



Enhancing Students' Critical Thinking Skills in Islamic Religious Education through Problem-Based Learning

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ABSTRACT

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This study aims to analyze the implementation of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in fostering students' critical thinking skills in Islamic Religious Education. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed to explore the learning process and its influence on students' critical thinking development. The participants consisted of two Islamic Religious Education teachers and three tenth-grade students selected through purposive sampling to represent high, moderate, and low levels of classroom participation. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, two classroom observations, and document analysis. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis involving coding, categorization, and theme development, while credibility was ensured through source and method triangulation as well as member checking. The findings indicate that PBL was implemented through contextual problem presentation, collaborative group work, information investigation, class presentations, and reflective discussions. This learning model stimulated students' ability to identify problems, justify arguments, consider multiple perspectives, and relate Islamic values to real-life situations. Nevertheless, improvements in critical thinking were not equally distributed, as some students still encountered difficulties in evaluating source credibility, constructing logical conclusions, and actively participating in discussions. The effectiveness of PBL was influenced by the quality of learning problems, teacher scaffolding, group role allocation, information literacy, and a supportive classroom environment. These findings imply that PBL should be implemented systematically, continuously, and adaptively to optimize students' critical thinking skills in Islamic Religious Education.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid transformation of twenty-first-century education has fundamentally changed the competencies expected of students, extending beyond the acquisition of factual knowledge toward the development of higher-order thinking skills (Fitriani, 2025; Hikmah, 2026; Mohlas, 2025; Najiburohman,

2025). Among these competencies, critical thinking has become an essential requirement because individuals are increasingly expected to evaluate information, solve complex problems, and make well-reasoned decisions in dynamic social environments (Mariani et al., 2026). In response to these demands, educational systems have shifted from teacher-centered instruction toward student-centered learning approaches that encourage learners to actively construct knowledge through inquiry, collaboration, and reflection. Nevertheless, the successful implementation of this paradigm remains challenging in many educational contexts because instructional practices continue to prioritize content transmission over meaningful knowledge construction (Cahyanto et al., 2025). Consequently, students often demonstrate limited analytical reasoning, weak problem-solving abilities, and insufficient reflective thinking despite possessing adequate conceptual understanding. These conditions highlight the importance of identifying instructional approaches capable of cultivating critical thinking, making this issue highly relevant for improving educational quality and preparing students to meet contemporary societal challenges (Nadhiroh & Anshori, 2023).

The challenge of developing students' critical thinking skills is particularly significant in Islamic Religious Education (IRE), where learning objectives encompass not only cognitive achievement but also the internalization and practical application of religious values in everyday life (Rochyati, 2025). Ideally, IRE should provide opportunities for students to analyze contemporary religious issues, evaluate diverse perspectives, and formulate reasoned arguments grounded in Islamic principles. However, instructional practices frequently remain dominated by lecture-based methods, rote memorization, and teacher-centered explanations, limiting students' opportunities to engage in higher-order thinking processes. Such instructional patterns reduce learners' participation in classroom discussions and discourage them from questioning, analyzing, and evaluating authentic problems critically (Tohet et al., 2025). As a result, students often possess theoretical religious knowledge without developing the capacity to apply that knowledge in addressing real-life situations. This discrepancy between the intended objectives of Islamic Religious Education and prevailing classroom practices demonstrates the urgent need for more innovative instructional models capable of promoting meaningful learning experiences and strengthening students' critical thinking competencies.

Empirical observations conducted during the preliminary stage of this study indicate that the learning process in Islamic Religious Education still exhibits several limitations in facilitating critical thinking development. Classroom instruction is predominantly characterized by textbook-oriented explanations, teacher-directed questioning, and assessments emphasizing factual recall rather than analytical reasoning. Consequently, many students experience difficulties when required to connect religious concepts with authentic social and

moral issues encountered in daily life. Classroom discussions also reveal unequal participation, where only a limited number of students actively express opinions, while others remain passive observers with minimal engagement in collaborative learning activities. Furthermore, students often encounter challenges in evaluating the credibility of information, constructing logical arguments, and drawing systematic conclusions from learning materials. These classroom realities suggest that existing instructional approaches have not yet fully accommodated the development of critical thinking skills expected in twenty-first-century education. Therefore, alternative learning models emphasizing inquiry, contextual problem solving, and collaborative investigation deserve further exploration to improve both learning quality and students' cognitive engagement.

Problem-Based Learning (PBL) has been widely recognized as one of the most effective student-centered instructional models for promoting critical thinking, collaborative learning, and problem-solving abilities (Adzimah, 2024; Holidi, 2026; Kusumawati, 2026; Nadhifah, 2026). By presenting authentic problems as the starting point of learning, PBL encourages students to identify issues, collect relevant information, analyze evidence, evaluate alternative solutions, and formulate logical conclusions through collaborative inquiry (Sutrisna & Sasmita, 2022). Rather than emphasizing memorization, this instructional approach enables learners to construct knowledge actively while developing metacognitive awareness and reflective thinking. Kusuma and Nurmawanti (2023) further argue that PBL strengthens students' ability to integrate theoretical understanding with practical experiences, thereby creating more meaningful learning outcomes. Within Islamic Religious Education, critical thinking encompasses not only analytical reasoning but also students' capacity to interpret religious values contextually and respond rationally to contemporary social issues (Alucyana & Raihana, 2023). These theoretical perspectives provide a strong conceptual foundation for considering PBL as a promising instructional strategy for enhancing critical thinking within religious education contexts.

Several empirical studies have demonstrated the positive contribution of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) to improving students' critical thinking skills in Islamic Religious Education. Fazrin (2025) reported that implementing PBL significantly enhanced students' analytical and evaluative abilities when addressing religious issues, while simultaneously increasing classroom participation and argumentative competence. Similarly, Kianda (2024) found that PBL strengthened students' problem-solving abilities by encouraging them to connect Islamic concepts with real-life situations, thereby making learning more contextual and meaningful. Rosalinda (2025) further emphasized that the effectiveness of PBL largely depends on teachers' capacity to design authentic learning problems and facilitate productive classroom discussions. Despite these encouraging findings, previous studies present several limitations. Most

investigations adopted quantitative approaches that primarily measured learning outcomes without exploring how critical thinking develops throughout the learning process (Hikmah & Mudarris, 2026; Manshur, 2026; Syafiih, 2025). In addition, limited attention has been devoted to students' learning experiences, classroom interactions, and instructional dynamics during PBL implementation, particularly within vocational secondary education. These limitations indicate the need for qualitative research capable of providing a more comprehensive understanding of how PBL stimulates students' critical thinking in Islamic Religious Education.

Based on these research gaps, the present study offers several important contributions to the existing body of knowledge. Unlike previous studies that predominantly focused on statistical improvements in students' achievement, this research adopts a qualitative perspective to examine the implementation process of Problem-Based Learning and its role in stimulating critical thinking throughout classroom activities. The study investigates not only instructional procedures but also students' experiences, teacher facilitation, collaborative interactions, and the factors supporting or constraining the development of critical thinking. Furthermore, it explores how Islamic values are integrated into problem-solving activities, allowing students to relate religious knowledge to contemporary social realities through reflective and analytical thinking. This process-oriented perspective represents the novelty of the study because it provides a deeper understanding of the pedagogical mechanisms underlying successful PBL implementation rather than merely evaluating its outcomes. Consequently, the findings are expected to enrich constructivist learning theory within Islamic Religious Education while providing practical insights for designing more contextual, interactive, and student-centered instructional practices.

Considering the educational challenges, empirical classroom conditions, and limitations of previous studies, this research seeks to analyze how Problem-Based Learning is implemented to stimulate students' critical thinking skills in Islamic Religious Education. Specifically, the study addresses three interrelated questions: how PBL is implemented during classroom instruction, how students experience the learning process, and what instructional factors influence the development of critical thinking. This study argues that critical thinking is not solely determined by the selection of an instructional model but also by the quality of contextual problems, teacher scaffolding, collaborative learning processes, classroom interaction, and students' information literacy. Therefore, the successful implementation of PBL requires systematic planning and continuous facilitation to maximize students' cognitive engagement. Theoretically, this study contributes to expanding the understanding of constructivist learning in Islamic Religious Education by explaining the instructional processes through which critical thinking develops. Practically, the

findings provide evidence-based recommendations for teachers to design more meaningful, contextual, and reflective learning experiences that better prepare students to address complex problems in both academic and everyday contexts.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design to obtain an in-depth understanding of the implementation of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in stimulating students' critical thinking skills in Islamic Religious Education. A qualitative case study was selected because it enables researchers to explore educational phenomena within their natural context and to capture participants' experiences, interactions, and perspectives comprehensively (Hosaini et al., 2024). Rather than measuring causal relationships, this approach emphasizes understanding the processes underlying classroom learning and the factors influencing students' critical thinking development. The study was conducted in July 2026 at a vocational secondary school in Indonesia. The research site was purposively selected because the school had implemented Problem-Based Learning in Islamic Religious Education and provided an appropriate context for examining how the instructional model was applied in authentic classroom settings. Classroom observations were conducted twice, on 12 and 14 July 2026, during Grade X Islamic Religious Education lessons focusing on honest behavior in daily life and the workplace. This learning topic was chosen because it aligns with the Grade X curriculum and provides contextual situations that encourage students to analyze, discuss, and solve authentic problems relevant to vocational education. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in the learning process and their varying levels of classroom participation, consisting of two Islamic Religious Education teachers and three Grade X students representing high, moderate, and low levels of learning engagement (Sugiyono, 2023).

Data were collected using three complementary techniques: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and students to explore their experiences, perceptions, and reflections regarding the implementation of Problem-Based Learning and its influence on critical thinking development. Classroom observations focused on documenting learning activities, teacher facilitation, student participation, collaborative interactions, and problem-solving processes throughout the instructional sessions. Documentation served as supporting evidence and included lesson plans, teaching materials, students' learning products, classroom photographs, and other relevant instructional documents. Employing multiple data collection techniques enabled methodological triangulation and facilitated a more comprehensive

understanding of the phenomenon under investigation by integrating participants' perspectives with direct classroom evidence (Bahrani et al., 2025).

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model of qualitative data analysis proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which consists of four interconnected stages: data condensation, data display, conclusion drawing, and verification. Data condensation involved selecting, simplifying, coding, and categorizing information obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation according to the research objectives. The condensed data were subsequently organized into narrative descriptions and thematic matrices during the data display stage to facilitate interpretation and identify relationships among emerging themes. Finally, conclusions were drawn continuously throughout the analysis and verified by comparing evidence across multiple data sources and collection methods. To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, the study employed source triangulation, methodological triangulation, and member checking, allowing participants to confirm the accuracy of the researchers' interpretations and ensuring that the findings accurately represented the participants' experiences and the observed classroom practices (Bahrani et al., 2025).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study examined the implementation of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in stimulating students' critical thinking skills in Islamic Religious Education. The findings were derived from semi-structured interviews with two Islamic Religious Education teachers (G1 and G2), three Grade X students (S1, S2, and S3), classroom observations, and supporting documentation. The analysis generated three major themes: (1) the implementation of Problem-Based Learning in Islamic Religious Education, (2) students' learning experiences and the development of critical thinking skills, and (3) teacher–student interaction dynamics during the learning process.

Implementation of Problem-Based Learning in Islamic Religious Education

The findings revealed that the teachers implemented the major phases of Problem-Based Learning, including problem orientation, student organization, collaborative investigation, presentation of findings, and reflection. At the beginning of each lesson, the teachers introduced the learning objectives and presented authentic problems closely related to students' daily lives. Rather than employing PBL in every instructional unit, the teachers selectively applied the model to topics involving social and moral issues, such as the spread of

misinformation on social media, tolerance, honesty, interpersonal ethics, consumerism, and responsibility in school and workplace environments. According to the teachers, these topics were considered more suitable because vocational school students could more easily understand religious concepts when they were connected to concrete situations.

During the interviews, the teachers explained that one frequently used learning scenario involved the dissemination of unverified information through social media. This contextual issue encouraged students to analyze religious values in relation to real-life experiences instead of merely memorizing theoretical concepts.

Teacher G1 explained:

"When I use the lecture method, students usually only receive information. In problem-based learning, they must explain why a particular action is considered right or wrong according to Islamic teachings."

This statement illustrates a fundamental shift in the learning orientation. Instead of functioning as passive recipients of knowledge, students were expected to interpret Islamic concepts, analyze contextual situations, and justify their judgments using logical reasoning and religious principles.

Teacher G2 further emphasized this challenge by stating:

"Students may memorize definitions, but when they are presented with a real case, they are not always able to determine the most appropriate response."

Following the presentation of the problem, students were organized into heterogeneous discussion groups. Each group was instructed to identify the central issue, collect relevant information, evaluate possible solutions, and formulate conclusions collaboratively. Students consulted multiple learning resources, including Islamic Religious Education textbooks, the Qur'an, Hadith, and internet-based materials. Throughout the discussion process, the teachers continuously monitored group activities and guided students by asking reflective questions instead of directly providing answers.

Teacher G1 described this facilitation strategy as follows:

"I usually ask where they obtained the information, what reasons support their arguments, whether there is any evidence from the Qur'an or Hadith, and what consequences may arise if their proposed solution is implemented."

Classroom observations confirmed this instructional practice. Whenever students encountered difficulties, the teachers refrained from immediately supplying correct answers. Instead, they used guiding questions that encouraged students to reconsider the core problem, evaluate the credibility of their information sources, justify their arguments, and predict the potential

consequences of their proposed solutions. This scaffolding process enabled students to organize their thinking more systematically while maintaining ownership of the learning process.

After completing the investigation stage, each group presented its findings to the class. Other groups actively responded by asking questions, providing alternative viewpoints, and challenging the proposed arguments. At the end of each presentation, the teachers summarized the discussion, clarified misconceptions, reinforced important Islamic concepts, and facilitated collective reflection to formulate final conclusions.

Although all stages of Problem-Based Learning were successfully implemented, the quality of implementation varied across student groups. Classroom observations showed that collaborative discussions occurred in every group; however, active participation was not equally distributed. Several students consistently dominated discussions, while others mainly recorded information or followed the opinions expressed by their peers without contributing their own ideas. Time management also emerged as one of the primary challenges. Reading contextual cases, searching for information, discussing solutions, presenting findings, and conducting classroom reflection required considerably more instructional time than conventional lecture-based lessons.

To address these challenges, the teachers implemented several adaptive strategies. They simplified the complexity of learning cases, provided initial reference materials to support students' investigations, assigned specific responsibilities to each group member, and offered additional guidance to students with lower participation levels. Furthermore, rather than allowing students to copy information directly from internet sources, the teachers encouraged them to explain the acquired information using their own words. This strategy was intended to strengthen conceptual understanding, promote deeper reasoning, and discourage superficial learning based solely on information retrieval.

Students' Learning Experiences and the Development of Critical Thinking Skills

The findings indicate that students perceived Problem-Based Learning (PBL) as a meaningful learning approach because it enabled them to connect Islamic Religious Education with situations encountered in everyday life. However, the development of critical thinking skills occurred gradually and varied according to students' levels of classroom participation, prior learning experiences, and confidence in expressing their opinions. Interview data and

classroom observations consistently demonstrated that students exhibited different patterns of critical thinking development throughout the learning process.

Student S1, who represented the highly active participant, reported that learning through authentic problems and collaborative discussions made Islamic Religious Education more engaging and easier to understand. One learning activity that remained memorable involved the discussion of misinformation and fake news circulating on social media.

S1 stated:

"I used to read only the headlines of news articles. After that lesson, I realized that the actual content could be very different from the title."

This statement illustrates an important change in the student's way of processing information. Rather than accepting information immediately, S1 began questioning its validity before believing or sharing it with others. The student also explained that they had become more careful when accessing Islamic information online by paying greater attention to the credibility of authors, websites, and supporting religious references. These experiences demonstrate the emergence of analytical thinking and reflective judgment, both of which are essential indicators of critical thinking.

Student S2, who represented a moderate level of classroom participation, experienced different learning challenges. During the initial stages of Problem-Based Learning, S2 admitted feeling confused because the contextual problems contained multiple issues that needed to be analyzed simultaneously.

S2 explained:

"At first I was confused because the case contained many problems, and I did not know where to begin."

However, after receiving guidance from the teacher, S2 gradually learned to identify the central problem by reading the case carefully, highlighting essential information, and organizing ideas before participating in group discussions. The student also reported a significant change in decision-making after interacting with peers.

S2 stated:

"I thought my answer was already correct. After listening to my classmates explain the possible consequences, I realized that there were aspects I had not considered."

This experience demonstrates that collaborative discussion encouraged students to reassess their initial assumptions and become more open to alternative perspectives. Rather than defending personal opinions without reflection, students gradually recognized that arguments should be supported by logical reasoning, reliable evidence, and careful consideration of potential

consequences. Such changes indicate the development of evaluative thinking, an important component of critical thinking.

Student S3, who represented the least active participant, encountered greater difficulties throughout the learning process. The student often struggled to determine the main issue presented in lengthy problem scenarios and therefore relied heavily on guidance from both teachers and peers.

S3 explained:

"When the case is too long, I become confused about which part should be answered."

Consequently, S3 rarely initiated ideas during discussions because of fear of making mistakes or being criticized by classmates. Nevertheless, gradual improvement became evident during the discussion of a case concerning dishonest behavior. Initially, S3 believed that remaining silent was the safest response to avoid conflict. Following group discussion and teacher guidance, the student concluded that silence could indirectly allow dishonest practices to continue. Furthermore, S3 recognized that reporting unethical behavior should be supported by sufficient evidence and conducted through appropriate procedures. This finding indicates that although students with lower participation required more instructional support, they were still capable of developing more reflective moral reasoning through structured collaborative learning.

Classroom observations reinforced the interview findings. Most students were able to identify the primary problem after receiving guiding questions from the teacher. Several students successfully justified their arguments by referring to verses from the Qur'an, Hadith, or relevant examples from daily life. However, other students continued to rely primarily on personal opinions without providing sufficient supporting evidence. The observations also revealed that students increasingly attempted to compare information obtained from multiple learning resources, including textbooks, religious references, and internet-based materials. Despite this progress, their evaluation of information credibility remained relatively limited. Many students accepted online information without carefully examining the author's qualifications, the credibility of the publishing institution, the publication date, or the originality of the source.

The findings further showed that each discussion group was able to formulate conclusions based on collective deliberation. Nevertheless, the quality of these conclusions differed considerably. While several groups produced logical explanations supported by evidence and clear reasoning, others generated relatively general conclusions that merely summarized discussion results without critically evaluating alternative perspectives, possible implications, or limitations of the proposed solutions. This suggests that students had begun to

acquire higher-order thinking skills but had not yet fully mastered systematic reasoning and comprehensive evaluation.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the most noticeable improvements in students' critical thinking occurred in their ability to identify problems, construct logical arguments, consider alternative viewpoints, and relate Islamic teachings to authentic situations encountered in everyday life. Conversely, several aspects remained underdeveloped, particularly the evaluation of information credibility, the depth of analytical reasoning, the synthesis of evidence from multiple sources, and the formulation of comprehensive conclusions. These findings suggest that while Problem-Based Learning effectively stimulated critical thinking, its impact varied across students and depended on continuous teacher scaffolding, collaborative interaction, and opportunities for sustained reflective practice.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the implementation of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) transformed Islamic Religious Education (IRE) from a predominantly content-transmission approach into a contextual learning process that emphasized inquiry, analysis, and reasoned decision-making. Rather than merely memorizing religious concepts, students were encouraged to apply Islamic principles in evaluating authentic social and moral issues, such as misinformation on social media, honesty, tolerance, and ethical responsibility. This finding is consistent with the theoretical framework proposed by Hmelo-Silver (2004), who argues that authentic problems serve as the starting point for knowledge construction through investigation, collaboration, and reflection. Likewise, the findings support Rohmah (2025) and Siregar (2025), who reported that PBL enables students to relate Islamic teachings to everyday experiences while promoting critical thinking. However, this study extends previous research by demonstrating that contextualization alone does not automatically generate higher-order thinking. Students' ability to analyze problems depended largely on the appropriateness of the case complexity and their prior reading comprehension. Consequently, meaningful contextual learning requires teachers not only to provide authentic examples but also to guide students in examining evidence, evaluating alternative viewpoints, and reflecting on the consequences of different solutions. These findings enrich constructivist learning theory by emphasizing that contextual learning is fundamentally a cognitive process rather than merely the contextualization of instructional content.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that the development of students' critical thinking skills occurred gradually rather than uniformly across participants.

Students with higher classroom participation demonstrated stronger abilities to identify problems, justify arguments, evaluate different perspectives, and formulate reasoned conclusions, whereas less active students required continuous guidance before they could engage in analytical thinking independently. This finding is consistent with Anggraeni (2023), who reported that PBL contributes positively to the development of critical thinking skills. More importantly, the present study confirms the argument advanced by Yu and Zin (2023) that the effectiveness of PBL depends heavily on teachers' scaffolding strategies rather than on the learning model itself. The guiding questions employed by teachers—such as asking students to identify the problem, justify their reasoning, examine information sources, and predict the consequences of proposed solutions—served as cognitive scaffolds that gradually strengthened students' analytical abilities. Nevertheless, this study also demonstrates that scaffolding should be differentiated according to students' learning characteristics. While highly active learners benefited from open-ended questioning, students with lower participation required more explicit guidance and structured support. This finding contributes to the theoretical understanding that the relationship between PBL and critical thinking is conditional and mediated by instructional facilitation rather than representing a direct causal relationship.

Another significant finding concerns students' evaluation of information credibility. Although most participants successfully searched for information using textbooks, the Qur'an, Hadith, and internet resources, many experienced difficulties in critically assessing the reliability, authority, and validity of those sources. This finding suggests that access to information should not be equated with information literacy. Students were generally able to retrieve information efficiently but frequently neglected to examine authorship, institutional credibility, publication dates, or original references before accepting information as trustworthy. Such findings are particularly important within Islamic Religious Education, where religious information is increasingly disseminated through digital platforms in the form of short videos, social media posts, and personal opinions with varying degrees of credibility. These results support the argument of Altinyelken (2021), who emphasized the importance of dialogue and critical reflection in Islamic education when students encounter diverse religious claims in digital environments. However, the present study extends previous literature by demonstrating that Islamic concepts such as *tabayyun* should not remain abstract theological principles but should instead be translated into explicit information evaluation practices. Consequently, critical thinking in Islamic

Religious Education should encompass not only logical reasoning but also the ability to critically evaluate religious information before accepting or disseminating it.

The study also highlights that collaborative learning does not automatically ensure equal cognitive participation among students. Although heterogeneous group discussions enabled learners to exchange perspectives and refine their reasoning, classroom observations revealed that analytical activities and presentations were frequently dominated by a small number of highly active students, while less confident learners assumed relatively passive roles. This finding contrasts with the common assumption that successful group work necessarily reflects meaningful learning for every group member. Instead, the results indicate that collaborative learning outcomes may conceal unequal cognitive engagement among participants. Therefore, teachers should assign intellectually meaningful responsibilities to every student, including identifying problems, evaluating information sources, constructing arguments, assessing weaknesses in proposed solutions, and synthesizing conclusions, rather than limiting participation to administrative roles such as note-taking or presenting. The findings further demonstrate that students' willingness to participate was influenced not only by cognitive ability but also by psychological safety. Fear of making mistakes discouraged several students from expressing their opinions despite having opportunities to contribute. These findings suggest that effective PBL implementation requires classroom environments that encourage respectful dialogue, evidence-based argumentation, and acceptance of diverse viewpoints, thereby integrating cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions of learning.

Overall, this study contributes both theoretically and practically to the growing body of literature on Problem-Based Learning in Islamic Religious Education. Theoretically, it extends existing constructivist perspectives by demonstrating that the effectiveness of PBL emerges from the interaction between contextual problems, teacher scaffolding, collaborative dialogue, information literacy, and students' psychological readiness rather than from the instructional model alone. This multidimensional perspective provides a more comprehensive explanation of how critical thinking develops during Islamic Religious Education and addresses limitations in previous studies that primarily focused on learning outcomes. Practically, the findings recommend that teachers carefully select authentic problems aligned with students' experiences, provide differentiated scaffolding according to learners' needs, explicitly teach information literacy skills, and structure collaborative learning to ensure equitable cognitive participation among all students. Continuous

implementation of these strategies is expected to strengthen students' abilities to analyze problems, evaluate evidence, formulate reasoned arguments, and apply Islamic values critically in contemporary social contexts. Nevertheless, the study is limited by its relatively small number of participants from a single educational setting. Future studies should therefore involve broader participant groups, incorporate additional data sources such as students' written reflections and recorded classroom discussions, and employ longitudinal designs to examine the sustained development of critical thinking over time.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the implementation of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in Islamic Religious Education effectively stimulates students' critical thinking by enhancing their ability to identify problems, justify arguments, consider multiple perspectives, and relate Islamic values to real-life situations. The findings highlight that successful PBL implementation depends not only on authentic problem scenarios but also on teacher scaffolding, collaborative learning structures, information literacy, and a supportive classroom environment. The study contributes to the literature by providing a process-oriented understanding of how critical thinking develops through PBL in Islamic Religious Education. However, the findings are limited by the small number of participants and the single research setting. Future research should involve multiple schools, larger participant groups, and longitudinal designs to examine the sustained development of students' critical thinking skills across diverse educational contexts.

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