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ISLAMIC EDUCATION TEACHERS' CREATIVE STRATEGIES IN DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING OF GRADE VIII B STUDENTS AT MTS DARUTTHOLIBIN

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ABSTRAK

Teacher-centered learning that emphasizes memorization often limits students' critical thinking and active participation. In Islamic Religious Education, students tend to become passive learners, making creative teaching strategies necessary to encourage critical thinking and active engagement. This study examines the creative strategies employed by Islamic Religious Education teachers in developing the critical thinking skills of class VIII B students at MTs Darutholibin Watumalang Wonosobo. The study was motivated by teacher-centered learning practices that emphasize memorization and limit students' active involvement in higher-order thinking processes. This research used a qualitative approach with a descriptive design. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentation, while data validity was tested using source and method triangulation. The data analysis process included data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The findings revealed that teachers implemented creative learning strategies through a flexible combination of lectures, contextual approaches, and discussions. Lectures were used to deliver fundamental concepts, contextual approaches connected learning materials with students' real-life experiences, and discussions encouraged active participation and idea exchange. The implementation of these strategies contributed to increased student activity, confidence in expressing opinions, and the ability to analyze and relate learning materials critically. However, the improvement in students' critical thinking skills was not evenly distributed, as it was influenced by factors such as learning motivation, self-confidence, and the surrounding learning environment.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is a process oriented not only toward transferring knowledge but also toward developing students' character and critical thinking skills (Lin et al. 2022; Pramana et al. 2021). In the 21st century, critical thinking skills are one of the key competencies students must possess to adapt to today's complex and dynamic developments (Xu et al. 2023; Surawan et al. 2022). Critical thinking is a reflective and rational thought process focused on making decisions about what to believe or do (Rivas et al. 2022). This ability involves not only cognitive aspects but also trains students to identify problems, analyze information, evaluate arguments, and draw logical conclusions.

Therefore, critical thinking is an essential foundation for developing a generation that is intelligent, analytical, and capable of facing global challenges.

Students' critical thinking skills are still relatively low, especially at the madrasah level. Based on the results of initial observations at MTs Darutholibin Watumalang, it was found that class VIII B students still showed difficulties in identifying problems, analyzing information, solving problems, and drawing conclusions when working on essay questions. This can be seen from the results of the Final Semester Exam (UAS), where most students were unable to connect lesson concepts with the contextual situations they faced. This condition indicates that the ongoing learning process has not fully provided space for students to hone critical thinking skills. In other words, learning tends to still emphasize basic cognitive aspects in the form of memorization and textual understanding alone. One factor that influences students' low critical thinking skills is the learning method which is still conventional.

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at MTs Darutholibin Watumalang still largely use the lecture method as their primary approach to delivering material, aided only by the use of PowerPoint presentations. While the lecture method offers advantages in explaining concepts quickly and in a structured manner, it is one-way and provides little opportunity for interaction between teacher and students. Teacher-centered learning can leave students passive and untrained in independent thinking (Nadhiroh et al. 2023; Humam et al. 2025). When teachers dominate learning, students lose the opportunity to explore ideas, ask questions, and construct arguments based on their own reasoning (Syauqi 2025).

Islamic Religious Education should not only focus on textual understanding of religious teachings but also encourage students to think reflectively and critically about life's values (Zain et al. 2025; Hidayati et al. 2024). Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning ideally integrates cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects in a balanced manner through a contextual and meaningful approach (Suryadinata et al. 2025; Rofiq 2025). However, if teachers rely solely on lectures, religious values are accepted as dogma without a process of reflection. Students are denied the opportunity to examine, discuss, and connect the material to the realities of their lives. As a result, Islamic religious learning loses its functional essence as a means of developing critical reasoning and an open-minded religious character. Creative teacher strategies are a key factor in overcoming this problem.

Creative teachers are able to create an engaging, interactive, and challenging learning environment for students. Creativity in education encompasses the ability to generate new ideas, strategies, and approaches in the learning process. Creative teachers combine various methods such as discussions, case studies, problem-based learning, and project-based learning to foster active student engagement (Berutu, 2025). In Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning, teachers' creative strategies can be realized by linking religious material to social issues, using relevant digital media, or engaging students in reflective activities that require reasoning and argumentation. Thus, teachers' creative strategies become important instruments in developing students' critical thinking skills in a focused and sustainable manner.

Furthermore, creative learning can also increase student motivation. According to Piaget's constructivist theory, effective learning occurs when students actively construct knowledge through experience and interaction with their environment (Azzahra et al. 2025; Suryana et al. 2022). When teachers are able to present innovative learning, students become not only recipients of information but also creators of knowledge (Kurniawan et al. 2024). This approach is highly relevant for overcoming learning boredom caused by monotonous lecture methods. For example, through the application of problem-solving methods based on Islamic values, students are encouraged to analyze moral, social, and spiritual issues around them. This approach not only hones critical thinking but also strengthens contextual religious understanding. Creative teachers are able to create an engaging, interactive, and challenging learning environment for students. Creativity in education encompasses the ability to generate new ideas, strategies, and approaches in the learning process. Creative teachers combine various methods such as discussions, case studies, problem-based learning, and project-

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2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive approach. The qualitative approach was chosen because it aimed to understand and describe in-depth phenomena occurring in the field, specifically related to the creative strategies of Islamic Religious Education teachers in developing students' critical thinking skills. Qualitative research is a type of research that does not use statistical procedures but instead emphasizes the meaning of social phenomena through data in the form of words, actions, and documents (Lim et al. 2024). Therefore, this study focused on gathering in-depth information regarding the activities, perceptions, and experiences of the research subjects in the learning context.

The descriptive research method was used because it aimed to systematically and factually describe conditions occurring in the field without manipulating variables (Bhangu et al. 2023). This study aimed to provide a clear picture of how creative strategies of Islamic Religious Education teachers are applied in the learning process and how these strategies contribute to the development of critical thinking skills of grade VIII B students at MTs Darutholibin Watumalang Wonosobo.

This research was conducted at MTs Darutholibin Watumalang, located in Watumalang District, Wonosobo Regency, Central Java. The selection of the research location was based on the consideration that this madrasah has a learning environment that supports the implementation of creative and innovative learning strategies. Furthermore, the madrasah's openness to the development of learning methods and adequate facilities were important factors in supporting the implementation of this research. The research was conducted for approximately six weeks in the even semester of the 2025/2026 academic year, encompassing permitting, instrument development, data collection through interviews and observations, data analysis, and the preparation of the research report. The research subjects were selected using purposive sampling, taking into account direct involvement in the learning process. The subjects included Islamic Religious Education teachers as primary informants, VIII B grade students as supporting informants, and the madrasah principal as key informants. This subject selection aimed to obtain in-depth and relevant data in line with the research focus. Data collection techniques included interviews, observation, and documentation (Denny et al. 2022). Semi-structured interviews were conducted to elicit information regarding teachers' creative strategies and student responses. Non-participatory observations were conducted to directly observe the learning process and classroom interactions. Documentation was used to supplement the data, including learning tools, student learning outcomes, and archives of learning activities.

The research instruments consisted of interview guides, observation sheets, and field notes. However, in qualitative research, the researcher remains the primary instrument determining data quality through the ability to observe, ask questions, and analyze the research situation. Data validity was tested using source and method triangulation techniques. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing data from teachers, students, and the madrasah principal, while method triangulation was conducted by comparing the results of interviews, observations, and documentation. This technique was used to ensure the validity and credibility of the data obtained.

Data analysis was conducted qualitatively through three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Sugiono 2021). Data reduction was carried out by selecting and simplifying relevant data, presenting the data in descriptive narrative form, and drawing conclusions gradually through verification through triangulation. This analysis process was carried out continuously until valid and comprehensive findings were obtained.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Creative Strategies of Islamic Religious Education Teachers in Developing *Critical Thinking*

The research results show that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at MTs Darutholibin Watumalang apply various creative learning strategies, namely lecture, contextual, and discussion strategies. These three strategies are not used in isolation but are flexibly combined according to the material needs and student characteristics. This combination demonstrates the teachers' pedagogical awareness in creating learning that is not monotonous and oriented towards the development of higher-order thinking skills. This aligns with the 21st-century learning framework, which emphasizes the importance of integrating various strategies to develop critical, creative, collaborative, and communicative thinking skills (Sikana et al. 2025; Meli et al. 2025).

The lecture strategy is still used as a basis for conveying initial learning concepts. This is because lectures have the advantage of conveying information systematically and efficiently, especially for conceptual material. However, in practice, teachers do not solely use lectures, but rather integrate them with questions and answers to encourage student engagement. This finding aligns with Suhirman et al. (2026), who stated that the lecture method remains relevant when combined with interactive techniques. In addition, according to Syafei (2025) in the cognitive theory of multimedia learning, good information delivery must involve active interaction so that students do not only receive information passively.

However, research findings indicate challenges in implementing the lecture strategy, with some students experiencing difficulty understanding the material when explanations are insufficiently detailed or too rapid. This reinforces Sumarni's (2025) view that the effectiveness of lectures is greatly influenced by the teacher's ability to manage learning communication. Furthermore, Sweller, in Rosyidiana's (2025) book, explains through cognitive load theory that delivering material too densely without interaction can overload students' cognitive capacity, hindering comprehension. Therefore, the use of lectures needs to be balanced with other, more participatory strategies to optimize students' thinking processes.

In addition to lectures, teachers also employ contextual strategies by linking learning material to students' daily lives, particularly in matters of faith and morals. This approach enables students to understand the material more meaningfully because it relates directly to their real-life experiences. These findings align with the Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) theory proposed by Putri et al. (2026), which states that learning will be more effective when linked to the context of students' lives. Furthermore, Bruner, in Handani's (2026) book, using discovery learning theory, asserts that learning becomes more meaningful when students discover for themselves the relationship between concepts and reality. Daud's (2024) research also shows that contextual learning can improve students' conceptual understanding and critical thinking skills. Thus, contextual strategies not only help students understand the material but also train them to critically analyze and evaluate life phenomena.

Discussion strategies are the most dominant approach in encouraging the development of students' critical thinking skills. Through discussions, students are given space to express opinions, exchange ideas, and provide reasons for a problem. This activity requires students to think analytically and evaluatively, which are core components of critical thinking. This aligns with Piaget's constructivist theory, as described in Astiti et al. (2024), which states that knowledge is actively constructed by individuals through experience. Furthermore, Vygotsky, in Lestari et al.'s (2024) research, emphasized the importance of social interaction in cognitive development through the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), where students can achieve higher levels of understanding through collaboration. Furthermore, the use of discussions aligns with the collaborative learning approach proposed by Elza (2025), which states that interaction between students can enhance understanding and higher-order thinking skills. Thus, discussion strategies serve not only as a means of exchanging ideas but also as a medium for developing critical thinking skills socially and cognitively.

Based on this description, it can be concluded that the creative strategies implemented by Islamic Religious Education teachers represent a form of integration of various complementary learning approaches. Lectures serve as the basis for conveying concepts, contextual strategies reinforce understanding through real-life experiences, and discussions serve as the primary means of developing critical thinking skills. The combination of these three strategies demonstrates that learning has shifted from teacher-centered to more student-centered learning. This indicates that creative teacher strategies play a crucial role in creating active, meaningful learning that optimally develops students' critical thinking skills.

3.2. Implementation of Creative Strategies in Learning

The implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers' creative strategies is carried out through systematic learning stages: introduction, core, and closure. In the introduction, teachers provide stimulus in the form of provocative questions related to students' daily experiences. This activity aims to build learning readiness and stimulate students' critical thinking from the beginning of the lesson. Providing initial stimulus is crucial for increasing students' cognitive engagement in the learning process (Parawati et al. 2023; Purba et al. 2026; Nurlina et al. 2021).

In the core stage, teachers combine various learning strategies in an integrated manner. Lectures are used to introduce basic concepts, followed by a contextual approach to connect the material to students' real-life situations. Discussion strategies are then used to actively engage students through questioning, discussion, and presentation of their ideas. In this process, the teacher no longer acts as a center of information but as a facilitator who directs the learning process. This aligns with the concept of active learning, which emphasizes that students' active involvement in learning can improve understanding and higher-order thinking skills (Srihartini et al. 2025; Nafiah et al. 2024). In the closing stage, the teacher and students reflect and draw conclusions on the material they have learned. This reflection is crucial for strengthening understanding and helping students evaluate their learning process (Hendrianty et al. 2024; Patty et al. 2023). Reflective thinking is at the heart of meaningful learning, as through reflection, students can understand the relationship between experience and acquired knowledge (Siswantara 2025).

Student responses to the implementation of creative strategies varied. Most students found learning more engaging, interactive, and easier to understand, particularly through discussions and contextual approaches. However, some students remained passive and lacked confidence in expressing their opinions. This difference demonstrates that critical thinking skills are influenced not only by learning strategies but also by internal student factors such as motivation, readiness to learn, and self-confidence. This is in line with self-determination theory which emphasizes the importance of intrinsic motivation factors in the learning process (Achmad et al. 2025; Nugrahani et al. 2026).

3.3. The Impact of Creative Strategies on Critical Thinking Skills

The research results show that the implementation of creative strategies by Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers has a positive impact on the development of students' critical thinking skills. This improvement is evident in changes in students' learning behavior, which has become more active, such as their courage to ask questions, their ability to express opinions, and their involvement in analyzing problems presented during the lesson. Furthermore, students are beginning to be able to connect learning material to real life, an important indicator of high-level critical thinking. This situation indicates a shift from passive learning to more participatory and student-centered learning.

These findings align with the concept of critical thinking proposed by Ennis in the study by Alfidiyah et al. (2025), who stated that critical thinking is a reflective and rational thought process that involves the ability to analyze, evaluate, and make logical decisions. Similarly, Facione, in the study by Teransa et al. (2026), emphasized that critical thinking encompasses the core skills of interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, and explanation. These indicators begin to emerge in students, particularly when they engage in discussions, question-and-answer sessions, and contextual learning that requires them to provide reasons and draw conclusions independently.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings also reinforce the constructivist theory proposed by Piaget in Ramadhani et al.'s (2026) research, which states that knowledge is actively constructed by individuals through learning experiences. In practice, creative strategies such as discussions and contextual approaches provide space for students to construct their own understanding through interactions with the learning environment. This is reinforced by Vygotsky's (2026) research, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction in cognitive development. Through group discussions and collaboration, students can develop higher-order thinking skills through dialogue and the exchange of ideas. Furthermore, the results of this study align with the Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) theory proposed by Maidah et al. (2025), which asserts that learning will be more meaningful when linked to students' real-life contexts. In this study, when teachers linked Islamic Religious Education (PAI) material to everyday phenomena, students found it easier to understand the material and were encouraged to think critically when assessing a problem. Thus, contextual strategies not only improve conceptual understanding but also strengthen students' analytical and reasoning skills.

However, improvements in critical thinking skills were not evenly distributed across all students. Some students remained less active, hesitant to express their opinions, and unable to conduct in-depth analysis. This suggests that the development of critical thinking is a gradual process influenced by various factors, such as self-confidence, readiness to learn, and previous learning experiences. These findings align with research by Ervina et al. (2025), which stated that collaborative learning can improve critical thinking skills, but its effectiveness is highly dependent on students' active participation and readiness to participate in the learning process.

In addition to internal student factors, a supportive learning environment is also important in optimizing the development of critical thinking. In a study by Sholeh et al. (2024), Hattie emphasized that the quality of interactions between teachers and students significantly influences learning outcomes, including the development of higher-order thinking skills. Therefore, creative strategies implemented by teachers need to be supported by a conducive learning environment, the use of varied learning media, and an approach that adapts to student characteristics.

Overall, the results of this study confirm that Islamic Religious Education teachers' creative strategies play a significant role in creating active, interactive, and meaningful learning. These findings strengthen the integration of constructivist theory, contextual learning, and collaborative learning in developing students' critical thinking skills. However, ongoing learning innovation and a more inclusive and adaptive approach are needed to ensure optimal and equitable development of critical thinking skills across all students.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the research results, the creative strategies of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at MTs Darutholibin Watumalang play a significant role in developing students' critical thinking skills through a combination of lectures, contextual learning, and discussions. Lectures are used as a basis for conceptual understanding, contextual learning to relate material to real life, and discussions are the primary means of encouraging student analysis and active participation. The systematic implementation of these strategies through the introductory, core, and closing stages has led to student-centered learning, marked by increased courage to express opinions, activeness, and analytical skills. The impact is seen in the development of critical thinking indicators, although not evenly distributed due to the influence of internal and external factors on students. Thus, the creative strategies of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers are effective in improving critical thinking skills gradually and sustainably.

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