

Improving Critical Thinking Skills Through Islamic Religious Education Learning: Case Study at Muhammadiyah Perumnas Elementary School

Sulfiadi¹, Ferdinan², Abd. Rahman³

^{1,2,3}Universitas Muhammadiyah Makassar, 90221, Makasar, Indonesia

Article Info

Keywords:

Teacher Learning Strategy
Critical Thinking Skills
Islamic Religious Education
Student Learning
Qualitative Research

ABSTRACT

This study aims to (1) identify the strategies used by Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers to enhance students' critical thinking skills at SD Muhammadiyah Perumnas, (2) describe the level of critical thinking skills among students, and (3) examine the supporting and inhibiting factors affecting the implementation of these strategies. A qualitative research approach was employed, prioritizing data related to the IRE teacher's strategies. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. The findings show that IRE teachers apply various strategies, such as delivering religious knowledge, stimulating student thinking, and providing constructive guidance to foster positive critical thinking. Students' critical thinking abilities generally develop progressively, though unevenly. Some students display improvement through active questioning and discussion, while others remain passive due to low confidence or lack of focus. Supporting factors include the use of varied learning strategies, encouraging approaches, school support through curriculum integration, and engaging IRE instruction. Inhibiting factors involve students' lack of seriousness, limited focus, and diverse cognitive abilities. These insights underscore the importance of strategic and adaptive teaching to promote critical thinking in religious education.

This is an open-access article under the [CC BY-SA](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/) license.



Corresponding Author:

Sulfiadi
Universitas Muhammadiyah Makassar, 90221, Makasar, Indonesia
Email: sulfisulfiadi3456@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

The 21st century marks a significant transformation from an industrial society to a knowledge-based society, characterized by the rapid development of technology and access to information [1]. This digital era offers vast opportunities for expanding knowledge, yet it also poses major challenges. The overload of unverified information has led to difficulties in filtering and validating data, especially among younger generations. In response, global education has emphasized the importance of 21st-century skills, notably the 4Cs: critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and communication [2]. Among these, *critical thinking* stands out as a foundational skill in navigating the complexities of modern life, particularly in religious education [3].

Critical thinking enables learners to analyze, evaluate, and make informed decisions [3]. In the context of Islamic Religious Education (IRE), it is essential not only for understanding religious texts and principles but also for avoiding blind adherence (*taqlid buta*), religious fanaticism, and misinterpretation of doctrines [4][5]. The Qur'an itself, notably in Surah Ali' Imran [3]:190–191, encourages reflection and rational thinking as part of faith, urging believers to contemplate the signs of God in the creation of the heavens and the earth [6]. Thus, integrating critical thinking into religious learning aligns with the core teachings of Islam and strengthens a learner's capacity to avoid radicalism and intolerance.

Despite this necessity, many IRE teachers still focus on rote memorization and textual knowledge transfer rather than encouraging deeper reasoning and reflective inquiry. Surveys by Wahid Foundation and LaKIP highlight

the presence of radical views and intolerance among school-age learners, revealing a gap in how religious education is delivered. This raises concerns about pedagogical strategies that fail to foster independent thinking [7]. Therefore, developing effective teaching strategies to promote critical thinking within IRE becomes imperative.

Previous studies have explored various strategies to enhance critical thinking in different contexts. For instance, Afni (2020) found that implementing Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) concepts improved student engagement and learning outcomes [8]. Darmawan (2021) emphasized the use of religious habituation and modeling in shaping students' religiosity [9]. Royani (2022) demonstrated the role of motivational techniques in increasing student interest in IRE subjects [10]. However, limited research has addressed the specific strategies used by IRE teachers in elementary schools to develop critical thinking in a structured and sustainable way.

This study aims to fill that gap by investigating the strategies employed by IRE teachers to improve critical thinking among students at SD Muhammadiyah Perumnas. The school was selected due to its strategic location and its promising academic environment. The research explores not only the instructional methods used but also evaluates students' actual critical thinking development and identifies supporting and hindering factors within the teaching-learning process. The expected contribution is to offer practical insights and innovative approaches that can be adapted by educators to enhance the quality of religious education in the 21st century.

2. METHOD

This study applies a qualitative descriptive approach through field research. This approach aims to systematically and deeply describe the strategies of Islamic Education (PAI) teachers in enhancing the critical thinking skills of students at SD Muhammadiyah Perumnas. Qualitative descriptive research focuses on understanding social phenomena holistically and contextually through direct interaction between the researcher and the research subjects in a natural setting [11].

2.1 Research Procedures

2.1.1 Preparation Phase

- Problem Identification: Defining research focus based on literature review and preliminary observations.
- Ethical Clearance: Securing permits from the school.
- Instrument Development: Preparing interview guides, observation sheets, and documentation protocols

2.1.2 Data Collection Phase

- Classroom Observation: Monitoring teacher-student interactions for 4 weeks
- Semi-Structured Interviews: Conducting interviews with PAI teachers and students.
- Documentation: Collecting lesson plans (RPP), photos, and audio recordings.

2.1.3 Data Analysis Phase

- Data Reduction: Thematic categorization (e.g., teaching strategies, student responses).
- Data Display: Presenting findings narratively and in tables.
- Verification: Triangulation (teacher, student, document) for validity.

2.1.4 Testing and Data Acquisition

- Validity: Methodological triangulation (observation, interviews, documents) and peer review.
- Reliability: Standardized interview protocols.
- Data Acquisition: Primary data from fieldwork and secondary data from journals.

2.2 Data Validity

To ensure the credibility of the findings, the researcher applied triangulation of sources and methods. Information from interviews, observations, and documentation was compared and cross-validated. This method increases the reliability of the research and minimizes bias.



Figure 1. Research Flow

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Islamic Religious Education Teachers' Strategies in Improving Critical Thinking Skills of Muhammadiyah Perumnas Elementary School Students

Data collected through interviews, observations, and documentation reveal that the teacher implements several key strategies. These are categorized into three main areas: delivering contextual religious content, stimulating student thinking through discussions and questions, and guiding students through hands-on practice. Each strategy is analyzed below and supported with direct quotes from interviews to validate the findings.

3.1.1 Delivering Religious Content and Insights in a Contextual Way

The Islamic Education teacher does not merely deliver theoretical material, but also aligns it with the students' needs and context. This approach reflects the constructivist learning theory, where students build knowledge through experience and interaction with their environment. The principal, Mrs. Subaedah, explained:

"In the learning process, the approach is adjusted to the needs of the students. At SD Muhammadiyah Perumnas, there are also students with special needs, so the teaching strategy must be flexible. The main focus is on improving Qur'an reading skills and instilling core religious values, including religious moderation and tolerance."

One student, Ahzan Maulana Hamka, also shared:

"In the Islamic class, I learned a lot about the pillars of faith, the pillars of Islam, and how to behave well according to Islamic teachings. The teacher explained everything clearly, so I could understand easily."

These statements indicate that the Islamic Education learning process at SD Muhammadiyah Perumnas focuses on strengthening basic religious values tailored to students' needs. Students not only understand Islamic teachings conceptually but also begin to relate them to daily life, which is a key aspect of critical thinking rooted in values. Islamic Religious Education teachers not only deliver material theoretically, but also relate it to the needs and conditions of students, including students with special needs. This strategy is in line with constructivism theory, which emphasizes that learning must start from students' initial experiences and knowledge. The teacher's focus on strengthening basic Islamic values such as the pillars of faith, the pillars of Islam, tolerance, and religious moderation encourages students not only to memorize but also to understand and relate religious material to real situations in their lives.

This approach is in line with Vygotsky's view that students' proximal development zones can be optimized through appropriate guidance, especially by considering the individual needs of students. Teachers have also demonstrated inclusivity in teaching, which is an important foundation for the formation of students' critical reasoning in dealing with social diversity.

3.1.2 Stimulating Thinking Through Questions and Discussions

The second strategy involves the use of trigger questions, facilitating discussions, and encouraging students to express their opinions. This reflects an active and problem-based learning approach, which is essential for developing critical thinking skills. The Islamic Education teacher, Mrs. Marhana Sanati, stated:

"We often conduct discussions, especially to train students' critical thinking and their courage to express opinions. We, as teachers, try to create a supportive atmosphere. Unlike in the past, where the teaching was authoritarian, now we act more like facilitators."

She also added:

"For example, when discussing the issue of bullying, students are asked to express their views and respond from the perspective of Islamic law."

This demonstrates that students are encouraged not only to understand issues but also to formulate solutions based on religious teachings—a higher-order thinking process involving analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. Another student, Abraham Mubaraq, shared his experience:

"One day in Islamic class, our teacher asked us to discuss how to respect religious differences. I had to think critically because I needed to find reasons why we should respect people with different religions. I said we must respect each other so that we can live in harmony."

This confirms that through discussion, students are trained to analyze social phenomena and connect them with Islamic principles, fostering reflective and reasoned attitudes.

Islamic Religious Education teachers actively use questioning strategies at the beginning of learning as a stimulus for students to think more deeply. This strategy supports the theory of active learning, where students are encouraged to participate in the process of thinking, answering, and evaluating information. Group discussions and case studies used by teachers also reflect the practice of problem-based learning, which is known as an effective method for training critical thinking skills.

The data shows that teachers act as facilitators, not authoritarian instructors. This change shows a shift in the educational paradigm towards a humanistic approach, where teachers provide space for students to express opinions, questions, and develop their own arguments based on Islamic values. This is important because critical thinking cannot grow in a pressuring environment, but rather in an open and respectful atmosphere.

3.1.3 Guiding Students Through Direct Practice

The final strategy includes providing examples and direct practice, such as performing prayer (salat) and using visual media. This aligns with Kolb's experiential learning approach, which emphasizes that direct experience is essential for internalizing concepts and fostering reflection. The teacher explained:



"I usually use pictures and books so students can understand the material faster. If I just explain orally, it's often ineffective. That's why I combine it with hands-on practice, like salat and recitation demonstrations. When students see or do it themselves, they understand better and start to ask deeper questions."

This shows that hands-on practice is an effective learning strategy. The teacher not only relies on written material but also provides real examples, helping students understand the subject matter more clearly. This method also supports a more interactive and engaging learning environment. The last strategy identified is providing direction through demonstration methods or direct practice. Teachers use visual media and practice worship procedures (such as prayer) directly in class. This strategy is very helpful in forming a concrete understanding, as well as providing opportunities for students to actively construct their own knowledge, which is the main principle in David Kolb's experiential learning theory.

This direct practice not only improves students' understanding of religious teachings technically, but also encourages students to think reflectively, ask questions, and understand the meaning of the practice. Thus, students not only carry out worship as a routine, but also begin to interpret and criticize the practice according to the Islamic values they have learned.

3.2 Students' Critical Thinking Ability at SD Muhammadiyah Perumnas

Critical thinking skills refer to the ability to analyze, evaluate, and logically and objectively interpret information to arrive at appropriate decisions or problem-solving strategies. To understand how critical thinking skills are developed among students at SD Muhammadiyah Perumnas, the researcher conducted interviews with the principal, Mrs. Subaedah, S.Pd, the Islamic Education teacher, Mrs. Marhana Sanati, S.Pd.I, and two fourth-grade students, Ahzan Maulana Hamka and Abraham Mubaraq.

The findings reveal that students' critical thinking abilities in the Islamic Education (PAI) subject vary significantly in their development. According to Mrs. Marhana:

"I've observed that the development of students' critical thinking skills in PAI lessons is quite diverse. Some students show progress, like asking questions and expressing opinions during discussions. However, others remain passive or just play around. This often stems from a lack of confidence or focus. Nonetheless, with the right methods, such as discussion and visual media, they are gradually becoming more engaged. I'm optimistic that, although not yet even, their critical thinking can continue to grow with patient and consistent guidance."

The principal, Mrs. Subaedah, added:

"I usually ask the Islamic Education teacher directly about how students are engaging in the process. I don't evaluate students directly, but rely on the teacher's assessment of whether the student is able to follow the learning process."

Based on these interviews, it can be concluded that students' critical thinking skills in PAI at SD Muhammadiyah Perumnas are developing gradually, though not uniformly. While some students actively engage by asking questions and participating in discussions, others remain less involved due to low self-confidence or lack of focus. However, the use of appropriate teaching methods—especially group discussions and visual aids—paired with consistent mentoring from teachers, can help improve these skills over time. Teachers serve as the main observers and assessors of the students' critical thinking abilities through daily classroom interactions.

Moreover, the students themselves acknowledged the benefits of critical thinking acquired in Islamic Education lessons. Ahzan shared:

"In my opinion, the critical thinking skills I learn in PAI really help in other subjects too, because I become more able to think before answering or deciding something. For example, when I face a difficult question, I can think calmly and find out the answer."

Abraham added:

"It's useful in daily life—like if there's a problem, I can find a solution more wisely and not rush. So, I understand better what is right and wrong, and I can respect others' opinions too."

These reflections show that the critical thinking skills developed in Islamic Education are not only applied academically but also extend into the students' daily lives. The ability to remain calm in decision-making, discern right from wrong, and appreciate differing viewpoints is a key indicator of maturing critical thinking.

3.3 Students' Critical Thinking Ability at SD Muhammadiyah Perumnas

Critical thinking refers to the capacity to analyze, evaluate, and draw conclusions from information in a logical and objective manner, with the goal of reaching effective decisions or problem-solving strategies. To explore students' critical thinking abilities in the context of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SD Muhammadiyah Perumnas, the researcher conducted interviews with the principal, Mrs. Subaedah, S.Pd, the Islamic Education teacher,

Mrs. Marhana Sanati, S.Pd.I, and two Grade IV students, Ahzan Maulana Hamka and Abraham Mubaraq. According to Mrs. Marhana Sanati:

"I've observed that the development of students' critical thinking skills in PAI lessons is quite diverse. Some students show progress, like asking questions and expressing opinions during discussions. However, others remain passive or just play around. This often stems from a lack of confidence or focus. Nonetheless, with the right methods, such as discussion and visual media, they are gradually becoming more engaged. I'm optimistic that, although not yet even, their critical thinking can continue to grow with patient and consistent guidance."

The principal, Mrs. Subaedah, added:

"I usually ask the Islamic Education teacher directly about how students are engaging in the process. I don't evaluate students directly, but rely on the teacher's assessment of whether the student is able to follow the learning process."

These interview findings indicate that students' critical thinking abilities in PAI are developing progressively, albeit unevenly. Some students exhibit initiative by posing questions and contributing to class discussions, while others remain passive due to limited self-confidence or focus. Nevertheless, through the application of interactive strategies—such as group discussions and visual media—paired with continuous teacher guidance, students are showing increased engagement and cognitive growth. The teacher thus plays a central role in both facilitating learning and assessing the development of critical thinking through daily classroom interactions.

Additionally, insights from the students reflect the impact of critical thinking skills beyond the classroom. Ahzan remarked:

"In my opinion, the critical thinking skills I learn in PAI really help in other subjects too, because I become more able to think before answering or deciding something. For example, when I face a difficult question, I can think calmly and find out the answer."

Meanwhile, Abraham added:

"It's useful in daily life—like if there's a problem, I can find a solution more wisely and not rush. So, I understand better what is right and wrong, and I can respect others' opinions too."

These responses underscore that the development of critical thinking in PAI lessons not only enhances academic performance across subjects but also shapes students' decision-making in everyday situations. Students learn to remain calm under pressure, distinguish right from wrong, and cultivate mutual respect, key outcomes of a maturing critical mindset shaped by values-based education.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the research, it can be concluded that the strategies used by Islamic Education teachers at SD Muhammadiyah Perumnas to enhance students' critical thinking skills include delivering relevant religious material, providing stimuli to encourage thinking, and offering positive guidance to shape critical thinking in a constructive direction. Overall, students' critical thinking abilities have shown gradual improvement, although not evenly distributed, some students are already actively asking questions and participating in discussions, while others remain passive due to a lack of confidence or focus. Supporting factors in this development include the use of varied teaching strategies, school support through the integration of critical thinking in teaching modules, and students' interest in engaging Islamic Education lessons. However, the process also faces obstacles such as students' lack of seriousness, differences in cognitive abilities, limited focus during learning, and external pressures such as high parental expectations and child protection policies that restrict strict teaching approaches.

REFERENCES

- [1] N. P. A. H. Sanjayanti, S. Darmayanti, D. Qondias, and K. O. Sanjaya, "Integrasi keterampilan 4C dalam modul metodologi penelitian," vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 407–415, 2020.
- [2] L. Nuryanti, S. Zubaidah, and M. Diantoro, "Analisis kemampuan berpikir kritis siswa SMP," vol. 3, pp. 155–158, 2018.
- [3] A. Nurjaman, *Peningkatan Kemampuan Berpikir Kritis Dalam Pembelajaran Pendidikan Agama Islam Melalui Implementasi Desain Pembelajaran "Assure."* Indramayu: Penerbit Adab, 2021.
- [4] Suwarjin, *Sejarah Perkembangan Fikih*. Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2017.
- [5] N. Wiyani, "Pendidikan agama Islam berbasis anti terorisme di SMA," vol. 2, no. 1, p. 83, 2013.
- [6] "Al Qur'an dan Terjemahannya (Surah Ali Imran (3) : 190-191)."
- [7] E. P. Rabbani, "Pengembangan keterampilan 4c melalui metode poster comment pada mata pelajaran pai dan budi pekerti (Penelitian di SMA Negeri 26 Bandung)," vol. 2, no. 1, p. 466, 2018.



- [8] A. F. Afni, “Strategi guru PAI dalam meningkatkan kemampuan berpikir kritis dengan konsep HOTS (Higher Order Thinking Skill) pada siswa kelas VIII di SMP Negeri 13 Malang,” undergraduate, Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim, 2020. Accessed: Jul. 01, 2025. [Online]. Available: <http://etheses.uin-malang.ac.id/23917/>
- [9] D. Darmawan, M. P. Prof. Dr. Bambang Sumardjoko, and M. A. Dr. Mutohharun Jinan, “Strategi Guru Pendidikan Agama Islam Dalam Meningkatkan Religiusitas Siswa Di SD Muhammadiyah Program Unggulan Gedongan Dan SD Muhammadiyah Plus Malangjwan Colomadu Karanganyar Tahun 2019,” s2, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta, 2021. doi: 10/LAMPIRAN.pdf.
- [10] A. ROYANI, “STRATEGI GURU DALAM MENINGKATKAN MINAT DAN MOTIVASI BELAJAR PESERTA DIDIK PADA PELAJARAN PENDIDIKAN AGAMA ISLAM DAN BUDI PEKERTI DI SD NEGERI GENUKSARI 01 SEMARANG TAHUN AJARAN 2022/2023,” undergraduate, Universitas Islam Sultan Agung, 2023. Accessed: Jul. 01, 2025. [Online]. Available: <https://repository.unissula.ac.id/30306/>
- [11] Sugiyono, *Metode Penelitian Kuantitatif, Kualitatif dan R&D*. Bandung: Alfabeta, 2019.