



Bridging Cognitive-Affective Dissonance in Islamic Religious Education: Strengthening Critical Thinking through the Ulul Albab Framework

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Abstract:

This study analyzes Islamic Religious Education (IRE) learning strategies, models of cognitive-affective integration, and challenges in developing students' critical thinking within the ulul albab character framework in the digital era. This study used a descriptive qualitative approach and collected data through classroom observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. The findings reveal that IRE learning remains predominantly teacher-centered, particularly through one-way lectures, due to time constraints and a dense curriculum. A significant gap was identified between students' cognitive achievement and affective internalization, as students tend to engage in short-term rote learning to achieve formal examination scores. Furthermore, the development of critical thinking through provocative and reflective questioning is not yet optimal because students' understanding of religious arguments remains predominantly textual and literal. These findings imply that conventional IRE learning strategies are insufficient to foster deep religious character and critical reasoning. Therefore, a transformation toward student-centered learning is needed, particularly through the consistent implementation of Problem-Based Learning and the development of structured affective assessment instruments to strengthen the integration of cognitive, affective, and critical-thinking dimensions in accordance with the ulul albab character.

INTRODUCTION

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) has a strategic role in preparing students to navigate increasingly complex social, moral, and digital realities. Its importance extends beyond transmitting theological knowledge because education must cultivate individuals who can understand religious teachings, evaluate information, and translate moral principles into responsible actions (An et al., 2025; Memon et al., 2024). The Qur'an illustrates this orientation through QS. Az-Zumar verse 18, which describes ulul albab as those who listen to different statements and follow the best of them. This principle reflects the importance of intellectual discernment as an integral component of religious maturity. In the context of 21st-century education, critical thinking has become an essential competency that students need to develop alongside academic knowledge

(Mardatillah et al., 2025). Therefore, strengthening critical thinking through PAI is important not only for academic achievement but also for preparing morally responsible citizens who can respond wisely to contemporary challenges.

The urgency of strengthening critical thinking in PAI is increasingly evident because students are exposed to abundant and often contradictory information through digital media. Education therefore needs to equip students to examine information, compare arguments, identify misleading claims, and make ethical decisions based on sound reasoning. Indri et al. (2026) emphasize that education plays an important role in developing students' critical thinking amid an era characterized by rapid transformation and uncertainty. The concept of *ulul albab* provides an Islamic framework for connecting intellectual ability with moral responsibility. A related warning appears in the hadith narrated by al-Bukhari and Muslim about people who recite the Qur'an but whose understanding does not penetrate beyond their throats (HR. Bukhari: 3611; Muslim: 1066). The narration highlights the danger of religious knowledge remaining superficial and disconnected from meaningful understanding and conduct. Consequently, PAI must integrate knowledge, reasoning, and character formation rather than prioritize memorization alone.

A major problem emerging in contemporary education is the persistent gap between students' cognitive achievement and their ability to internalize values and apply critical reasoning in real situations. National education policy, through Law No. 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, Article 3, explicitly emphasizes the development of students' faith, piety, noble character, knowledge, competence, and responsibility (Moh. Abdullah et al., 2026). Similarly, the Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology Regulation No. 12 of 2024 concerning the Independent Curriculum emphasizes the development of competencies, including critical reasoning and noble character. Nevertheless, educational practices can become overly focused on measurable academic outcomes, particularly examination scores and curriculum completion (Hosaini et al., 2024). Such an orientation may encourage students to memorize concepts temporarily without developing the ability to interpret, evaluate, question, or apply them. The problem becomes more serious when religious knowledge is treated as a collection of fixed answers rather than as a foundation for ethical reflection. This condition creates a sociopedagogical challenge that requires systematic investigation.

The empirical phenomenon indicates that PAI learning at the junior high school level still encounters difficulties in translating cognitive mastery into affective internalization and critical reasoning. Initial observations and document analysis indicate that students can obtain relatively high scores on written examinations while demonstrating limited ability to connect religious principles with contemporary moral problems (Wibisono et al., 2025). Many students can recall definitions, verses, hadith, and moral principles but struggle when confronted with situations requiring interpretation, argumentation, and ethical judgment (Yusgiantara et al., 2025). The learning process is also frequently dominated by one-way lectures because teachers must complete extensive curriculum content within limited instructional time. Consequently, classroom interaction often provides insufficient opportunities for questioning, discussion, reflection, and problem-solving. Students may become accustomed to short-term rote learning aimed at achieving formal academic outcomes. This phenomenon is particularly concerning in the digital era, where students encounter cyberbullying,

misinformation, hoaxes, intolerance, and academic dishonesty that require both critical judgment and strong moral orientation.

Previous studies have examined various strategies for improving PAI learning and students' critical thinking. Ayuningtyas et al. (2023) reported that the extensive scope of Islamic Religious Education curriculum content can encourage teachers to rely on one-way lecture methods, thereby limiting opportunities for students to develop critical reasoning. Chotimah et al. (2024) highlighted the importance of learning organization and motivation in PAI, while concerns about excessive emphasis on quantitative achievement indicate the potential weakening of students' affective development. Hayatun et al. (2025) identified several implementation challenges, including students' low reading interest, limited supporting facilities, and weak learning motivation. Meanwhile, collaborative learning has been associated with strengthening students' analytical and communication abilities (Aston, 2023). These studies demonstrate that instructional strategies, learning environments, and student engagement influence learning outcomes. However, they generally examine teaching strategies, motivation, facilities, or critical thinking as relatively separate dimensions rather than explaining how cognitive and affective integration shapes critical reasoning in Islamic education (Fadllurrahman, 2025; Noh et al., 2025).

This limitation highlights an important research gap regarding the relationship between students' cognitive mastery, affective internalization, and critical reasoning within an Islamic character framework. Existing studies have provided valuable insights into instructional methods and the development of critical thinking. However, fewer studies have examined why high cognitive achievement does not necessarily lead to corresponding moral behavior and critical judgment. The relationship between religious knowledge and everyday decision-making therefore remains insufficiently explored, particularly among junior high school students experiencing rapid digital and social transformation. This study addresses that gap by positioning the *ulul albab* character as an integrative framework linking intellectual discernment, religious understanding, and moral action. Rather than evaluating learning strategies solely according to academic outcomes, the research examines the sociopedagogical dissonance between what students know, what they internalize, and how they reason when facing real-life problems. Addressing this gap is important for developing genuinely transformative PAI learning.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrated analysis of PAI learning strategies, cognitive-affective relationships, and critical-thinking development through the *ulul albab* framework. The study does not merely compare teaching methods or measure students' cognitive performance, but investigates the deeper dissonance between academic knowledge and its transformation into reflective, ethical, and critical behavior. The research problem is therefore formulated around how PAI learning can overcome the dominance of rote learning and create meaningful connections between religious knowledge, affective internalization, and critical reasoning. The initial argument is that conventional teacher-centered learning is insufficient to achieve this integration because it provides limited space for students to question, investigate, discuss, and apply religious principles to authentic problems. A more transformative approach is required in which students actively construct understanding through contextual problems, reflection, dialogue, and moral decision-making. Such an approach is expected to strengthen the

ulul albab character by integrating intellectual intelligence with religious commitment and responsible action.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical case study design to explore Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning strategies, cognitive-affective integration, and obstacles to developing students' critical thinking skills. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables researchers to examine phenomena within their natural contexts and obtain in-depth interpretations of participants' experiences and perspectives (Pandika, 2026; Siregar et al., 2025). According to Memon et al. (2024), qualitative research positions the researcher as the key instrument for investigating natural conditions without manipulating variables. The descriptive case study design was chosen because this research focuses on comprehensively describing the actual dynamics of PAI learning and the relationship between students' cognitive achievement, affective internalization, and critical reasoning. The research was conducted at SMP IT Zam Zam because the school implements the Independent Curriculum while emphasizing Islamic values, making it relevant for examining the identified sociopedagogical dissonance.

Data were collected through three complementary techniques: passive participant observation (Ibadullah et al., 2026), semi-structured in-depth interviews (Buerahen & Syarifah, 2024), and documentation. Data collection was conducted over two months and four days, from March to May 2026. Passive participant observation was used to directly examine PAI teaching strategies, the use of provocative or trigger questions, classroom interactions, and students' behavioral and critical-thinking responses without interfering with instructional activities. In-depth interviews were conducted with the principal, PAI teachers, and selected students from Grades VII, VIII, and IX to explore perceptions of instructional practices, curriculum constraints, rote-learning patterns, and affective development (Nasucha et al., 2023). Informants were selected purposively based on their knowledge and relevance to the research focus, including PAI teachers and students representing different levels of academic achievement (Mutholib & Gürel, 2025). The researchers documented the study by examining PAI teaching modules based on the Independent Curriculum, HOTS-oriented learning materials, affective assessment instruments, and student learning records.

Data analysis followed an interactive qualitative model involving data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data condensation involved selecting, simplifying, focusing, and organizing field notes, interview transcripts, and documents relevant to PAI learning strategies, cognitive-affective integration, and critical-thinking development. Data display was then conducted by organizing the condensed information into systematic narrative descriptions, matrices, and thematic relationships to facilitate the identification of recurring patterns and relationships. The final stage involved drawing and verifying conclusions by continuously comparing emerging interpretations with field evidence until consistent and credible findings were established. This process was conducted iteratively throughout data collection and analysis to ensure that the conclusions accurately reflected the empirical phenomenon. The Miles and Huberman model was used as the principal analytical framework (Mutholib & Gürel, 2025), while the credibility of the findings was strengthened through source and technique triangulation, as recommended by Karwadi et al. (2025). Ismail et al. (2025)

further support systematic verification in qualitative analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Islamic Religious Education Learning Strategy

Based on observation and interview data, the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning strategy combines several instructional methods, including lectures, interactive question-and-answer sessions, and small-group discussions. However, in practice, the lecture method remains the most dominant approach. The PAI teacher confirmed this finding, Ustadz Zulham Zamzami, S.Pd.I., who stated, "The methods used include lectures, Q&A sessions, discussions, and assignments. However, lectures are still quite dominant due to time constraints and the breadth of Islamic Religious Education material." The dominance of this one-way method affects student engagement during classroom activities. Researchers observed that when teachers explained theoretical concepts at length, some students became passive, lost focus, and copied material from the board without providing feedback. Although interactive activities were implemented, student participation was uneven, and teacher explanations remained central to the learning process.



Figure 1. Atmosphere of Islamic Religious Education teaching and learning activities.

Figure 1 shows the classroom atmosphere during PAI learning activities. Students sit at individual desks and participate in classroom instruction while the teacher leads the learning process. The figure illustrates a classroom arrangement in which teacher-led instruction is prominent, while students primarily listen, take notes, and follow the learning activities. The classroom setting also shows student interaction during the learning process, although participation varies among students.

Cognitive and Affective Integration in the Learning Process

The integration process between the cognitive dimension, represented by knowledge, and the affective dimension, represented by attitudes and values, is supported by printed learning materials based on the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) and incorporating Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) indicators. These modules are designed to empower students not only to memorize learning materials but also to analyze moral issues.



Figure 2. Use of learning devices in Islamic Religious Education instruction.

Figure 2 shows the use of learning devices during classroom activities. The learning equipment is integrated into the instructional process and used to support the delivery of PAI learning materials. The figure illustrates the availability and use of instructional devices during classroom learning activities.

Although the learning tools support higher-level reasoning, the findings indicate a gap between students' cognitive mastery and affective internalization. Most students remain engaged in examination-oriented learning patterns. This was revealed in an interview with Niswah, who stated, "I mostly memorize to make it easier during exams... It is quite helpful in getting good grades." Similarly, Shareef stated, "Memorization is quite easy... It is still difficult to connect the material to real life." These statements indicate that students use Memorization to facilitate examination preparation, while connecting the learning material with real-life situations remains difficult. This suggests that although students' cognitive academic achievement is relatively good, their absorption of spiritual values as guidelines for daily behavior has not yet developed optimally.

Development of Students' Critical Thinking Skills

Developing students' critical thinking skills supports their ability to solve problems critically and creatively as part of 21st-century learning competencies. Teachers attempt to trigger students' critical thinking through questions that require them to examine religious materials more deeply.



Figure 3. Teacher efforts in managing the classroom during learning activities.

Figure 3 illustrates the teacher's efforts to manage the classroom during instruction. Students are positioned in an organized classroom arrangement while participating in teacher-directed learning activities. The figure shows classroom management practices the teacher uses to maintain students' attention, organize participation, and support ongoing learning activities.

When students were asked to analyze the deeper meaning of a Qur'anic verse or hadith, most struggled and could provide only literal interpretations based on the available translation; the findings also indicate that the established culture of memorization makes some students reluctant to engage in deeper thinking. When the teacher does not directly guide learning activities, students tend to become passive and wait for the answer to be provided. Their responses therefore frequently rely on previously memorized information rather than independent analysis. Students' ability to interpret and analyze religious materials independently varies, and teacher guidance remains necessary to stimulate deeper thinking during the learning process.

Discussion

The findings indicate that PAI learning at SMP IT Zam Zam employs lectures, question-and-answer activities, discussions, and assignments. However, lectures remain dominant because of time constraints and an extensive curriculum. This pattern aligns with Mujiburrahman et al.'s (2025) view of learning strategies as systematic procedures for achieving instructional objectives and with the facilitator role described by Mardatillah et al. (2025). Teachers have also connected religious materials with contemporary issues, such as social-media communication and examination cheating, reflecting the contextual orientation of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL). This finding supports Ayuningtyas et al. (2023), who reported that broad PAI curriculum coverage can encourage teachers to prioritize knowledge transmission. However, the present findings extend this literature by showing that the problem is not method selection, but unequal classroom participation. Theoretically, this reinforces viewing strategy as an interactional process rather than merely a teaching technique.

The findings reveal a cognitive-affective gap: students can achieve good academic performance while struggling to internalize religious values in daily behavior. This result supports Abdalla's (2025) conception of Islamic education as personality formation rather than examination achievement. It is consistent with Gao (2026), who criticized administrative formalism that reduces educational success to quantitative scores. The finding also corresponds with Hambali et al. (2023), who emphasize the interdependence of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains, and with Mu'alimin & Rosady (2025), who position Islamic education as comprehensive internalization of Islamic teachings. The observed learning materials incorporate HOTS indicators, suggesting that curriculum design alone does not guarantee affective transformation. This complements Moh. Abdullah et al. (2026) account of learning media functions, particularly their capacity to support cognitive, affective, and psychomotor development. The theoretical implication is that cognitive enrichment must be accompanied by structured value internalization.

Students' reliance on memorization and examination preparation clarifies why cognitive achievement does not consistently translate into religious behavior. Hosaini et al. (2024) similarly identified administrative formalism as a weakness of contemporary educational evaluation, while Fadllurrahman (2025) distinguish cognitive processes from

the affective domain of attitudes and values. Noh et al. (2025) further emphasize that affective development is reflected in changes in attitudes, perspectives, and behavior. This study explains the gap by linking it to students' short-term learning orientation and difficulty connecting religious concepts with real-life situations. This differs from approaches that treat cognitive and affective achievement as separate outcomes; the findings suggest that their relationship must be examined within the learning process. Practically, schools need assessment mechanisms that document students' application of religious values, not only their ability to reproduce content. Assessment could include observed behavior, reflection, and evidence of contextual performance.

Findings on critical thinking show that reflective trigger questions stimulate reasoning, but effects remain uneven because many students still rely on literal interpretations and teacher guidance. This is consistent with Selvin et al. (2024), who found uneven critical-thinking abilities, and with Wibisono et al. (2025), who emphasize analytical reasoning for problem solving. The finding also supports Karwadi et al. (2025), who highlight question-and-answer interaction in encouraging students to express arguments. From an Islamic educational perspective, this pattern corresponds with the concept of *ulul albab* in QS. Az-Zumar verse 18, which emphasizes listening, evaluating, and selecting what is best. Interpretations by Mu'alimin & Rosady (2025) similarly associate *ulul albab* with discernment and thoughtful selection. Theoretically, this study positions critical thinking not as opposition to religious commitment, but as a mechanism for deeper religious understanding and responsible judgment and action. This perspective strengthens the connection between intellectual reasoning, religious interpretation, and moral decision-making in PAI learning.

The state of the art lies in integrating instructional strategy, cognitive-affective development, and critical thinking within the *ulul albab* framework rather than examining these dimensions separately. Previous studies have addressed teacher roles and contextual approaches (Fadlurrahman, 2025; Moh. Abdullah et al., 2026), curriculum-related constraints (Ayuningtyas et al., 2023), critical-thinking skill development (Pandika, 2026), and affective learning (Yusgiantara et al., 2025). However, this study identifies a sociopedagogical mechanism connecting these dimensions: a rote-learning culture oriented toward examination scores can weaken the transformation of cognitive religious knowledge into affective behavior and independent critical reasoning. This advances discussion beyond evaluating whether particular methods are effective. It explains why HOTS activities may still produce limited educational transformation when classroom practices, student habits, and assessment orientations remain score-centered. The novelty lies in conceptualizing cognitive-affective dissonance as a central barrier to *ulul albab* character development.

This study contributes an integrative PAI learning direction connecting key dimensions: contextual instruction, student participation, critical questioning, affective assessment, and *ulul albab* character formation. For teachers, the findings support a shift from predominantly teacher-centered lectures toward Student-Centered Learning, particularly Problem-Based Learning and Collaborative Learning, while retaining lectures when appropriate. Interactive discussions, reflective questions, contextual problems, and opportunities to articulate arguments can provide students with practice in analysis and evaluation. For schools, the findings imply that assessment policy should move beyond paper-based cognitive scores by strengthening evidence of religious behavior, social responsibility, discipline, and reflection. This contribution complements Nasucha et al.

(2023), who found that discussions, questioning, and interactive activities can deepen understanding and critical thinking, and aligns with Aston (2023) on teachers' role in problem-based learning. Overall, this study provides a framework for aligning intellectual achievement with moral development.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the most important lesson from the findings is that the success of Islamic Religious Education cannot be measured solely through students' cognitive achievement, because high academic scores do not necessarily indicate the internalization of religious values or the development of independent critical thinking. The study's main scholarly contribution lies in identifying cognitive-affective dissonance as an important pedagogical issue and positioning the ulul albab framework as an integrative perspective for connecting religious knowledge, critical reasoning, and moral behavior. The findings also show the need to move beyond predominantly lecture-based, examination-oriented learning toward contextual, student-centered approaches that incorporate Problem-Based Learning, collaborative activities, reflective questioning, and structured affective assessment. However, this study is limited by its qualitative focus on a single integrated Islamic school. It therefore cannot fully represent variations across public, private, or other types of secondary schools. Future research should include multiple school contexts, larger and more diverse samples, and longitudinal or mixed-methods designs to examine how cognitive-affective integration and ulul albab-oriented learning influence students' critical thinking and character development over time.

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