

Instructional Innovation As A Strategic Effort To Cultivate Critical Thinking In Muhammadiyah Elementary Education

Sulfiadi¹ Ferdinan² Abd. Rahman Battiar³

Universitas Muhammadiyah Makassar

Sulfiadi@unismuh.ac.id, ferdinan@unismuh.ac.id

Abstrak

This study explores the innovative instructional strategies implemented by Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers at Muhammadiyah Perumnas Elementary School to foster students' critical thinking. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research focuses on learning practices, teacher-student interactions, and contextual integration of Islamic values. The findings reveal that varied strategies such as communicative delivery, open-ended discussions, reflective practices, and real-life applications significantly enhance students' analytical, ethical, and spiritual reasoning skills. This innovation is supported by curriculum design, teacher readiness, and Islamic school culture, despite challenges like time constraints and diverse student abilities. The study affirms that instructional innovation rooted in Islamic values plays a strategic role in cultivating holistic critical thinking from an early age.

Keywords: Instructional Innovation, Critical Thinking, Islamic Education, Elementary School

INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking skills are a foundational competency in 21st-century education that must be instilled from an early age, particularly at the elementary level. In this context, teachers play a strategic role as instructional innovators capable of creating learning processes that are active, reflective, and student-centered. Muhammadiyah Perumnas Elementary School, as an institution rooted in Islamic values, is expected to integrate thematic learning with modern approaches such as discovery learning, problem-based learning, and the 5E learning cycle, in order to develop students' thinking capacities holistically. Research indicates that 21st-century competencies, including critical thinking, are essential tools for facing global challenges (Asri et al., 2023), and that student profiles demand innovative approaches to developing higher-order thinking skills (Nurwidodo et al., 2021). The implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum*, which emphasizes 21st-century competencies, has encouraged a transformation in instructional design (Mongkau & Pangkey,

2024) and calls for curriculum reform rooted in pedagogical innovation (Rismana & Hernawati, 2025). Curriculum content analysis also highlights the importance of integrating higher-order thinking skills (Abduh & Istiqomah, 2021) and providing teachers with training on systematically developing critical thinking assessment instruments (Merta et al., 2021). Meanwhile, innovations in the 4C framework such as critical and collaborative thinking require teachers to be prepared in adopting technology-integrated and collaborative learning models (Wulansari & Sunarya, 2023).

Instructional innovation has thus become a crucial element in transforming traditional teaching methods into learning processes that are active, exploratory, and reflective, especially in improving students' critical thinking skills. Approaches like discovery learning have proven effective in enhancing conceptual understanding and higher-order thinking (Idham et al., 2024; Nata et al., 2025). Additionally, project-based approaches contribute significantly to contextual learning (Nupus et al., 2025; Ratno et al., 2022). The adaptive role of teachers is also vital in facilitating comprehension and critical thinking through active learning models (Krisnanto & Prayitno, 2025), including the effectiveness of feedback strategies (Komara et al., 2025). Moreover, scientific literacy and character education exert a strong influence on students' cognitive and ethical development (Parisu et al., 2025; Dewi, 2022).

Beyond discovery learning, the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) model has also been widely applied in primary education. PBL encourages students to collaboratively solve real-world problems, making critical thinking and reflection a natural part of the learning process. This strategy is shown to enhance students' analytical, synthesis, and evaluative abilities (Compen et al., 2024).

Another effective model is QASEE (Questioning, Answering, Sharing, Extending, Evaluating), which accommodates students with diverse academic abilities. QASEE promotes active participation and strengthens reflective thinking in heterogeneous classrooms (Hsia & Hwang, 2020).

The success of instructional innovation is largely determined by teacher readiness. Therefore, professional development through reflective training is essential. Teachers equipped with reflective competencies are more effective and adaptive in applying critical thinking strategies. Furthermore, teacher collaboration in professional learning communities (PLCs) has proven to enhance consistency in implementing innovative teaching strategies (As'ad et al., 2024).

Given this background, Muhammadiyah Perumnas Elementary School, as an Islamic educational institution, holds great potential to become a pioneer in instructional innovation that integrates Islamic values with the enhancement of critical thinking. The structured, consistent, and sustainable implementation of active learning models, professional development support, and technology integration is essential. This study specifically aims to explore the forms of instructional innovation practiced by teachers at Muhammadiyah Perumnas Elementary School in enhancing students' critical thinking skills. The focus lies on the strategies, approaches, and experiences of teachers in designing learning that challenges students to think, reason, and evaluate information deeply.

The findings of this study are expected to provide both empirical and practical contributions to the development of innovative instructional models, particularly within Muhammadiyah elementary schools. Moreover, this research can serve as a reference for teacher training programs and policymaking in basic education that is rooted in 21st-century skills. By strengthening critical thinking at the elementary level, Indonesian education will be better prepared to produce a generation that is not only cognitively competent but also capable of reflective, logical, and solution-oriented thinking. This forms the fundamental rationale behind the need for instructional innovation by teachers in the context of modern elementary education.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive case study design. This approach was chosen to deeply explore the innovative strategies implemented by Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers in enhancing students' critical thinking skills at Muhammadiyah Perumnas Elementary School. The primary focus of the research was on the instructional process, teacher-student interactions, and the impact of the applied strategies on students' critical thinking abilities.

The research subjects included IRE teachers, the school principal, and fourth-grade students at Muhammadiyah Perumnas Elementary School, selected purposively based on their direct involvement in the IRE learning process.

The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis technique, which involved identifying, categorizing, and interpreting emerging themes from interviews, classroom observations, and relevant documentation. Data validity was ensured through source and method triangulation, by comparing data

obtained from interviews, observations, and documents. Additionally, member checking was conducted with participants to verify the accuracy and credibility of the collected data.

Through this approach, the study aims to provide a comprehensive and in-depth portrayal of the instructional innovations applied by IRE teachers and their contribution to the cultivation of students' critical thinking skills.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

RESEARCH FINDINGS

A. Strategies of Islamic Religious Education Teachers in Enhancing Critical Thinking Skills of Muhammadiyah Perumnas Elementary Students

The instructional strategies implemented by Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers at Muhammadiyah Perumnas Elementary School reflect innovative approaches aimed not only at transferring religious knowledge textually but, more importantly at fostering critical, reflective, and contextual thinking. In this approach, the teacher acts as both a facilitator and a spiritual guide, helping students understand Islamic teachings holistically not merely through memorization, but through practice, internalization of values, and ethical decision-making relevant to daily life. The IRE learning process is designed to promote open dialogue, inquiry-based exploration, and deep reflection on religious teachings. These elements form a solid foundation for cultivating critical thinking skills from the early years of education.

Based on interviews with the school principal, Ms. Subaedah, S.Pd., IRE teacher Ms. Marhana Sanati, S.Pd.I., and two fourth-grade students, Ahzan Maulana Hamka and Abraham Mubaraq, it was found that the teacher employed a variety of approaches. Strategies included communicative and applicable delivery of religious content, active group discussions, open-ended Q&A sessions, and direct practice of religious rituals. These methods were intended to stimulate student thinking, analyze Islamic values, and connect them to students' social realities. The teacher did not merely convey material but actively created a learning atmosphere conducive to logical, empathetic, and spiritual thought development.

1. Delivering Relevant Religious Content and Insights

The IRE teacher at Muhammadiyah Perumnas Elementary strived to present religious lessons in a communicative, meaningful, and contextualized manner. Core topics such as the pillars of faith (*rukun iman*), pillars of Islam (*rukun Islam*), and exemplary stories of prophets and companions were taught

not only through lectures but also via narrative approaches, discussions based on real-life events, and value-based reflection. According to interview results, this method made it easier for students to grasp moral messages and ethical teachings, as they were delivered through relatable and real-life examples.

Special attention was also given to students with special needs by simplifying instructional delivery and focusing on reinforcing basic memorization and Islamic values. Key values such as religious moderation and tolerance were strongly emphasized, helping students cultivate inclusive religious understanding and laying a foundation for critical and wise attitudes in responding to diversity within their social environment.

2. Providing Stimuli to Encourage Thinking

The second strategy involved the use of thinking stimuli at the beginning and throughout the lesson. The teacher posed open-ended, thought-provoking questions, presented simple moral or social case studies, and invited students to express their opinions freely and with reasoning. Open discussions were a regular feature of IRE classes, especially in thematic learning that connects Islamic teachings to daily life.

In the interviews, the teacher stated that this approach trained students to express opinions confidently, evaluate arguments, and remain open to different perspectives. For example, students discussed how Islam addresses bullying, how to respect friends of different religions, or how to interpret the concept of justice in Islam. These activities directly promoted critical thinking, as students were asked to analyze issues, respond based on Islamic values, and propose solutions reflecting Islamic ethics.

Students responded positively to this strategy, noting that the lessons felt more alive and meaningful because they were emotionally and intellectually involved. Some reported feeling more confident speaking in class, more respected, and more accustomed to thinking critically before making decisions. These reflections indicate that the teacher's strategies effectively fostered foundational critical thinking within religious education.

3. Offering Positive Guidance through Visuals and Practical Activities

The final strategy involved presenting material through visual aids and hands-on practice. For topics such as ablution (*wudu*), prayer (*salat*), daily supplications (*du'a*), and noble character (*akhlak*), the teacher went beyond verbal explanations and incorporated practical demonstrations in class or at the school mosque. Tools such as images, illustrated books, props, and ritual simulations were used to support a comprehensive understanding.

This method proved particularly effective for students with visual and kinesthetic learning styles. By observing, performing, and discussing religious practices, students did not merely memorize procedures but gained insight into their spiritual significance. The teacher also encouraged students to ask deeper questions: “Why should we pray on time?”, “What is the social function of zakat?”—turning these practical moments into value-rich discussions that bridged religious teachings with social realities, thereby reinforcing students’ critical thinking capacity.

Through this process, the teacher demonstrated that critical thinking in Islamic Religious Education is not solely a logical skill, but also reflective and ethical. Students’ ability to assess situations, construct arguments, and make decisions was shaped not only by logic but also by Islamic principles of wisdom and morality.

B. Students’ Critical Thinking Skills at Muhammadiyah Perumnas Elementary School

The research findings reveal that students’ critical thinking skills at Muhammadiyah Perumnas Elementary School have developed progressively and vary across individuals. A consistent, supportive, and value-based instructional approach has enabled most students to become increasingly reflective, capable of analyzing situations, and able to formulate responses based on ethical considerations. According to the school principal, this transformation does not happen instantly; rather, it is the outcome of habitual critical thinking and value internalization consistently cultivated within the school environment.

Teachers noted improvements in students’ active participation during discussions, willingness to ask questions, and courage to express personal opinions. Students have begun to formulate reasons behind their statements and show progress in linking religious concepts to social phenomena. For instance, in a discussion on bullying, students were able to explain why such behavior contradicts Islamic values of compassion, and they proposed solutions based on principles of *shura* (consultation) and forgiveness. These examples demonstrate that students are not merely memorizing teachings, but are building a framework for critical thinking grounded in spiritual and social values.

Interviews with students also indicated that they are beginning to consider the consequences of their actions, search for deeper meaning behind religious rules, and resolve conflicts with greater wisdom. One student mentioned that Islamic Religious Education (IRE) lessons help them remain

calm in making decisions because they are used to thinking things through. Another student shared that Islamic values such as justice, patience, and cooperation guide them when encountering differing opinions at school. These reflections indicate that critical thinking skills developed through IRE have a tangible impact not only on academic achievement but also on students' social and emotional behavior.

Thus, students' critical thinking skills at Muhammadiyah Perumnas Elementary School are evidently nurtured through an innovative and adaptive IRE learning process. Teachers play a vital role as facilitators in creating a dialogic learning environment, offering room for exploration, and embedding Islamic values in a contextual and meaningful manner. Early habituation of critical thinking is expected to lay a solid foundation for students' intellectual and moral character development in the future.

C. Supporting and Inhibiting Factors for IRE Teachers

1. Supporting Factors

Several internal and external factors support the success of teachers' innovative strategies in enhancing students' critical thinking skills:

Variety in Teaching Methods: Teachers utilize a combination of lectures, discussions, hands-on practice, and multimedia resources to accommodate diverse learning styles. **Curriculum and Teaching Module Support:** The school designs instructional modules that integrate critical thinking indicators within each IRE learning theme.

Islamic School Culture: Daily routines such as morning prayers, *duha* prayer, and short sermons (kultum) reinforce a religious atmosphere that fosters critical thinking through value habituation. **Positive Student Response:** Students show enthusiasm for IRE lessons, especially when they are connected to Islamic stories and real-life contexts.

One student expressed that IRE lessons became more engaging because they are not limited to memorization but also provide space for thinking and discussing real events.

2. Inhibiting Factors

Nevertheless, teachers face several challenges in implementing these strategies effectively:

Lack of Focus and Motivation: Some students are easily distracted or show little interest during class discussions. **Limited Time Allocation:** Time constraints make it difficult for teachers to conduct in-depth discussions within a single session.

Differences in Academic Abilities: Not all students possess equal ability to analyze or formulate arguments.

Conventional Parental Expectations: Some parents emphasize memorization and ritual practices over the development of critical thinking as a form of character education. Teachers also reported that educational approaches must align with child protection principles, requiring them to be more patient and creative in maintaining discipline without punishment, while still embedding reflective and value-based moral education.

D. Reflections and Educational Implications

This study concludes that the instructional innovations in Islamic Religious Education developed by teachers at Muhammadiyah Perumnas Elementary School have effectively supported the growth of students' critical thinking skills. The approaches used have not only improved students' religious understanding but have also encouraged them to become more reflective, communicative, and socially responsible.

In practical terms, the findings suggest the need for:

Strengthening teacher training programs focused on designing critical and contextual IRE learning.

Developing learning modules based on Islamic case studies.

Expanding the use of digital and visual media to enhance instructional variety. Conducting continuous evaluations on the cognitive and affective outcomes of instructional strategies.

Discussion

The results of this study confirm that instructional innovation in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) at Muhammadiyah Perumnas Elementary School contributes significantly to the development of students' critical thinking skills. The integration of interactive, reflective, and contextual learning strategies aligns with the theoretical framework outlined in prior research, particularly regarding the necessity of 21st-century competencies in elementary education (Asri et al., 2023; Nurwidodo et al., 2021).

Teachers implemented multiple strategies such as communicative content delivery, value-oriented narratives, open-ended discussions, case-based exploration, and hands-on practices each of which contributed to students' ability to analyze, interpret, and make value-based decisions. These practices resonate with the findings of Idham et al. (2024) and Nata et al. (2025), who emphasize the effectiveness of discovery learning in enhancing higher-order thinking. Additionally, the use of real-life cases and thematic

discussions, as seen in this study, reflects the principles of Problem-Based Learning (Compen et al., 2024) and supports reflective pedagogy, as noted by Krisnanto & Prayitno (2025).

The evolution of students' critical thinking is not instantaneous but rather cultivated over time through continuous exposure to dialogic learning environments and value reinforcement. This is consistent with the need for schools to create habitual critical practices (Mongkau & Pangkey, 2024) and provide curriculum innovations rooted in reflective and contextual relevance (Rismana & Hernawati, 2025).

Furthermore, the study shows that teacher readiness both in terms of mindset and skill is a decisive factor in successful implementation. This supports the literature emphasizing the role of professional development and collaborative learning communities (PLCs) (As'ad et al., 2024). Teachers' ability to adapt to diverse academic levels, foster inclusive learning, and apply child-centered discipline reflects the principles of both educational equity and Islamic ethical values, thereby advancing not only cognitive but also moral and emotional aspects of student growth (Parisu et al., 2025; Dewi, 2022).

Inhibiting factors such as limited time, varied academic abilities, and conventional parental expectations indicate a broader need for systemic support. Addressing these challenges through curriculum flexibility, parental education, and time management reforms could further optimize the impact of instructional innovations in IRE.

Conclusion

This study concludes that instructional innovation serves as a strategic and effective approach to cultivating critical thinking among students at Muhammadiyah Perumnas Elementary School. By integrating varied teaching strategies including contextual discussions, experiential activities, and dialogic learning IRE teachers foster an environment where students can reflect deeply, evaluate ethically, and respond constructively to real-world issues.

The findings demonstrate that critical thinking in Islamic education is not merely a logical function but a composite of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual development rooted in Islamic values. Students showed growth in articulating arguments, understanding religious teachings contextually, and applying them to everyday social situations.

In practical terms, this research highlights the importance of:

1. Empowering teachers through continuous training in critical and contextual instructional design;

2. Developing IRE modules based on Islamic case studies that engage students in value-laden analysis;
3. Enhancing instructional media, including visual and digital tools, to accommodate diverse learning styles;
4. Evaluating cognitive and affective outcomes regularly to ensure the sustainability of innovative practices.

By embedding critical thinking within Islamic education from an early age, Muhammadiyah schools can contribute to forming a generation that is intellectually strong, morally grounded, and socially responsive.

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