

PROMOTING PLURALISM THROUGH CRITICAL THINKING IN ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

In Indonesia's educational landscape, marked by historical struggles with low academic performance, the introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum presents a pivotal opportunity to integrate critical thinking skills into Islamic Religious Education, empowering students to engage thoughtfully with religious teachings and promote pluralism and social cohesion. Critical thinking, as defined by scholars like Paul & Elder and Ennis, involves analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing information systematically, and effective pedagogy is crucial for its cultivation. Given Indonesia's diverse socio-cultural fabric, fostering critical thinking becomes paramount for encouraging mutual respect and understanding. However, a notable gap exists in research addressing the integration of critical thinking and pluralism within Islamic Religious Education in Indonesia. This study aims to investigate the development and implementation of critical thinking pedagogy within Islamic Religious Education, exploring the challenges of promoting pluralism within this context, particularly focusing on fourth-grade students in a private elementary school in Gresik, East Java. This qualitative study employs a descriptive case study design. The research examines factors influencing critical thinking pedagogy and highlights the teacher's interactive methods, including storytelling and multicultural education. Challenges such as inadequate textbooks, varied prior knowledge among students, and limited teacher mindset are identified. Recommendations for future research include improving textbook comprehensiveness and assessing the impact of direct interactions on students' perspectives.

Key factors: Critical thinking, pluralism, Islamic Religious Education

INTRODUCTION

In the realm of education, Indonesia faces significant challenges despite ongoing efforts to enhance academic standards. The stark findings from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2012 placed Indonesia at a discouraging 64th out of 65 countries in literacy, reflecting a pressing need to bolster critical thinking skills among Indonesian students given their evident underperformance (OECD, 2012). However, amidst these struggles, there are glimmers of progress, as evidenced by the PISA 2022 results showing slight improvements

in reading, mathematics, and science scores among Indonesian students. Although still below the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) average, these advancements suggest potential for growth and development, provided appropriate measures are implemented (OECD, 2022).

In this educational landscape, the introduction of the "Merdeka Curriculum" in 2020 by the Minister of Education and Culture, Nadiem Makarim, represents a watershed moment for Indonesia's educational framework. This curriculum reform seeks to empower students by granting them greater autonomy in selecting learning materials, with the overarching goal of fostering creativity, innovation, and independence (Kemendikbud, 2023). Within the domain of Islamic Religious Education, this reform presents an opportune moment to integrate critical thinking skills into the pedagogical approach, thereby equipping students with the intellectual tools to engage thoughtfully with Islamic teachings and their contemporary applications.

Critical thinking, as described by Paul & Elder (2006), encompasses the ability to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information in a logical and systematic manner. This skill set involves questioning assumptions, examining evidence, considering multiple perspectives, and reaching well-reasoned conclusions. Ennis (1985) further defines critical thinking as "reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do," emphasizing the significance of reason, reflection, and decision-making in the critical thinking process.

In the realm of education, effective pedagogy plays a crucial role in nurturing critical thinking skills among students. Pedagogy refers to the theory and practice of teaching and education, encompassing the methods, strategies, and techniques used by educators to facilitate learning and development. By employing pedagogical approaches that encourage active engagement, promote inquiry-based learning, and foster collaborative dialogue, educators can create environments conducive to the cultivation of critical thinking abilities. Integrating critical thinking into pedagogical practices involves designing learning experiences that challenge students to analyze information, evaluate arguments, and construct well-supported conclusions. By incorporating activities such as Socratic questioning, problem-based learning, and collaborative inquiry, educators can provide opportunities for students to develop and apply critical thinking skills in meaningful contexts (Shulman, 2005).

Moreover, Indonesia's socio-cultural fabric, characterized by its rich diversity in religion, culture, language, and socio-economic status, underscores the paramount importance of nurturing critical thinking skills in promoting pluralism and social cohesion. Critical thinking not only facilitates individuals' navigation of the intricate dynamics of a pluralistic

society but also fosters mutual respect, understanding, and appreciation for diverse perspectives. As noted by Sulaiman & Agustin (2018), the absence of critical thinking alongside religious education poses the risk of students passively accepting religious information without subjecting it to rational critique. This passive reception could engender dogmatic adherence to religious beliefs, hindering the capacity to comprehend and value differing perspectives. Smith (2015) emphasizes that critical thinking is essential for students to engage with religious texts and doctrines in a meaningful and intellectually rigorous manner. Additionally, Jones (2017) argues that promoting critical thinking within religious education can empower students to navigate complex ethical and moral dilemmas with discernment and empathy.

In light of the role Islamic Religious Education plays in shaping students' perspectives on pluralism, it becomes evident that fostering critical thinking within this framework is essential for promoting a nuanced understanding of diverse viewpoints. However, despite this pressing need, there remains a notable gap in research addressing the integration of critical thinking and pluralism within Islamic Religious Education in Indonesia. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by investigating how the cultivation of critical thinking skills within Islamic Religious Education can contribute to the promotion of pluralism. To achieve this goal, the study will explore key factors influencing the development and implementation of critical thinking pedagogy within Islamic Religious Education and examine the possibilities and challenges of incorporating critical thinking into religious education learning in the context of promoting pluralism, particularly within Islamic Religious Education, focusing on the specific context of fourth-grade students in one of private elementary schools in Gresik, East Java. Through this inquiry, the study seeks to offer valuable insights into the intersection of critical thinking, religious education, and pluralism in Indonesian educational settings. Research questions: 1) What are the key factors influencing the development and implementation of critical thinking pedagogy within Islamic Religious Education? 2) What are the challenges of incorporating critical thinking into religious education learning in the context of promoting pluralism, particularly within Islamic Religious Education?

The significance of the study

The significance of this study lies in its exploration of the intersection between critical thinking, religious education, and pluralism within the context of Indonesian educational settings, particularly focusing on Islamic Religious Education. By investigating the cultivation of critical thinking skills within Islamic Religious Education and its potential contribution to

promoting pluralism, this study addresses a notable gap in research. Firstly, understanding the factors influencing the development and implementation of critical thinking pedagogy within Islamic Religious Education is crucial for educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers. Identifying these factors can inform the design of effective pedagogical strategies that nurture critical thinking skills among students within religious education contexts. Secondly, examining the possibilities and challenges of incorporating critical thinking into religious education learning, specifically within the framework of promoting pluralism, provides valuable insights into educational practices that foster tolerance, empathy, and understanding among diverse communities. This aspect of the study offers practical implications for curriculum design, teacher training, and educational policy development aimed at promoting pluralism and social cohesion in Indonesian society.

Furthermore, by focusing on fourth-grade students in a private elementary school in Gresik, East Java, this study offers context-specific insights into the dynamics of critical thinking, religious education, and pluralism at a grassroots level. Understanding the experiences and perspectives of students in this specific context enhances the relevance and applicability of the study's findings to educational practitioners and policymakers working to improve educational standards and promote pluralism across Indonesia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

a. Critical thinking

Critical thinking involves several criteria that guide the process of evaluating information and making reasoned judgments. These criteria often include clarity, accuracy, relevance, depth, breadth, logic, fairness, and significance. Clarity refers to the clear expression of ideas and the absence of ambiguity. Accuracy involves the correctness of information and the absence of errors or distortions. Relevance pertains to the connection between the information presented and the issue at hand. Depth entails the thoroughness of analysis and consideration of complexities. Breadth involves considering multiple viewpoints and perspectives. Logic refers to the coherence and consistency of reasoning. Fairness entails considering all relevant viewpoints and avoiding bias. Significance involves determining the importance and implications of information. These criteria serve as guiding principles for critical thinking, helping individuals assess information effectively and make informed decisions (Paul & Elder, 2006). Facione (1990) identifies seven dimensions: clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, and logic. These dimensions encompass aspects such as

the clarity of expression, the correctness of information, the specificity of language, the connection to the issue at hand, the thoroughness of analysis, the consideration of multiple perspectives, and the coherence of reasoning.

In sum, critical thinking encompasses various criteria that guide the process of evaluating information and making reasoned judgments. These criteria include clarity, accuracy, relevance, depth, breadth, logic, fairness, and significance. Clarity ensures clear expression of ideas, minimizing ambiguity. Accuracy focuses on the correctness of information, devoid of errors or distortions. Relevance examines the connection between presented information and the issue at hand. Depth entails thorough analysis, exploring complexities beyond surface-level understanding. Breadth involves considering multiple viewpoints to gain a comprehensive understanding. Logic evaluates the coherence and consistency of reasoning, identifying and avoiding logical fallacies. Fairness requires considering all relevant perspectives without bias. Significance involves determining the importance and implications of information for informed decision-making. These criteria serve as guiding principles for critical thinkers, enabling them to assess information effectively and make well-informed decisions.

b. Pluralism

Pluralism is the recognition and acceptance of diversity within a society, particularly regarding beliefs, values, and cultural backgrounds. It emphasizes the coexistence of multiple perspectives and ideologies, promoting tolerance, understanding, and cooperation among different groups (Heywood, 2015). As a pluralistic society, Indonesia requires critical thinking skills to maintain harmony in diversity. Indonesia is a country rich in diversity in various aspects of life, including religion, culture, ethnicity, and language. The relationship between Indonesia and pluralism is a complex and interesting phenomenon, and the role of critical thinking in understanding it is crucial.

Indonesia has significant religious diversity, with the majority of its population adhering to Islam, but also including Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, and other traditional belief communities. Critical thinking allows individuals to appreciate and understand the diversity of religious beliefs, as well as to assess and understand their impact on daily life. This helps build tolerance and harmony among religious communities (Hefner, 2013). Indonesia is also rich in cultural diversity, with over 300 ethnic groups and various cultural traditions. Critical thinking enables us to understand the complexity of Indonesian culture, including its history, traditions, and social norms. This helps appreciate the uniqueness of each culture and strengthens an

inclusive national identity (Geertz, 1960). The Indonesian language, as the official language of the country, is an important unifying factor amidst linguistic diversity in Indonesia. Critical thinking allows us to understand the role of language in strengthening national identity and promoting cross-cultural communication. It also opens the door to appreciation of linguistic diversity in Indonesia (Sneddon, 2003). Indonesia also has significant socio-economic diversity, from developed urban areas to remote villages. Critical thinking enables us to identify and analyze existing socio-economic inequalities and consider fair and sustainable solutions to improve the welfare of all members of society (Hadiz, 2016). By employing critical thinking, both individuals and societies can appreciate and leverage Indonesia's diversity as a source of wealth and strength, while also working towards inclusivity, equality, and social justice.

c. Islamic Religious Education

Islamic Religious Education is a conscious and planned effort to prepare learners to understand, appreciate, believe in, and behave morally in practicing the teachings of Islam. Islamic Religious Education relies mainly on the holy scriptures of the Qur'an and Hadith through guidance, teaching, training, and the use of experience (Dahwadin & Nugraha, 2019). Nadiem Makarim, the Minister of Education and Culture of Indonesia, introduced the "Merdeka Curriculum" in 2020 as part of education reform in Indonesia. This concept aims to give more freedom to students in choosing learning materials that suit their interests, talents, and needs. The Merdeka Curriculum aims to enhance students' creativity, innovation, and independence, as well as provide greater opportunities for the development of skills relevant to the real world (Kemendikbud, 2023).

Islamic Religious Education as a series of Islamic subjects delivered both formally in schools and informally and non-formally at home and in the community with materials taught from elementary to higher education levels must respond well to this "Merdeka Curriculum" policy by training students under the supervision of Islamic Religious Education teachers to always think critically until it is hoped that students can have more mature, wiser, and more careful thinking so that students are able to understand, develop, and apply Islamic teachings in daily life. Islamic Religious Education is a subject that is given periodically and progressively from elementary to high school. The wide range of materials with very limited face-to-face hours makes the implementation of free learning curriculum can be one way to overcome various problems faced by Islamic Religious Education teachers in teaching. In implementing free learning curriculum in Islamic Religious Education learning, there are several things that must be considered, including: Islamic Religious Education learning must

be able to stimulate students' critical attitude. Islamic Religious Education learning must be related to contemporary contexts and benefits. Islamic Religious Education learning must foster students' creativity. Islamic Religious Education learning must enable students to collaborate and communicate well. Islamic Religious Education learning must make students have self-confidence (Darise, 2021). In Indonesia, formal education is divided into two types. First, public schools are under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, and second, Islamic schools (madrasah) are under the auspices of the Ministry of Religion. Schools under the Ministry of Education have religious education materials for Muslims called Islamic Religious Education and Character Education. Meanwhile, madrasah religious education curriculum has several religious educations, such as: Arabic Language, History of Islamic Culture, Fiqh, Quran and Hadith, and Aqidah-Akhlaq (Ashari, 2021).

d. Intersection of Islamic Religious Education and Pluralism

Islamic education and pluralism are two concepts that are often perceived as contradictory, but can also be understood as two dimensions that complement each other in the context of inclusive and tolerant education. Inclusive Islamic education acknowledges the diversity of beliefs and religious practices, and promotes understanding and appreciation of these differences. This is in line with the principle of pluralism, which emphasizes the importance of respecting and understanding religious and cultural diversity in society.

Inclusive Islamic education must accommodate and respect various religious perspectives within society. In this context, Islamic education needs to provide space for students to understand and appreciate different beliefs and religious practices. This is consistent with the view that religious pluralism is a natural aspect of humanity that should be acknowledged and respected (Nasr, 2013). Furthermore, inclusive Islamic education should also promote constructive interfaith dialogue and understanding. By encouraging students to engage in open and respectful dialogue, Islamic education can build bridges between different religious communities and help reduce conflicts and tensions between religions (Abu-Nimer, 2003). It should also emphasize universal values such as peace, justice, and understanding, which are points of convergence between Islam and the principles of pluralism. By emphasizing these values in the curriculum and teaching practices, Islamic education can serve as a means to build an inclusive and harmonious society (Mazrui, 1996). Inclusive Islamic education should empower students to become positive agents of change in diverse societies. This involves equipping students with the skills and knowledge needed to promote peace, tolerance, and cooperation amidst differences (Rahman, 2009).

Islamic teachings emphasize the importance of critical thinking, a concept highlighted by both Western scholars and the Quran itself. Within the Quran, references to reasoning and thinking occur numerous times, with words such as *'Aqala*, *Na`qilu*, *Ya`qilu*, *Ta`qilun*, and *Ya`qilun* appearing 49 times. Additionally, the Quran identifies five main methods of thinking: *Ta`qil* (thinking), *Tadhakkur* (remembrance), *Tafakkur* (deep thinking), *Tadabbur* (reflection), and *Tafqih* (understanding). Various thinking skills are also outlined, including seeing, contemplating, interpreting, researching, analyzing, understanding, recording, making predictions, and self-reflection. The Quran emphasizes the importance of analytical thinking, cautioning against blindly following without knowledge. For instance, Surah al-Isra (17):36 admonishes against following blindly, highlighting the responsibility of individuals to question and understand. Tafsir al-Azhar further explains the significance of this verse, stressing the importance of utilizing the intellect bestowed by Allah to observe, consider, and discern between right and wrong. This verse underscores the necessity for critical examination and reasoning in Islamic practice, discouraging blind adherence to tradition or ancestral norms.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research approach utilized in this study is qualitative with a descriptive case study design. Qualitative research aims to understand social phenomena through the interpretation and in-depth analysis of non-numeric data, such as words, images, or sounds (Creswell, John W. 2018). Descriptive case study research is a type of study that aims to document and describe a phenomenon, event, or case in detail. The goal is to provide a deep understanding of the characteristics and context of the case under study (Yin, 2018). This research employed triangulation using two methods: observations and documentation. By employing triangulation, researchers can minimize potential bias or errors in data interpretation, thus increasing confidence in the research findings. This is an important strategy to ensure that research findings are reliable and have strong validity (Denzin, 1970).

Documentation is the process of collecting data using documents, records, or other recordings as a source of information. Documents can include written documents such as letters, diaries, reports, or audio and visual recordings. Researchers analyze these documents to gain a deeper understanding of the research topic or case under study (Bowen, 2009). The researcher will collect and analyze text book and materials used in the class that is observed. Observation is a method of data collection involving direct and systematic observation of behavior, interactions, or events that occur within a specific context. Researchers record what

they observe without direct intervention in the subjects or situations observed. Observations can be participatory, where researchers actively engage in the observed situation, or non-participatory, where researchers only act as observers without direct involvement (Emerson & Shaw, 2011). This research employs participatory observation that refers to a research method where the researcher actively engages in the observed situation or context. This involvement allows the researcher to gain firsthand experience and insights into the behaviors, interactions, and events within the specific setting under study. Unlike non-participatory observation, where the researcher remains a passive observer, participatory observation involves direct participation in the activities or interactions being observed (Emerson & Shaw, 2011). In this case, the researcher acted as a participatory observer because the researcher was a teacher in the school that is observed.

There are two types of observation in this research, namely focused and general. Focused observation was conducted by observing the teaching and learning process of Islamic Religious Education subject on June 8, 2024 and the teaching and learning process of Islamic Cultural History subject on June 15, 2024. Meanwhile, general observation was carried out by observing important things that happened in the observed school related to pluralism. The presentation of the findings in this research is written based on this type of observation.

Sample and setting

The sample of this research is fourth grade students in a private school in Gresik, East Java. The school is owned by a Foundation that hold Islamic principles. The class encompasses twenty-five students, consists of five teen boys and ten girls. Although the school is under the Ministry of Education, the religious education material at the school also covers the *madrasah* religious education curriculum. In research involving human subjects, particularly focusing on fourth-grade students at this school, ethical considerations are paramount. To safeguard participants, pseudonyms should replace real names to protect privacy. Informed consent from parents or legal guardians is crucial, outlining the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits. Special care must be taken to minimize potential harm, given the participants' age and vulnerability. Participants should understand their voluntary participation rights, including the ability to withdraw without consequence. Adhering to principles of beneficence and non-maleficence ensures that potential benefits outweigh risks. By following these ethical guidelines, researchers can conduct their study responsibly, respecting participants' rights while generating valuable insights (APA, 2017).

The researcher mentioned all participants, the students, in the findings by pseudonyms. The following is the data of the participants mentioned:

Name	Age
Rayhan	10 y.o
Bukhori	10 y.o
Aini	10 y.o
Caesar	10 y.o
Harve	10 y.o
Naina	10 y.o
Dimas	10 y.o
Ravi	10 y.o
Aldi	10 y.o

Table 1: Partisipants

Data analysis method

In the process of analyzing findings, this research used coding method. Case study analysis with coding method involves organizing, mapping, and interpreting qualitative data collected from the case study. Coding is the process of labeling or categorizing data, allowing researchers to identify patterns, themes, or trends that emerge in the analyzed material (Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldana, J. 2013). The analysis process with coding typically involves thematic analysis and interpretation. Researchers identify themes or patterns that emerge in the data, such as issues, trends, or experiences relevant to the research topic. These themes are then further analyzed to provide a deep understanding of the case under study. The results of coding analysis are reviewed to ensure consistency and validity. Researchers then provide interpretation of the findings, linking them to existing theories or generating new insights that can contribute to understanding the phenomena under study (Yin, R. K. 2018). In this research, the data analysis process entailed transcribing the primary data obtained, thereafter discerning the emergent themes arising from the fourth-grade students' discourse in the series of Islamic religious education classes. This examination was conducted with careful consideration of the intricate details encapsulating their individual experiences and linking it based on theoretical framework.

FINDINGS

Observation of Islamic Religious Education learning on June, 8 2023

The textbook used in Islamic Education classes observed in this study is titled "Islamic Education and Character Education" or "Pendidikan Agama Islam dan Budi Pekerti" intended for fourth-grade students, written by Ahmad Faozan and Jamaluddin, and published in 2021. In the context of formal education in Indonesia, the series of textbooks for Islamic education in schools is produced by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, Research and Development Agency and Publishing Center of the Curriculum and Publishing also known as Kemendikbud cooperating with the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia. At the beginning of the chapter discussing diversity, this book invites its readers to love reading the Quran because it will earn many rewards. After discussing about recitation, Tajwid, and focusing on memorization, the textbook directs students to the meaning of Surah Al Hujurat/49:13 by providing translation (Faozan & Jamaluddin, 2021, p.8).

Tolerance, diversity, and unity

The teacher instructs students to independently read the material provided by the textbook from pages 8 to 15. Then, read aloud.

"Have you ever played with friends of different religions, ethnicities, or tribes? How can you play peacefully with them? Diversity and differences are the decrees of Allah SWT. intentionally created, as stated in Surah Al-Hujurat/49:13. Diversity and differences are not meant to be disputed, but rather to seek common ground that leads to attitudes of mutual respect and honor. Nationality, ethnicity, and skin color are not determinants of nobility. Only piety determines a person's worth. This is also affirmed by the Prophet Muhammad in his hadith." (The teacher)

The teacher provides an example of how Prophet Muhammad used to have good relations with non-Muslims. One of them is when he stood up to honor a procession of a Jewish funeral. Aini responds.

"Why did Prophet Muhammad do that, Ma'am?" (Aini, 10 y.o) The teacher writes a verse from Surah Al Anbiya, "And We have not sent you, [O Muhammad], except as a mercy to the worlds." " (Qur'an, Al Anbiya). Aldi responds.

"All people, Ma'am? So, Christians too? Hindus too?" (Aldi, 10 y.o)

The teacher confirms. The teacher understands that the student seems to have learned something new that he has never heard before. Then the teacher reminds the students to raise their hands before asking or giving opinions. Dimas then raises his hand, the teacher nods.

"I know, Ma'am, in this picture it shows a Buddhist and a Christian. They are consulting with Muslims." (Dimas, 10.y.o)

"Correct." (The teacher)

Not judging someone

Discussing about religious differences, Rayhan raises his hand, the teacher allows. "Ma'am, how do we know the religion of a newborn baby? Can we tell from their physical appearance? How do we differentiate?" Suddenly some students interject, "Yes, Ma'am, how do we differentiate?" (Rayhan, 10 y.o)

The teacher recalls a hadith which states *Kullu insaani taliduhu ammuhu alal fitrah, fa abawaahu yuhawwa daanihi auyunasshiraa nihi auyumajjisaa nihi*, which means 'Every child is born on the *fitrah* (natural disposition); it is only his parents who make him a Jew, Christian, or Magian'. The teacher explains.

"We cannot distinguish someone's religion through their physical appearance. All babies are born in a state of *fitrah*, meaning to believe in God. There's an aspect that makes humans surrender to a greater power. Now, determining someone's religion is influenced by family, environment, and what they learn. Knowing God is a long journey, dear." (The teacher)

Equality and rejection of discrimination

The students nod. Then the teacher asks Bukhori to read the hadith on page 15 aloud. "Someone who heard the sermon of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in the middle of Tasyriq day narrated to me: 'O mankind! Your Lord is one, and your father is one (meaning Prophet Adam). Remember! There is no superiority of an Arab over a non-Arab, nor of a non-Arab over an Arab; there is no superiority of a fair-skinned person over a dark-skinned person, nor of a dark-skinned person over a fair-skinned person except through piety. Have I conveyed the message?' They answered, 'Yes, indeed, O Messenger of Allah, you have conveyed it.'" (Bukhori, 10 y.o. referring to Hadits)

The teacher gives feedback, correcting some mistakes, and expressing thanks. The teacher explains the meaning of the hadith.

"This hadith, transmitted by Ahmad from Abu Nadrah, encapsulates the profound message of equality and unity that Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) emphasized to his followers during his sermon. In this address, the Prophet highlights the fundamental principles of Islamic teachings regarding human

equality and the rejection of any form of racial, ethnic, or social superiority. By stating that all human beings share a common ancestor in Prophet Adam and that their Lord is one, Prophet Muhammad underscores the intrinsic unity of humanity regardless of their racial or ethnic backgrounds. He explicitly rejects any notion of superiority based on ethnicity, nationality, or skin color, emphasizing that the only criterion for distinction among people is piety and righteousness. This hadith serves as a powerful reminder of the universal values of justice, compassion, and equality that lie at the heart of Islam. It calls upon believers to transcend divisions and prejudices, fostering a society based on mutual respect, understanding, and cooperation. Through this message, Prophet Muhammad laid the foundation for a society where individuals are judged not by their outward appearances or social status, but by the content of their character and their devotion to Allah." (The teacher)

Beauty standards differences

Then the teacher tells the students to raise their hands.

"Look at your hand's skin, is it the same?" (The teacher)

"No" (The students)

"What about the shape of your nose and hair?" (The teacher)

"No" (The students)

"The diversity of mankind is a divine gift, as stated in the Qur'an (Surah Al-Hujurat/49:13), where Allah emphasizes the creation of humanity from a single pair, Adam and Eve, and the subsequent division into nations and tribes to foster mutual understanding. Allah underscores the equality of all human beings regardless of race or lineage, emphasizing that the most honorable among them are those who exhibit piety." (The teacher)

Aini raised hand.

"I have been bullied because she is a woman with dark skin." (Aini, 10 y.o.)

The teacher realizes that beauty standards for women are indeed unreasonable in society. The teacher understands how uncomfortable it feels.

"Allah does not look at your physique or wealth. But Allah looks at your deeds and your heart, dear. As someone who has been bullied, you must be patient. But also, we should realize that bullying is dangerous and affirm to the perpetrator that it is not good. Then, we also must not do that to others." (The teacher)

Observation of Islamic Cultural History learning on June, 15 2023

The series of curriculum textbooks for madrasah schools in Indonesia is created by the General of Islamic Education of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia. The textbook used in the observation of Islamic Cultural History class discussed in this research is the book titled "Islamic Cultural History for Elementary Islamic Schools Grade 4" written by Bahren Ahmadi and published in 2020. On the first page of the book, there is a disclaimer that reads "This book is prepared by the government in the framework of implementing KMA Number 183 of 2019 concerning the Curriculum of Islamic Religious Education and Arabic Language in Madrasahs. This book is compiled and reviewed by various parties under the coordination of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and is used in the learning process. This book is a "Living Document" that is constantly improved, updated, and refreshed in accordance with the dynamics of changes in the times. Input from various circles is expected to improve the quality of this book."

Chapter one in this book discusses the Perseverance Of Prophet Muhammad and The Companions In Da'wah. In general, this book discusses the perseverance of Prophet Muhammad and his companions in preaching, which is an extraordinary example of dedication and courage in upholding the teachings of Islam despite facing various challenges and difficulties. Prophet Muhammad, as the last messenger of Allah, faced various obstacles in spreading the teachings of Islam, ranging from rejection, harsh treatment, to threats and even physical violence. However, he remained steadfast and persevered in conveying Allah's message to humanity.

Social justice

The teacher organizes the students first and asks them to read independently. Then the teacher opens the question and answer session. Students eagerly raise their hands. The teacher uses an ice-breaking technique to organize the students, then points to one of the male students who raised his hand.

"Ma'am, my father once told me a story about Bilal bin Rabbah. When he was tortured, Bilal was helped by Abu Bakar. Bilal was a slave. What is a slave, ma'am?"
(Caesar, 10 y.o.)

"Thank you for your question. Slaves are generally forced to work or serve their masters without pay or with very low compensation, and they lose basic rights such as personal freedom, the right to enjoy the fruits of their own labor, and sometimes even the right to determine their own fate. In the past, the practice of slavery existed

in many cultures and civilizations. Islam came to abolish slavery. It is important to remember that every individual, regardless of background or social status, has the right to be respected and treated fairly and decently." (The teacher)

Non-judgmental

The teacher then points to Harve who wants to ask a question.

"Ma'am, how can we believe that Prophet Muhammad existed? How can we believe that what Prophet Muhammad conveyed is true?" (Harve, 10 y.o)

"Historical records from both Islamic and non-Islamic historians provide evidence of the existence and influence of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in history. Historical records and generations during the time of Prophet Muhammad witnessed that he was a person whose truthfulness was accepted, based on his honesty, ethics, morality, and intelligence. Therefore, when Prophet Muhammad declared that he was a messenger, people believed him, although they needed a process to change their beliefs." (The teacher)

"Oh, I see. Then, how can we believe that Allah exists now? Don't we ourselves cannot see Allah?" The teacher answers, "The concept of Allah's existence is based on the revelation He gave to the Prophet through the Quran. Furthermore, many signs of Allah's greatness are evident in the universe and in daily life, such as the creation of the complex and harmonious universe as evidence of His existence. Although we cannot see Allah directly, believing in Him is based on a spiritual relationship that will develop as you mature." (Harve, 10 y.o.)

"Don't think about the Creator, but think about what He has created." (Naina, 10 y.o.)

The teacher nods, repeating the student's statement and reminding them to raise their hands first.

Minority Rights and Majority Obligations

"The boycott carried out by Abu Jahal at that time not only affected Muslims but also followers of other religions. For example, Abu Thalib, the Prophet's non-Muslim uncle who supported him. Abu Thalib also experienced hunger during the boycott. He was a leader of the Banu Hashim tribe." The teacher explains, "The Muslim community at that time was oppressed because they were a minority. Their numbers were few. Whereas Abu Jahl's group was the majority. Their numbers were many." (The teacher)

"What are majorities and minorities, ma'am?" (Ravi, 10 y.o.)

"As I explained earlier, majorities are those with a large number. Whereas minorities have a small number. Because majorities have a large number, they have an obligation to protect minorities. Now, are there many or few Muslims in Indonesia?" (The teacher)

"Many." (The students)

"What religion has fewer followers in Indonesia?" (The teacher)

"Buddhism,"

"Hinduism,"

"Christianity."

"Chatholic"

"Konghuchu"

(The students)

"Because there are many Muslims in Indonesia, we are obligated to protect the rights of followers of other religions. Don't be like Abu Jahal's group who liked to oppress." (The teacher)

General Observation

Tahfidz as a flagship program

As an Islamic school, students from first to sixth grade are required to participate in the tahfidz program. The tahfidz program is not only implemented as an extracurricular activity but also included in the regular schedule twice a week. Tahfidz is an Arabic term referring to the process of memorizing the Quran. Literally, tahfidz comes from the word "hafidz," which means "memorizer," and "al-Qur'an" is the holy book in Islam. So, tahfidz is the effort or process of memorizing all or part of the Quran. Tahfidz is highly valued in Islam because the Quran is considered a guide to life and a source of wisdom for Muslims. School A has a tahfidz graduation agenda for students who are able to achieve specific memorization targets. Two months before the graduation, students are required to undergo quarantine. They must focus on strengthening their memorization.

Most of the teachers are from pesantren

The memorization of the students is listened to by the teachers at school A and corrected if there are errors in pronunciation or accuracy. Out of sixty teachers, forty of them are graduates of pesantren (Islamic boarding school), so they can read the Quran well and correctly. Teacher recruitment considers the ability to read the Quran.

Learning outside the classroom program

The learning outside the classroom program is conducted once every two weeks. The purpose of this program is to invite students to visit important places around the school, such as the post office, fire department, city library, bank, souvenir market, palm sugar-making house, and an old temple.

DISCUSSION

1. The key factors influencing the development and implementation of critical thinking pedagogy within Islamic Religious Education

Experimental learning and inquiry method

The teacher utilizes a comprehensive and interactive learning approach that incorporates diverse strategies to engage students in comprehending Quranic teachings and their practical implications. Initially, the teacher prompts students to contemplate Quranic verses and their relevance to daily life, fostering a deeper connection with the text. By initiating discussions and posing thought-provoking questions, the teacher stimulates critical thinking and encourages students to relate Quranic principles to their own experiences. The teacher employs a variety of reading materials, including the Quran itself and supplementary texts, to provide context and enhance understanding. Students are encouraged to read independently and aloud, thereby promoting literacy skills and facilitating comprehension through both individual and collective engagement.

Furthermore, the teacher incorporates storytelling, such as recounting Prophet Muhammad's interactions with individuals of different faiths, to illustrate Quranic teachings in practical contexts. By embedding the teachings within historical and narrative frameworks, the teacher enhances the lessons' relatability and memorability for students. Adopting an inclusive approach, the teacher addresses students' inquiries and concerns, cultivating a supportive learning environment where diverse perspectives are acknowledged and respected. Through open dialogue and active listening, the teacher creates opportunities for students to express their thoughts and deepen their understanding collaboratively.

The teacher's emphasis on multicultural education, which advocates for respect for diversity and equity, is evident throughout the lesson. Multicultural education theory underscores the inclusion of diverse perspectives, cultures, and histories in the curriculum to foster understanding and appreciation for various backgrounds. By examining Quranic verses and teachings of Prophet Muhammad that emphasize the equality of all humans irrespective of

race, ethnicity, or social status, the teacher promotes multicultural awareness and acceptance among students. The interactive nature of the lesson encourages students to recognize and celebrate diversity while challenging stereotypes and prejudices (Banks, 1994; Flavell, 1979).

The teaching approach employed aligns with several educational theories, particularly those emphasizing experiential learning and multicultural education. Experiential learning theory, as proposed by David Kolb (Kolb, 1984; Jacob, 1989), suggests that individuals learn best through direct experience and reflection on that experience. In this context, the teacher engages students in active learning by prompting them to reflect on their own experiences and beliefs regarding diversity, religion, and equality. By encouraging students to share personal anecdotes and facilitating discussions around relevant Quranic verses and hadiths, the teacher creates a dynamic learning environment where students actively engage with the material and construct their understanding of the concepts being discussed.

The instructional approach also reflects the use of inquiry-based methods to aid students in developing higher-order thinking skills. The teacher encourages students to question, investigate, and critically evaluate information, in line with the principles of inquiry-based learning (Harlen & Qualter, 2010; Paul & Elder, 2005). The teacher fosters a classroom environment conducive to cooperation and discussion among students in understanding complex concepts such as tolerance, diversity, and rejection of discrimination (Johnson & Johnson, 1994). To utilize inquiry-based and experimental approaches effectively, a teacher with interdisciplinary understanding is necessary. A teacher with interdisciplinary understanding can enrich students' learning experiences by integrating concepts and methods from various fields of study. Studies indicate that interdisciplinary approaches can enhance students' understanding of the relationships between fields and promote deeper critical thinking (Boix Mansilla & Duraisingh, 2007).

Students' prior knowledge

Students' prior knowledge plays a significant role in the critical questions they pose during lessons, driven by both their understanding of the topics discussed and their broader curiosity. Questions such as "How can we know the religion of a newborn baby?" and "Can we tell from their physical appearance? How do we differentiate?" demonstrate their desire for a deeper understanding of religious concepts and human nature. They attempt to link lessons about human equality with broader religious concepts. Meanwhile, questions like "How can we believe in Allah's existence? Can't we see Allah ourselves?" indicate that the students have initial understandings of religious differences and seek to understand how the principles they

learn in class relate to different beliefs. In fact, Harve, the student who asked that question, comes from a family newly converted to Islam. Meanwhile, Naina, who adds, "Don't think about the Creator, but think about what He has created.", comes from a religious family that has adequate resources about religious discourses. Naina's say is referring to Imam Al Ghazali's say.

When Aini shares that she has been bullied because of her skin color, it may reflect her personal experiences or observations of social realities around her. It is understood that women are vulnerable to being victims of body shaming (Gillen, 2015). When the teacher provides explanations and responses, it offers a broader context and deeper understanding of values such as justice, equality, and compassion in Islam. These questions can arise from various sources of knowledge, including personal experiences, everyday observations, and previous understanding of religious lessons. This indicates that the students are actively engaged in the learning process and endeavor to relate the concepts they learn to their daily lives.

The teacher employs constructivist principles by encouraging students to actively construct their own knowledge through inquiry-based learning and critical thinking. Constructivism posits that learners actively build their understanding of the world by assimilating new information with existing knowledge and experiences. In this lesson, the teacher guides students in analyzing Quranic verses and hadiths, prompting them to draw connections between Islamic teachings and contemporary issues of diversity and inclusion. By facilitating discussions and providing opportunities for students to express their opinions and ask questions, the teacher fosters a collaborative learning environment where students are actively engaged in meaning-making and knowledge construction (Vygotsky, 1978).

The teacher gives feedback and clear instruction

In the context of the motivation theory proposed by Deci & Ryan (1985), the use of positive feedback by teachers to students in this case can be considered as one of the strategies that support the development of students' critical thinking skills. Positive feedback from teachers to students helps build students' confidence and motivates them to actively participate in learning. For example, when a teacher gives positive feedback to students for their clear and accurate reading skills of hadiths, it not only boosts students' confidence in their abilities but also provides additional motivation for them to continue actively participating in learning activities. When students feel appreciated and recognized for their efforts, they tend to be more motivated to engage more deeply in the learning process. by providing constructive and positive feedback, teachers can also help students identify areas where they have succeeded

and where they still need to improve their skills. This helps create a supportive environment for student growth, where they feel supported to try new things and develop their critical thinking skills without fear of negative judgment.

In the context of the findings, teachers use ice-breaking techniques, ask students to raise their hands when they want to ask or express opinions, and respond one by one to students' statements. Establishing clear rules and expectations, rewarding good behavior, using structured classroom arrangements, and building positive relationships between teachers and students are some methods that can help improve discipline in the classroom. Additionally, it is important to set a good example of behavior as a teacher and provide constructive feedback when needed. By consistently implementing these strategies, teachers can help create a more orderly and effective learning environment for elementary school students (Evertson & Weinstein, 2013).

Regulating emotions

The relationship between critical thinking and emotions is an important aspect of learning and deep understanding. Critical thinking involves the ability to evaluate information objectively, analyze arguments, and make rational decisions. However, emotions can influence how we interpret information, affect our judgments, and even impact our ability to process information accurately. When responding to challenging arguments or situations, emotions such as anxiety, anger, or excitement can affect our ability to think objectively. Therefore, effective emotional management is important to facilitate effective critical thinking. Conversely, good critical thinking can also help manage emotions more effectively, as the ability to evaluate situations objectively can help reduce excessive emotional reactions (Halpern, 2003; Mayer & Salovey, 1997).

In the context of emotion validation theory, teachers demonstrate a deep understanding of students' experiences of verbal abuse or bullying due to their skin color. Emotion validation is the process of acknowledging and appreciating someone's feelings, so they feel heard and understood. Teachers assert that societal beauty standards are irrational, showing an understanding of how these standards can cause discomfort and harm to individuals. Linehan (1997) highlight the importance of acknowledging and validating someone's emotional experiences as a first step in helping them cope with difficulties.

Furthermore, teachers reinforce students' awareness of the importance of having healthy boundaries when dealing with bullying. By emphasizing that Allah sees the heart and actions, not physical appearance or wealth, teachers convey the message that one's worth and

dignity are not dependent on external factors like appearance or material status. This aligns with the concept of building healthy boundaries, where individuals understand and protect themselves from negative behaviors or opinions that can undermine their self-confidence and self-esteem (Cloud & Townsend, 1992).

Lastly, teachers emphasize the importance of avoiding bullying others in response to students' experiences. By affirming that bullying is harmful and unacceptable behavior, teachers convey the message of the importance of acting with empathy and treating others with respect. This can also be seen as an approach aligned with feminist principles, which reject all forms of discrimination, harassment, or unfair treatment of individuals based on gender, skin color, or other characteristics. Hooks (2000) emphasizes the importance of equality and respect for all individuals. Thus, teachers effectively use emotion validation theory, building healthy boundaries, and feminist principles to provide deep support to students experiencing bullying, reinforcing understanding of values such as empathy, self-worth, and equality.

The role of textbooks

Multimodal texts, which combine various modes of communication such as text, images, audio, and video, play a crucial role in enhancing understanding, critical thinking skills, and visual literacy skills in learners. By presenting information through diverse modes, multimodal texts allow students to explore complex concepts in different ways, which can strengthen their understanding and facilitate the learning process (Jewitt, 2014). Additionally, multimodal texts also enable greater inclusion and participation from various types of learners, including those with different learning styles, as exemplified by Dimas's interest in pictures in books (Image 1.).

School textbooks play an important role in enhancing critical thinking skills and promoting pluralism among students. Firstly, well-designed textbooks can challenge students' thinking by presenting various perspectives and approaches to specific topics. This stimulates their critical thinking skills by introducing them to a range of arguments and asking them to evaluate, compare, and conclude from this information (McPeck, 1990). School textbooks that encompass cultural, social, and political diversity can help broaden students' understanding of their world. By introducing them to various perspectives and experiences, such textbooks can help develop open and tolerant attitudes towards differences (Banks, 2015). In this regard, Indonesian Ministry of Education textbooks are considered multimodal texts because they present text and images. The textual and pictorial materials presented lead students to the introduction of pluralism and trigger critical thinking.



Image 1. (Faozan & Jamaluddin, 2021, p 8)

Integration with the school program

One of the school's out-of-classroom learning program agendas is to visit an old temple. School A hires a historian from Gresik as a speaker. The Old Temple of Gresik City is one of the historical sites located in Gresik City, East Java, Indonesia. This temple is known by the official name "Klenteng Kwan Sing Bio" or "Klenteng Zheng Chenggong." This temple was built in 1700 and is one of the oldest temples in Indonesia. The temple's architecture combines Chinese and Javanese styles, reflecting the historical relationship between China and Indonesia. The Old Temple of Gresik City is one of the interesting historical tourist destinations in the area and is often visited by tourists and Confucian followers who perform worship. Vygotsky (1978) said, through direct experience with buildings that reflect religious or ethnic diversity, students can indirectly understand and internalize values associated with these groups. Historians as learning facilitators help students link physical structures to historical and cultural contexts, thus expanding their understanding of human diversity and rich cultural heritage.

2. The challenges of incorporating critical thinking into religious education learning in the context of promoting pluralism

Text books with less comprehensive material

Textbooks with less comprehensive material often disappoint readers with shallow or inadequate explanations. This can hinder deep understanding of the topics discussed. Incomplete information can cause confusion and frustration for readers seeking deeper understanding. (Tsai & Yang, 2016). In contrast to the Islamic Education and Character Education textbooks published by the Ministry of Education and Culture, the History of Islamic

Culture textbooks published by the Ministry of Religion do not include pluralism values in Chapter One. As previously discussed, Chapter One discusses the resilience of the Prophet and his companions against the cruelty of the Quraysh *Kafir* or infidels (Ahmadi, 2020). If developed to be more comprehensive, resilience is also shown by non-Muslims who support the Prophet, such as Abu Talib, as explained by the teacher.

Abu Talib, the uncle of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, played an important role in supporting the Prophet and his mission, especially during the boycott period experienced by the Quraysh tribe in Mecca. Although he did not directly embrace Islam, Abu Talib provided protection to the Prophet and his followers despite facing significant pressure and economic difficulties. He showed extraordinary courage and loyalty in facing suffering alongside the Muslims (Muhammad, 2001). Then, the next issue is the term "Kafir" which is considered sensitive and debatable if not explained in context. Conservatively, this term is used to refer to those who do not embrace Islam or do not believe in Islamic teachings (Rahman, 2009). Shihab (2021) conveys that the term "Kafir" not only refers to disbelief in Islam, but also includes elements of rejection of the truth.

Not all students have prior knowledge to discuss, young age factor, resources

Factors such as young age and limited resources can affect how much knowledge someone has before engaging in a discussion. This is a concept often referred to as "prior knowledge." According to constructivism theory in education, new knowledge is built upon existing knowledge. Therefore, if someone has little prior knowledge about a particular topic, they may struggle to understand or participate in deeper discussions. Piaget's cognitive development theory suggests that younger children may not yet have the ability to think abstractly or process complex information in the same way as adults. This means that an approach tailored to their cognitive developmental stage may be needed to help them engage in discussions. In terms of limited resources, such as access to books, the internet, or direct experiences, this can also limit someone's prior knowledge. For example, if someone does not have access to books or the internet, they may not have enough information to understand the topic deeply (Piaget, 1952; Vygotsky, 1978).

Not all teachers have pluralism mindset

Some teachers at school A are graduates of *Pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools). Not all of them are exposed to the concept of pluralism in their training, while others may be limited by narrow perspectives or personal biases. Social construction theory states that someone's understanding and perception of the world are largely shaped by their social interactions and

personal experiences. Therefore, if a teacher has not been exposed to the concept of pluralism in their educational or societal environment, they may not have sufficient understanding or appreciation of pluralism values (Lapidus, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978).

Not all subjects can use methods that trigger critical thinking skills

The *Tahfidz* subject, which is the flagship program at School A, emphasizes classical and individual memorization methods. Memorization is not inherently wrong in education because it lays the foundation for subsequent stages (Bloom, 1956). However, it becomes problematic if one remains stuck at that stage. In Bloom's taxonomy, there are six cognitive domains that depict the complexity levels in learning.

Lack of direct interaction with followers of other religions or ethnicities

During the agenda of visiting the old temple, there was no direct interaction between the students and the followers of the Konghuchu ethnic Chinese religion. The students only recognized the building. Students interacted and were exposed to information by the historian hired by School A. Looking at the background, the historian has criteria no different from the students, namely Javanese ethnicity and Muslim. Interaction with humans is crucial in learning because through this interaction, individuals can gain deeper understanding, gain new perspectives, and broaden their insights into the world. According to social constructivism theory, social interaction plays a key role in shaping knowledge and understanding. Through dialogue, discussion, and collaboration with others, students can actively construct their knowledge and enrich their learning experiences (Vygotsky, 1978).

CONCLUSION

Incorporating critical thinking into religious education, particularly within the framework of promoting pluralism, presents both opportunities and challenges. Engaging students through interactive and experiential learning methods, such as inquiry-based learning and storytelling, fosters critical thinking by connecting religious teachings with real-world contexts. Emphasizing multicultural awareness and acceptance within religious education promotes tolerance, diversity appreciation, and challenges stereotypes. Encouraging students to actively construct their own knowledge through inquiry-based learning aligns with constructivist theories, facilitating deeper understanding and meaning-making. Providing constructive feedback and validating emotions creates a supportive learning environment, fostering confidence, motivation, and emotional intelligence alongside critical thinking skills.

Textbooks with less comprehensive material may hinder deeper understanding and fail to encompass pluralistic values adequately. Varied levels of prior knowledge due to factors like age and resource access can affect students' ability to engage in critical discussions. Not all teachers may possess a pluralistic mindset, potentially limiting their ability to effectively promote critical thinking and pluralism. Some subjects may prioritize memorization over critical thinking, hindering the development of higher-order thinking skills. Lack of direct interaction with followers of other religions or ethnicities may impede students' opportunities to gain deeper insights and perspectives.

For future studies, it would be beneficial to conduct a detailed examination of the content and structure of religious education textbooks to identify areas where pluralistic values could be better integrated. This could involve collaborating with curriculum developers or educators to create more inclusive learning materials. Future studies are also needed to explore the impact of direct interactions with followers of other religions or ethnicities on students' perspectives and understanding of pluralism. This could involve conducting qualitative research or longitudinal studies to assess the long-term effects of such interactions on students' attitudes and behaviors.

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