrier, highlighting the need for strategies that address student engagement more systematically (Hady et al., 2025; Hajras & Nasri, 2025; Nasri et al., 2025; Rahmatullah et al., 2025; Rasyidi et al., 2025). *This was also apparent at SMP Negeri 1 Aikmel, where despite innovative strategies, some students remained passive—underscoring the complexity of cultivating critical thinking in heterogeneous classroom settings.*

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this study supports the view that Islamic Religious Education, when positioned within a constructivist and contextual framework, can serve as an effective medium for nurturing critical thinking. It challenges the stereotype of PAI as merely dogmatic and shows its potential for cultivating reflective, socially-aware individuals. Practically, the study suggests that teacher training programs for PAI educators must incorporate modules on critical thinking pedagogy, reflective questioning, and contextual teaching. Furthermore, policymakers should support schools in providing time, resources, and flexibility in curriculum implementation to allow for deeper, critical engagement in religious education. *The case of SMP Negeri 1 Aikmel shows that, with proper support and training, even schools in rural areas can become fertile ground for critical, value-oriented learning.*

CONCLUSION

This study explored the strategies used by Islamic Education (PAI) teachers at SMP Negeri 1 Aikmel to promote critical thinking among students. The findings reveal that when teachers consciously design lessons with higher-order

thinking objectives, integrate reflective dialogue, and contextualize learning with local sociocultural issues, PAI can become a powerful tool for shaping students' critical consciousness. Despite facing challenges such as limited time, uneven student motivation, and scarce teaching resources, teachers demonstrated creativity and commitment in fostering meaningful learning.

The study concludes that Islamic Religious Education does not have to remain within the confines of rote learning. Instead, it holds transformative potential when aligned with contextual realities and reflective pedagogy. Schools, teacher education institutions, and policymakers must support this transformation by providing training, flexibility, and resources. With such support, schools—even in rural settings like SMP Negeri 1 Aikmel—can cultivate students who not only understand religious teachings but can also apply them critically in addressing real-world moral and social challenges.

The implications of this study are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it reinforces the relevance of constructivist learning models in Islamic education. Practically, it underlines the need for teacher training programs to include modules on critical thinking, reflective pedagogy, and contextual teaching. Additionally, educational policymakers must ensure that schools are equipped with the necessary support—such as time allocation, access to diverse learning materials, and curriculum flexibility—to enable meaningful critical engagement in PAI classrooms.

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