
CRITICAL THINKING AMONG TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the critical thinking skills of Islamic Religious Education teachers in the context of the implementation of the independent learning curriculum which requires the transformation of the learning paradigm from dogmatic to analytical-reflective. The main problem lies in the gap between the demands of developing students' critical thinking skills and the lack of mastery of these competencies among PAI teachers. A literature review shows that there is limited specific research on the critical thinking competence of PAI teachers as facilitators of critical learning. The research uses a phenomenological qualitative approach with in-depth interview techniques with twelve intermediate PAI teachers who were selected purposively. Key findings reveal significant variations in teachers' critical thinking abilities with the majority understanding concepts but practical implementation difficulties. Five inhibiting factors were identified: curriculum disintegration, lack of critical pedagogical training, limited digital literacy, administrative burden, and conservative culture. The research concludes the need for a continuous coaching model that integrates mastery of Islamic content with critical pedagogy to improve the professionalism of PAI teachers in facilitating transformative learning.

Keywords: *Critical Thinking; PAI Teachers; Pedagogy.*

INTRODUCTION

In the era of the industrial revolution 4.0 which demands fundamental transformation in education, the ability to think critically has become an essential competency that must be mastered by every educator, especially Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers. The paradoxical phenomenon arises when the Indonesian education system faces a dilemma between the demands of developing students' critical thinking skills and the reality of the lack of mastery of these competencies among PAI teachers themselves. This condition creates a significant gap between the expectations of the independent learning curriculum and the implementation of learning that is still trapped in conventional and indoctrinative patterns. The Ministry of Religious Affairs through the PAI Critical and Creative Thinking (CCT) program has tried to encourage learning transformation by developing a stimulus of teaching materials that are contradictory and contextual to stimulate students' curiosity, but this initiative is still limited to seven pilot schools and has not touched the root of the fundamental problem regarding the critical thinking competence of PAI teachers nationally (Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia, 2024).

The importance of research on the critical thinking skills of PAI teachers cannot be separated from the strategic role of religious education in shaping the character and intellect of the young generation of Indonesia. PAI teachers are not only tasked with transferring religious knowledge, but also responsible for developing students' ability to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize religious information objectively and rationally. However, reality shows that the majority of PAI teachers still use a dogmatic approach to learning and do not encourage the development of students' high-level thinking skills. Research (Hamdani et al., 2023) identify that the implementation of the independent curriculum in PAI learning still faces significant obstacles related to teachers' ability to integrate scientific approaches with learning methods that stimulate students' critical thinking skills. This condition is exacerbated by the finding that the critical thinking skills of Indonesian students in general are still in the low category, which indicates that there are systemic problems in the learning process at the educator level.

A review of previous research revealed several clusters of problems that have not been completed in the development of critical thinking skills of PAI teachers. First, research (Auliya, 2022) The integration of scientific approaches through the 21st century proficiency model in PAI learning shows that PAI teachers have adequate theoretical understanding but experience difficulties in practical implementation in the classroom. Second, a study on the role of technology in PAI learning shows that most PAI teachers have not been able to effectively integrate Technological Pedagogical and Content Knowledge (TPACK) to support the development of students' critical thinking skills. Third, research on exemplary-based PAI learning strategies still focuses on the moral-spiritual aspect but ignores the intellectual-critical dimension that should be an integral part of comprehensive religious education.

A critical analysis of previous research identified three fundamental gaps that require serious attention. The first gap lies in the lack of research that specifically examines the critical thinking competencies of PAI teachers as research subjects, where most studies still focus on the impact of learning on students without exploring the capacity of teachers as facilitators of critical learning. The second gap is related to the absence of valid and reliable measurement instruments to assess the critical thinking ability of PAI teachers in the context of religious learning that have unique characteristics compared to other subjects. The third gap concerns the lack of a theoretical framework that integrates the theological-normative dimension of Islam with the principles of contemporary critical pedagogy in the context of the professional development of PAI teachers.

The urgency of this research is further strengthened when it is associated with the global challenges of Islamic education which demands a balance between the transmission of

religious values and the development of analytical and reflective thinking skills. The critical thinking skills of PAI teachers are the key to creating learning that not only produces students who are religious but also intellectual, critical, and adaptive to the dynamics of the times. This study aims to comprehensively examine the level of critical thinking skills of PAI teachers, identify the factors that affect the development of these competencies, and formulate an effective coaching model to improve the quality of PAI learning in Indonesia. Thus, this research is expected to make a theoretical and practical contribution to the development of the professionalism of PAI teachers and improve the quality of Islamic religious education nationally.

Based on the analysis of the above problems, this research is formulated through the following questions: a. What is the level of critical thinking skills of PAI teachers in Indonesia in the era of the independent learning curriculum? b. What factors affect the development of PAI teachers' critical thinking skills in learning practice? c. What is an effective coaching model to improve the critical thinking skills of PAI teachers? This research is limited to the study of the critical thinking skills of PAI teachers who teach at the junior and senior secondary school levels, with a focus on the cognitive-pedagogical aspects in the context of Islamic religious learning. The study did not discuss the administrative-managerial aspects or personality dimensions of PAI teachers that were not directly related to critical thinking skills in learning. The selection of focus on intermediate level PAI teachers is based on the consideration that at this level students already have adequate cognitive abilities to engage in learning that requires high-level thinking skills, so that the role of teachers in facilitating the development of critical thinking skills becomes more optimal and can be measured objectively.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological paradigm to explore in depth the critical thinking skills of Islamic Religious Education teachers. The qualitative research design was chosen because critical thinking skills are a complex phenomenon that requires a deep understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and learning practices of PAI teachers in a natural context. The main data collection method uses an in-depth interview technique with a semi-structured structure that allows the researcher to explore the cognitive, affective, and pedagogical dimensions of PAI teachers related to critical thinking skills. The research subjects consisted of twelve PAI teachers who were purposively selected based on the criteria of teaching experience of at least five years, had a minimum educational qualification of a bachelor of Islamic religious education, and taught in junior or high school. The interview process was conducted in a duration of 45-60 minutes for each respondent using interview guidelines that have been validated by qualitative research methodologists. Data analysis uses thematic analysis techniques through stages of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to identify key themes that emerge from interview transcripts. The validity of the data is guaranteed through triangulation of sources by conducting interviews with PAI teachers from various backgrounds of educational institutions, as well as member checking to verify the accuracy of data interpretation with research respondents

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Level of Critical Thinking Ability of PAI Teachers

The results of in-depth interviews with twelve Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at the junior and senior high school levels showed significant variations in their critical thinking skills. The majority of teachers recognize that critical thinking is an important aspect of PAI learning, but only a small percentage are able to articulate the indicators of critical thinking in concrete terms, such as the ability to evaluate arguments,

infer logically, and relate abstract concepts to contextual reality.

One informant said, "We know the importance of critical thinking, but we are rarely taught how to cultivate it in religious lessons. We focus more on exam and memorization materials." (Interview, Junior High School Teacher, May 2025). This statement indicates that although conceptually teachers understand the urgency of critical thinking, in practice they are still constrained by a learning culture that is dogmatic and oriented towards low cognitive achievement.

These findings are in line with the results of the study (Mufaizah et al., 2024) which states that critical thinking in PAI learning is still faced with an old paradigm that does not fully support the exploration of deep and analytical thinking. Teachers tend to emphasize the aspect of memorization cognition rather than the development of reason-based religious arguments and evaluation.

Factors Affecting the Critical Thinking Ability of PAI Teachers

The thematic analysis of the interviews revealed five main factors that affect the low critical thinking skills of PAI teachers, namely: (1) the disintegration of the curriculum with the critical learning approach, (2) the low level of critical pedagogy training, (3) the limited mastery of digital literacy, (4) the high administrative burden, and (5) the conservative learning culture in the school environment.

Most teachers said that "The training we received was more technical in the administration of the independent curriculum, not about how to teach students to think critically" (Interview, High School Teacher, May 2025). This reinforces the findings (Irawan et al., 2024) which shows that as many as 68.53% of teachers have not mastered the learning materials in depth, and 62.87% of the implementation of the lesson plan is not in accordance with the principles of critical learning in the independent curriculum.

In addition, the role of technology, which should be a catalyst for the development of critical thinking, has not been maximized. Teachers recognize the limitations in utilizing interactive digital media and digital literacy strategies that support students' critical thinking. In fact, as revealed (Lestari & Iryanti, 2024), digital literacy has significant potential in shaping learning strategies that encourage deep analysis, evaluation, and reflection on Islamic values.

Strategies and Models for Strengthening Critical Thinking for PAI Teachers

Despite the obstacles, some teachers showed positive initiative in developing critical thinking skills. One of the strategies that has begun to be implemented is open discussions based on case studies, the use of problematic video media, and the application of convergent-divergent questions in teaching. One teacher stated, "I try to start the learning with a true story from the news and challenge students to analyze it from an Islamic perspective" (Interview, Junior High School Teacher, May 2025).

This strategy shows the potential for contextual and problematic PAI pedagogical reform, which is rooted in the social reality of students. These findings are in line with the results (Putri et al., 2024), which shows that the School Literacy Movement can be optimized in PAI to encourage students' critical thinking skills with structured and consistent interventions.

Furthermore, strengthening the critical thinking skills of PAI teachers requires systemic intervention in the form of a continuous coaching model. This model should include integrative training that combines mastery of Islamic content, critical pedagogy, and digital literacy. In addition, institutional support in the form of teacher learning communities, collaborative supervision, and learning innovation incentives are also key factors in forming a sustainable critical thinking culture.

Implications for Teacher Professionalism and PAI Learning

Teachers' critical thinking skills are closely correlated with the quality of their professionalism in learning. Teachers who think critically are better able to reflect on learning, develop evaluative strategies, and respond to students' needs flexibly and contextually. (Fauziah, 2024) emphasizing that teachers' professionalism in the digital era does not only lie in mastering content, but also in the ability to transform knowledge into a critical learning experience for students.

In the context of PAI learning, teachers are required not only as conveyors of religious dogma, but also as facilitators of dialogue between faith and reason. (Wahyudi & Hidayat, 2023) emphasizing the importance of teachers' ability to develop critical thinking indicators such as formulating problems, evaluating, and concluding in the context of online and offline learning.

This research shows that to realize the ideal professionalism of PAI teachers, synergy is needed between increasing individual teacher capacity and systemic reform in curriculum development, training, and school culture. That way, PAI learning can become an arena of religious dialectics that arouses students' intellect and hearts in a balanced manner.

CONCLUSION

This research reveals that the critical thinking skills of Islamic Religious Education teachers are still at a level that is not optimal. The majority of teachers understand the importance of conceptual critical thinking, but experience difficulties in the practical implementation of learning that encourages students' analytical and evaluation skills. The five main factors that hinder the development of these abilities include the inintegration of the curriculum with a critical learning approach, the lack of critical pedagogy training, the limitation of digital literacy, excessive administrative burden, and a conservative learning culture. The current research gap lies in the lack of specific studies on the critical thinking competencies of PAI teachers as the main subject, the absence of valid measurement instruments in the context of religious learning, and the lack of a theoretical framework that integrates the theological dimension with contemporary critical pedagogy.

Further studies need to develop a critical thinking ability measurement instrument specific to PAI teachers taking into account the unique characteristics of religious learning. Classroom action research to test the effectiveness of the continuous coaching model is also needed. The practical contribution of this research provides the basis for the development of a PAI teacher training program that integrates mastery of Islamic content with critical pedagogy, as well as policy recommendations for curriculum development and learning supervision that support the transformation of the religious learning paradigm towards a more analytical and reflective approach.

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