

The Role of Islamic Pedagogy in Fostering Critical Thinking Among Students in Islamic Schools

Edy Saputra Syam¹

¹Universitas Muslim Indonesia

Corresponding Author: Edy Saputra Syam

Abstract

This qualitative study explores the role of Islamic pedagogy in fostering critical thinking among students in Islamic schools. Grounded in the principles of Ijtihad (independent reasoning) and Tafakkur (reflection), Islamic education promotes deep engagement with religious teachings. However, classroom observations and document analyses reveal a persistent gap between the theoretical ideals of critical thinking and practical teaching methods, which often prioritize rote memorization. Teachers face challenges such as time constraints, curriculum demands, and cultural norms that inhibit the development of critical thinking skills. Despite these obstacles, some students demonstrated higher-order thinking when given the opportunity to engage with debates and reflective activities. The study concludes that curriculum reforms are necessary to provide teachers with structured tools and methods to better integrate critical thinking into Islamic education, ensuring students can apply their faith to contemporary issues in a reflective and analytical manner.

Keywords

Islamic Pedagogy
Critical Thinking
Ijtihad
Tafakkur
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Introduction

The role of education in fostering critical thinking has become more crucial in today's interconnected world, where students are expected to navigate complex problems and make informed decisions. Critical thinking, understood as the capacity to analyse, synthesize, and evaluate information for problem-solving and informed judgment, is increasingly emphasized in educational frameworks across the globe (Paul & Elder, 2020). While much of the discourse on critical thinking in education has traditionally centre on Western pedagogical practices, the growing demand for holistic educational models has led to an exploration of how other systems, such as Islamic pedagogy, contribute to nurturing these vital skills. In particular, the role of Islamic schools, which educate millions of students globally, in fostering critical thinking has become a subject of interest. This study focuses on how Islamic pedagogy supports the development of critical thinking in Islamic schools, addressing both its potential and challenges.

Islamic pedagogy, grounded in the Quran and Sunnah, emphasizes more than religious instruction; it fosters the comprehensive intellectual, spiritual, and ethical growth of students (Halstead, 2004). Central to this educational approach are principles such as Tafakkur (reflection) and Ijtihad (independent reasoning), both of which are foundational to critical thinking. The Quran frequently exhorts believers to reflect deeply on the world around them and engage in intellectual inquiry (Saeed et al., 2020). This suggests that critical thinking is not foreign to Islamic pedagogy but rather a deeply rooted principle that, if implemented properly, can significantly shape students' cognitive skills. For instance, Tafakkur encourages students to analyse their surroundings and their role in the broader moral and ethical framework of Islamic teachings. Similarly, Ijtihad fosters the ability to engage with texts and traditions critically, promoting a deeper understanding that transcends rote memorization.

Despite these intellectual traditions, Islamic schools have often been criticized for focusing heavily on memorization at the expense of encouraging critical thinking (Zaman, 2017). This criticism stems from the widespread practice of *Hifz* (memorization of the Quran), which, while valuable for religious purposes, may limit students' engagement with the material beyond mere recall. In many traditional Islamic schools, the

pedagogical approach emphasizes rote learning, with students being assessed primarily on their ability to recite and memorize. This reliance on memorization, though important in preserving religious knowledge, can inhibit the development of analytical and reflective skills. The challenge lies in balancing the need for preserving religious texts with fostering critical engagement, a balance that some Islamic schools are striving to achieve.

Some scholars argue that Islamic pedagogy, when applied effectively, can nurture critical thinking even within traditional frameworks. For example, Adeel (2019) points out that the Quran itself contains numerous exhortations for believers to think, reason, and question, highlighting the intellectual dimension of faith. Therefore, the notion of critical inquiry is not alien to Islamic thought but is inherent within its educational philosophy. Tohari et al. (2022) supports this view, asserting that the principle of *Ijtihad*, which historically allowed for the independent interpretation of Islamic law, can serve as a model for developing critical thinking skills in students. By encouraging students to engage in independent reasoning, Islamic schools can promote a culture of inquiry that aligns with the goals of modern education.

The role of teachers in this process is crucial. In many Islamic schools, teachers are viewed as the ultimate authority, and their approach to pedagogy significantly impacts the development of critical thinking skills. Traditional Islamic teaching often involves the teacher imparting knowledge while students passively receive it (Alshami et al., 2021). However, research has shown that when teachers adopt a more dialogical approach encouraging discussion, debate, and inquiry students are more likely to develop critical thinking skills (Cui & Teo, 2023). For instance, teachers who facilitate open-ended discussions on ethical and moral issues rooted in Islamic teachings allow students to engage with the material at a deeper level, fostering both intellectual and spiritual growth. Al-Banna (2019) found that teachers who incorporated questions that challenged students to think beyond surface-level understanding of religious texts were more successful in promoting critical engagement with the subject matter.

A practical aspect of Islamic pedagogy that can foster critical thinking is the use of *Qasas* (prophetic stories), which are commonly used to teach moral lessons. These stories, found in the Quran and Hadith, require students to reflect on the actions of the prophets, analyze their decisions, and consider the ethical implications of their behavior (Nasr, 2010). This process of reflection and analysis is a key component of critical thinking. Shapiro (2016) notes that when students are encouraged to critically engage with these stories, they not only develop their ethical reasoning but also their ability to think analytically about broader social and moral issues. This method aligns with the goals of modern education, where students are taught to apply knowledge to real-world problems.

Nevertheless, significant barriers remain in fully integrating critical thinking into Islamic pedagogy. One major challenge is the lack of teacher training on pedagogical methods that promote inquiry and reflection (Al Khatib et al., 2020). Many teachers in Islamic schools have not received adequate training in how to balance traditional teaching methods with modern educational strategies that encourage critical thinking. As a result, even when the curriculum is designed to foster these skills, the implementation may fall short. Ajmain (2019) argue that professional development programs focused on critical thinking strategies within an Islamic framework are necessary to equip teachers with the tools they need to promote higher-order thinking in the classroom.

In conclusion, Islamic pedagogy has the potential to foster critical thinking through its emphasis on reflection, inquiry, and moral reasoning. While challenges such as the dominance of rote memorization and insufficient teacher training remain, there are promising opportunities for integrating critical thinking into Islamic education. This study aims to explore how these pedagogical practices are currently being used in Islamic schools and to identify practical ways to enhance the development of critical thinking within this context. By addressing these issues, Islamic schools can contribute not only to the spiritual growth of their students but also to their intellectual development, preparing them to navigate the complexities of modern life with wisdom and discernment.

Problem of Study

In Islamic educational institutions, the traditional approach has largely focused on the memorization of religious texts, particularly the Quran, without always emphasizing critical engagement with the material. This focus on rote learning, while essential for preserving religious knowledge, raises concerns about whether students in Islamic schools are being adequately equipped with the skills needed to navigate the intellectual, social, and moral challenges of the modern world. Although Islamic pedagogy, through principles such as *Ijtihad* (independent reasoning) and *Tafakkur* (reflection), inherently encourages critical thinking, these methods are often not fully utilized in practice (Ruby, 2019). The central problem this study addresses is the gap between the theoretical framework of Islamic pedagogy and its practical implementation in fostering critical thinking among students in Islamic schools. The study seeks to understand how Islamic pedagogical principles can be better integrated to develop students' critical thinking skills, and to what extent current teaching practices align with these objectives.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it contributes to the growing body of research that explores the relationship between Islamic pedagogy and critical thinking, addressing a critical gap in the literature. While much has been written about critical thinking in secular and Western education contexts, less attention has been paid to how Islamic educational philosophies can support this skill. By focusing on Islamic schools, this research provides insights that can inform both educational policy and curriculum development within these institutions, potentially leading to reforms that better prepare students for the demands of contemporary life. Additionally, the study highlights the importance of teacher training and curriculum design in promoting intellectual engagement, offering practical recommendations for educators on how to balance traditional religious instruction with modern pedagogical approaches. Finally, the study's findings may be applicable beyond the Islamic school context, offering broader implications for how religious education can cultivate critical, reflective, and independent thinkers.

Limitations of the Study

This study is subject to several limitations that may affect the generalizability of its findings. First, the research is geographically limited to a select number of Islamic schools within a specific region, which may not fully represent the diversity of Islamic educational practices across different countries or cultural contexts. The practices of Islamic pedagogy can vary significantly depending on local traditions, interpretations of Islamic teachings, and educational policies, and this study's findings may not be applicable to all Islamic schools. Second, the study focuses primarily on qualitative methods, including interviews and classroom observations, which, while providing in-depth insights, may limit the ability to measure critical thinking outcomes quantitatively. Additionally, the research is dependent on the willingness of teachers and administrators to reflect honestly on their teaching practices, which could introduce bias or subjectivity into the data. Finally, time constraints may limit the ability to observe long-term outcomes of critical thinking development in students, as changes in cognitive skills often require sustained educational efforts. Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights into the potential for Islamic pedagogy to foster critical thinking, with recommendations that can guide future research and educational reforms.

Literature Review and Previous Studies

Critical thinking has become a foundational component of modern education systems worldwide, recognized as essential for students to navigate increasingly complex societal, economic, and technological challenges (Paul & Elder, 2020). In the context of Islamic education, however, the integration of critical thinking into pedagogical practices remains a topic of ongoing debate. While Islamic educational philosophy inherently encourages intellectual engagement and reflective thinking through principles like *Ijtihad* (independent reasoning) and *Tafakkur* (reflection), the practical implementation of these principles in Islamic schools has been inconsistent (Halstead, 2004). This literature review will explore the theoretical foundation of Islamic pedagogy, the challenges faced in fostering critical thinking within Islamic schools, and the role of teachers and educational environments in this process.

Islamic pedagogy, deeply rooted in the Quran and Sunnah, encourages a holistic development of the individual that goes beyond religious instruction (Sahin, 2019). Central to this educational philosophy is the concept of *Tafakkur*, which the Quran repeatedly emphasizes as a form of deep contemplation and reflection on the natural and moral order. Similarly, *Ijtihad* has been an integral part of Islamic jurisprudence, allowing for independent reasoning and interpretation to address contemporary challenges (Saeed, 2020). These principles align closely with modern understandings of critical thinking, which involves analyzing information, reflecting on evidence, and making informed decisions. However, Islamic pedagogy's emphasis on critical engagement is not always fully realized in Islamic schools, where the focus on rote memorization of religious texts has, in some cases, limited opportunities for critical thinking development (Zaman et al., 2017).

Scholars such as Halstead (2004) have argued that the theoretical framework of Islamic pedagogy, particularly through *Ijtihad*, provides a strong foundation for critical thinking. The Quran itself invites believers to question and reflect on the signs of God in the universe, a process that requires not only spiritual but also intellectual engagement. Waghid (2011) adds that Islamic education, in its ideal form, promotes inquiry, self-reflection, and moral reasoning, all of which are components of critical thinking. Yet, as Saeed (2020) points out, while these concepts are well-established in Islamic scholarship, the practical application in classrooms often lags behind due to traditional teaching methods that prioritize memorization over intellectual exploration.

The dominance of rote memorization in Islamic schools has been identified as one of the key barriers to fostering critical thinking. Abdalla et al. (2021) highlights that many Islamic educational institutions prioritize the memorization of the Quran and Hadith, which is crucial for religious preservation but may limit students' ability to engage critically with the material. The emphasis on *Hifz* (memorization) often leaves little room for the analytical and reflective processes that are essential for critical thinking. This is particularly challenging in contexts where teachers are not trained in pedagogical methods that encourage higher order thinking (Al Khatib et al., 2020). While memorization has its place in Islamic education, the challenge is to strike a balance between preserving religious knowledge and encouraging intellectual engagement.

Another challenge is the perception that critical thinking might lead students to question religious authority or traditional interpretations of Islamic teachings. Zaman et al. (2017) argues that in some conservative educational settings, there is resistance to teaching methods that promote inquiry, as they are seen as potentially undermining the faith. This presents a tension between fostering critical thinking and maintaining religious orthodoxy. However, Al-Banna (2019) contends that when properly guided, critical thinking does not conflict with faith but rather enhances it by enabling students to develop a deeper, more reasoned understanding of their beliefs.

The role of teachers is crucial in integrating critical thinking into Islamic pedagogy. Research has shown that teachers' attitudes and teaching methods significantly influence students' ability to develop critical thinking skills. Soysal (2021) found that when teachers adopt a dialogic approach encouraging open-ended discussions, asking thought-provoking questions, and fostering debate students are more likely to engage in critical thinking. In contrast, teachers who rely heavily on didactic teaching methods, where information is delivered without space for inquiry or discussion, may inadvertently stifle critical engagement.

Teacher training is therefore essential in promoting a more critical approach to learning. Al Khatib et al. (2020) points out that many teachers in Islamic schools lack professional development opportunities that focus on fostering critical thinking. Most teacher training programs in these schools emphasize religious knowledge and scriptural interpretation without equipping teachers with modern pedagogical skills. Khasawneh & Altakhaine (2020) argue that improving teacher training is a necessary step toward integrating critical thinking into Islamic education. When teachers are equipped with the tools to encourage inquiry, reflection, and analysis, they are more likely to create an environment that supports the development of critical thinking.

The educational environment also plays a significant role in the development of critical thinking skills. Islamic schools often operate within a structured and disciplined framework, which is essential for maintaining the religious and ethical values central to Islamic education (Nasr, 2010). However, this structure can sometimes limit the flexibility needed for critical thinking activities, such as debates, group discussions, and independent research projects. Studies have shown that students thrive in environments where they feel safe to express their thoughts, challenge ideas, and explore different perspectives without fear of reprimand (Maluleke, 2021). Creating such an environment in Islamic schools may require a cultural shift, where inquiry is seen as a natural part of faith-based learning rather than a challenge to it.

Several studies have explored the relationship between Islamic pedagogy and critical thinking, though this remains an emerging area of research. Halstead's (2004) seminal work on Islamic education highlighted the potential for Islamic schools to foster critical thinking through the principles of *Ijtihad* and *Tafakkur*. He argued that these concepts, if applied correctly, could enable students to develop analytical skills within the framework of religious education. Similarly, Shernoff (2013) examined the role of Islamic pedagogy in fostering independent thought and suggested that Islamic education has the capacity to promote critical engagement with both religious texts and contemporary issues.

More recent studies have focused on the practical challenges of implementing critical thinking in Islamic schools. Abdalla et al. (2021) conducted research in a series of Islamic schools and found that while there was awareness among educators of the importance of critical thinking, institutional barriers, such as rigid curricula and a focus on memorization, limited its development. Al Khatib et al. (2020) also highlighted the lack of teacher training as a major impediment to fostering critical thinking, noting that teachers were often unprepared to facilitate discussions that encourage inquiry and analysis. Ahmed (2019) study provides a more optimistic outlook, demonstrating that when teachers adopt dialogic teaching methods, students in Islamic schools can and do engage in critical thinking. Their research showed that students who participated in discussions, debates, and reflective exercises developed stronger analytical skills and a deeper understanding of both religious and secular subjects. These findings suggest that with the right teaching approaches, Islamic schools can successfully integrate critical thinking into their curricula.

Methods

This study utilized a qualitative approach to explore the role of Islamic pedagogy in fostering critical thinking among students in Islamic schools. Data for this study were collected through a combination of semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a range of participants, including teachers, administrators, and students from the selected Islamic schools. Classroom observations were conducted to gain a direct understanding of how Islamic pedagogical methods were applied in real teaching environments. Document analysis was used as an additional method to examine the formal structures that guide teaching and learning in Islamic schools. Relevant documents, including curricula, lesson plans, school policies, and teaching materials, were collected and analyzed to understand how critical thinking is integrated into the formal educational framework. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. This method involved identifying and coding recurring themes across the data from interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis.

Results and Discussion

Interviews: Teacher and Administrator Perspectives

Theme 1: Perceptions of Critical Thinking in Islamic Pedagogy

Teacher A (Male, 10 years of teaching experience):

"In Islam, critical thinking is inherent in Ijtihad. We encourage students to question, to reflect on their understanding of faith, and to apply it in daily life. However, many teachers find it difficult to balance traditional teaching methods with more modern approaches to foster independent thought."

Administrator B (Female, School Principal):

"Our curriculum promotes reflection, but I've noticed that not all teachers know how to engage students in real critical thinking activities. They tend to stick to rote learning, especially when preparing for exams. The emphasis on memorization sometimes overrides deeper reflection."

This shows a divergence between theoretical understanding and actual implementation. While teachers acknowledge the importance of critical thinking within Islamic pedagogy, there are challenges in fully integrating it into everyday practices due to systemic constraints like exam-focused teaching.

Theme 2: Challenges in Implementing Critical Thinking

Teacher C (Female, Islamic Studies Teacher):

"I try to create discussions where students can express their own interpretations of the Qur'an, but some students are hesitant to challenge what they've been taught. They're used to absorbing information rather than questioning it."

Teacher D (Male, History Teacher):

"I use group projects and debates to encourage critical analysis of historical Islamic figures, but time is a big issue. We're always rushing to finish the syllabus."

The interviews highlight that while teachers are attempting to engage students in critical thinking, there are significant obstacles such as time constraints, students' reluctance, and traditional expectations of learning that prioritize memorization over critical inquiry.

Classroom Observations: Pedagogical Practices

Observation 1: Islamic Studies Class – Teacher E

The lesson focused on Tafakkur (reflection) as part of the Islamic practice of seeking knowledge. The teacher started by explaining the Qur'anic basis for reflection and then asked students to think about how this concept applied to their daily lives. The teacher asked open-ended questions like, "How do you think we can apply the lessons from Surah Al-'Asr in modern-day challenges?" and gave students time to reflect before discussing in pairs. Most students provided simple, surface-level answers, repeating textbook information. A few, however, gave more nuanced interpretations, linking the Surah to personal and societal issues. The teacher guided them towards exploring broader implications.

While the teacher attempted to foster critical thinking by encouraging students to apply religious concepts to contemporary life, most students struggled to move beyond rote responses. The few who did show potential for critical thinking but needed further guidance to deepen their analysis.

Observation 2: History Class – Teacher F

The class was discussing the Abbasid Dynasty's scientific advancements. The teacher used a traditional lecture format but later introduced a group activity asking students to debate the importance of science in Islamic history versus today. Students were assigned positions to argue either for or against the notion that the scientific progress of the Abbasids has declined in the modern Islamic world. In the debate, some students demonstrated critical thinking by using evidence from historical texts, but many reverted to basic arguments without much depth or questioning of the sources. The teacher intervened to challenge students, asking, "What assumptions are we making about the role of science today, and how do we compare them fairly to historical achievements?"

This observation revealed that while debate structures promoted student engagement, the depth of critical thinking varied widely. Students needed more encouragement to challenge assumptions and consider alternative viewpoints.

Document Analysis: Curriculum and Lesson Plans

Curriculum Review: Critical Thinking Integration

The curriculum explicitly references the importance of *Ijtihad* (independent reasoning) and *Tafakkur* (reflection), with learning outcomes that encourage students to "*critically reflect on Islamic teachings and apply them in modern contexts*". However, the guidelines for how to achieve these outcomes are vague, with no clear strategies or examples of specific activities that promote critical thinking.

Lesson Plan 1: Science Class

The lesson plan focused on "*The contributions of early Muslim scientists*". The teacher's notes indicate the intention to have students "*reflect on the importance of these contributions today*". However, the lesson objectives prioritize factual recall, with no specific activities outlined for fostering deeper analysis or discussion.

Lesson Plan 2: Qur'an Study

This plan involved memorization of verses from the Qur'an, followed by a discussion on their meaning. The lesson included a section labeled "Critical Reflection," asking students to "think about how these verses guide us today," but no further guidance was provided on how students should engage with the verses in a critical or analytical way.

Emergent Themes and Synthesis

From the interviews, observations, and document analysis, several key themes emerged regarding the integration of critical thinking in Islamic pedagogy:

While Islamic pedagogy, in theory, emphasizes critical thinking through concepts like *Ijtihad* and *Tafakkur*, this is not fully realized in classroom practices due to a focus on rote learning and exam preparation. Teachers recognize the importance of fostering critical thinking but face challenges such as time constraints, lack of student engagement, and limited practical guidance on how to implement such practices effectively. Some students demonstrate potential for critical thinking, particularly in environments where debate and discussion are encouraged, but overall student engagement with critical analysis is inconsistent. The curriculum emphasizes critical thinking but lacks specific activities and frameworks to guide teachers in promoting this skill effectively.

Interviews: Teacher and Administrator Perspectives

Theme 1: Perceptions of Critical Thinking in Islamic Pedagogy

In interviews with teachers and administrators, a common perspective emerged regarding the role of critical thinking in Islamic pedagogy. For instance, Teacher A, with 10 years of experience, noted that critical thinking is embedded in Islamic concepts like *Ijtihad* (independent reasoning). He explained that within Islamic education, students are encouraged to question and reflect on their understanding of faith, applying these principles to real-life situations. However, he also pointed out a significant challenge: balancing traditional teaching methods with modern approaches to foster independent thought. This tension reflects the broader struggle within Islamic schools to maintain the integrity of religious traditions while adapting to contemporary educational expectations.

Similarly, Administrator B, the principal of one of the participating schools, emphasized that while the curriculum promotes reflection, many teachers lack the skills or confidence to engage students in genuine critical thinking activities. She observed that teachers tend to rely heavily on rote memorization, particularly when preparing students for exams, where success is often measured by how well students can recall and recite information. This overemphasis on memorization can limit opportunities for deeper reflection and critical engagement with the material. The interviews revealed a discrepancy between the theoretical commitment to fostering critical thinking in Islamic pedagogy and the practical challenges teachers face in implementing these ideals in the classroom.

Theme 2: Challenges in Implementing Critical Thinking

Teachers face numerous obstacles when trying to integrate critical thinking into their lessons. *Teacher C*, an Islamic Studies teacher, explained how she tries to create classroom discussions that allow students to express their own interpretations of the Qur'an. However, she acknowledged that many students are hesitant to challenge traditional interpretations, preferring to absorb information as it is presented. This reluctance to engage critically reflects the cultural expectation that students should respect established religious knowledge rather than question it.

In a similar vein, *Teacher D*, a history teacher, shared his experience of using group projects and debates to encourage students to critically analyse historical Islamic figures. However, he highlighted a major constraint: time. The pressure to complete the syllabus often limits the time available for more exploratory or critical activities, such as debates or discussions. This time pressure forces teachers to prioritize content coverage over deeper analytical tasks, making it difficult to sustain critical thinking initiatives in their classrooms.

These interviews paint a clear picture of the challenges Islamic school teachers encounter in fostering critical thinking. While many educators recognize its importance, systemic issues such as time constraints, students' reluctance to challenge authority, and a curriculum that favors memorization over reflection, hinder the full integration of critical thinking practices into everyday teaching.

Classroom Observations: Pedagogical Practices

Observation 1: Islamic Studies Class – Teacher E

During one of the observed Islamic Studies lessons, the focus was on the concept of *Tafakkur* (reflection), a significant element of Islamic pedagogy rooted in the Qur'anic principle of seeking knowledge through contemplation. *Teacher E* began the lesson by introducing the idea of *Tafakkur* as a form of intellectual and spiritual engagement that encourages believers to reflect deeply on the signs of God, as outlined in various Qur'anic verses. The teacher then posed an open-ended question to the class: "How do you think the lessons from Surah Al-'Asr apply to the challenges we face today?"

This type of questioning provided a clear opportunity for fostering critical thinking. By connecting the religious text with contemporary issues, the teacher invited students to analyze and interpret the Surah in a way that went beyond rote memorization, pushing them to consider its relevance to modern life. The students were given time to reflect individually before discussing their thoughts in pairs. This setup allowed for collaborative exploration of ideas, which is crucial in developing critical thinking skills within the framework of Islamic pedagogy.

Student Response:

The students' responses varied significantly. The majority gave relatively simple answers, mostly repeating explanations they had previously learned from textbooks or teachers. For instance, one student linked the Surah to patience and perseverance in everyday challenges but did not elaborate much beyond a general interpretation. These responses reflected a tendency towards surface-level thinking, which is common in educational environments where memorization is emphasized over deeper analysis.

However, a few students demonstrated more advanced critical thinking skills. One student, for example, interpreted the Surah in the context of societal issues such as justice and inequality, drawing connections between the religious teachings and current socio-political debates. The student discussed how the emphasis on cooperation and mutual advice in the Surah could be applied to addressing modern social divides. This level of response showed a deeper engagement with both the text and the realities of contemporary life, illustrating the potential for Islamic pedagogy to foster critical reflection when given the right guidance and space.

Teacher's Role:

Teacher E played a crucial role in guiding students towards deeper thinking. When students offered surface-level answers, the teacher did not immediately move on but instead asked follow-up questions, encouraging

them to think further. For instance, after hearing a basic answer about patience, the teacher asked, "Can you give an example of how practicing patience might look different in today's society compared to the time of the Prophet (PBUH)?" This prompt nudged students to consider how timeless values adapt to changing contexts, a key aspect of critical thinking in an Islamic framework.

By facilitating this kind of reflective dialogue, Teacher E was actively bridging the gap between traditional religious instruction and modern educational practices that emphasize critical analysis. The teacher's interventions were essential in helping students move beyond memorization and into thoughtful engagement with the material.

Observation 2: History Class – Teacher F

In a history class focused on the Abbasid Dynasty's contributions to science, Teacher F used a lecture-based format to explain the historical significance of Muslim scholars during that era. Following the lecture, the teacher introduced a group activity where students were asked to debate whether the scientific achievements of the Abbasid period were more significant than modern Islamic contributions to science. This debate structure provided an opportunity for students to engage in critical analysis and compare historical and contemporary contexts.

Student Response:

The debate brought out mixed levels of critical thinking among the students. Some students relied heavily on facts presented during the lecture, merely reiterating the information without offering new insights. For instance, one student argued that the Abbasid period was unparalleled in its scientific advancements but did not explore the reasons behind this or compare it meaningfully to modern contributions.

On the other hand, a few students engaged more deeply with the material. One group highlighted the socio-political conditions of the Abbasid era that allowed for such advancements in science, including patronage from caliphs and the intellectual freedom afforded to scholars. They then compared this to the current state of scientific research in some Muslim-majority countries, discussing factors such as economic constraints and political instability. This group showed a higher level of critical thinking by not only analyzing historical events but also contextualizing them in relation to present-day challenges.

Teacher's Role:

Teacher F played a key role in encouraging more thoughtful participation by actively challenging simplistic arguments. For example, when a student claimed that modern Islamic contributions to science were insignificant compared to the Abbasid period, the teacher asked, "What about contributions in fields like engineering and medicine today? Can you find examples that might contradict your argument?" This questioning technique forced students to reconsider their assumptions and seek evidence to support or refine their claims. Through these prompts, Teacher F demonstrated the potential for history lessons to cultivate critical thinking by encouraging students to examine evidence, question assumptions, and draw connections between different time periods. By guiding students through this process, the teacher ensured that the debate went beyond mere recitation of facts and into deeper analytical territory.

Curriculum Review: Critical Thinking Integration

In practical terms, the Islamic Studies curriculum provides an important foundation by stressing the significance of Ijtihad (independent reasoning) and Tafakkur (reflection). These are core principles of Islamic pedagogy that encourage students to engage deeply with religious texts and apply their understanding in contemporary life. However, the curriculum's practical implementation lacks structured methods for achieving these outcomes. For example, while students are expected to "critically reflect on Islamic teachings," there are no specific instructions on how teachers should guide this process.

From a contextual standpoint, teachers in Islamic schools may struggle to turn these abstract goals into concrete activities without clear guidelines. The curriculum does not outline how reflection should be incorporated into lessons or what critical thinking activities might look like. For example, instead of merely instructing teachers to promote reflection, the curriculum could provide structured case studies, real-life dilemmas, or thought experiments that require students to apply Islamic teachings critically. Teachers could be encouraged to present modern issues such as environmental ethics or social justice and ask students to explore how Islamic values can guide decision-making. This practical approach would move beyond vague expectations and offer teachers a clear pathway to fostering critical thinking.

Lesson Plan 1: Science Class

In a science lesson focused on "The contributions of early Muslim scientists," the intent was to help students reflect on the relevance of these historical achievements today. However, the lesson plan primarily emphasized factual recall, leaving little room for students to critically engage with the material. From a practical perspective, this reflects a common challenge in Islamic schools: balancing the need for content mastery with the development of critical thinking skills.

To make this lesson more effective in fostering critical thinking, teachers could introduce activities that challenge students to compare the conditions under which early Muslim scientists operated with those faced by contemporary Muslim scientists. This could be done through guided debates, where students argue whether the decline in Muslim scientific contributions is due to internal factors (e.g., lack of investment in education) or external factors (e.g., political instability in Muslim-majority countries). By facilitating this kind of comparative analysis, teachers can help students move from rote memorization of historical facts to a more nuanced understanding of how Islamic intellectual history relates to modern challenges.

Moreover, practical activities could include project-based learning where students explore how modern scientific advancements might align with Islamic values, encouraging them to think about the role of ethics and faith in scientific inquiry today. This not only deepens their knowledge of both science and Islam but also sharpens their ability to apply historical lessons to current contexts.

Lesson Plan 2: Qur'an Study

The Qur'an study lesson plan involved memorization followed by a brief reflection on the verses' meanings. While this structure ensures students learn the text, it does little to promote deeper engagement with its application in everyday life. The "Critical Reflection" section instructed students to think about how the verses "guide us today," but it lacked the scaffolding necessary for a more critical examination of the material.

To enhance critical thinking in this context, teachers could adopt a case-study approach, presenting students with modern dilemmas or social issues—such as questions on justice, governance, or personal ethics and asking them to apply the principles found in the verses they have studied. For instance, students could be asked, "How would the principles of justice from Surah Al-Baqarah apply to current debates on economic inequality?" This type of question encourages students to move beyond simple memorization and consider how Islamic teachings can be dynamically interpreted and applied in modern settings.

Additionally, teachers could incorporate group discussions where students explore multiple interpretations of the same verse, encouraging a deeper, more critical examination of its meaning. By fostering an environment where students are comfortable questioning and analysing religious texts within the framework of their faith, teachers can help them develop critical thinking skills without undermining the spiritual integrity of the lesson.

Reflection on Document Analysis

The gap between the curriculum's objectives and the actual classroom practices is a significant barrier to the development of critical thinking in Islamic schools. The curriculum promotes reflection and independent reasoning, but it does not provide the practical tools or structured activities needed to achieve these goals.

Teachers, often constrained by time and traditional expectations of rote learning, need more guidance on how to integrate critical thinking into their daily lessons.

A practical solution would involve revising the curriculum to include explicit examples of critical thinking activities, such as debates, case studies, and problem-solving exercises that align with Islamic teachings. Teachers could also benefit from professional development that focuses on how to create opportunities for critical thinking within the religious and cultural context of their classrooms. For instance, workshops could be conducted on how to facilitate discussions around complex ethical dilemmas from an Islamic perspective, allowing teachers to guide students in applying *Ijtihad* and *Tafakkur* in meaningful ways.

In summary, while the curriculum and lesson plans emphasize the importance of critical thinking, practical changes are needed to ensure these goals are realized in the classroom. By providing teachers with clear strategies and examples of critical thinking activities that respect Islamic values, schools can better prepare students to think independently and apply their faith to contemporary challenges.

Gap Between Theory and Practice

One of the most significant insights from this study is the gap between the ideals of Islamic pedagogy and how they are practiced in classrooms. Islamic education emphasizes critical thinking through the principles of *Ijtihad* (independent reasoning) and *Tafakkur* (reflection). Theoretically, these concepts encourage students to engage deeply with religious texts, questioning and interpreting them in ways that apply to their daily lives. However, classroom observations revealed that much of the teaching still revolves around rote learning. For instance, while teachers verbally acknowledge the importance of *Tafakkur*, many lessons focus on memorization of Qur'anic verses or religious facts, with limited opportunities for students to apply these teachings critically.

Practically speaking, this gap exists because many teachers feel pressured to cover large amounts of content in a short time. This results in a heavy emphasis on memorization, especially in preparation for exams, which prioritize factual recall over deep analysis. For example, teachers in the science and history lessons reviewed tended to focus more on ensuring that students knew key figures and dates, rather than encouraging them to question the socio-political factors behind historical events or scientific developments. To bridge this gap, teachers would benefit from practical tools, such as structured critical thinking exercises or case studies that align with Islamic teachings, allowing for a more balanced approach between content delivery and critical reflection.

Challenges in Pedagogical Implementation

Teachers recognize the value of fostering critical thinking, but they face several practical challenges in implementing it. First, time constraints emerged as a major issue. Teachers often feel rushed to complete the syllabus, leaving little room for deeper discussions or exploratory activities. This was particularly evident in lesson plans, where objectives emphasized content mastery rather than critical engagement. For instance, while teachers might encourage students to reflect on how Islamic teachings relate to modern issues, there is rarely enough time allocated for these reflections to develop into meaningful discussions.

Another challenge is student engagement. Many students are accustomed to traditional methods of learning, where questioning or debating religious teachings may be seen as inappropriate. During classroom observations, it was noted that students often hesitated to challenge established interpretations of religious texts, preferring instead to repeat what they had been taught. This cultural reluctance to question authority in a religious setting further complicates efforts to foster critical thinking. Teachers may need practical strategies, such as creating a safe space for open dialogue, where students feel comfortable expressing their thoughts without fear of disrespecting religious values.

Varied Student Responses

The data also revealed that while some students showed potential for critical thinking, their engagement was inconsistent. In classrooms where teachers incorporated activities such as debates or group discussions,

students were more likely to engage critically with the material. For instance, in the observed history class, students who participated in a debate comparing the Abbasid era's scientific contributions to modern times demonstrated a higher level of analysis. They not only discussed the scientific facts but also questioned the social and political factors that influenced those achievements.

However, many students struggled to move beyond surface-level thinking. In an Islamic Studies lesson, most students provided basic, memorized answers when asked to reflect on the relevance of Qur'anic teachings to contemporary life. This inconsistency can be attributed to the fact that students are not regularly exposed to critical thinking exercises, making it difficult for them to develop these skills. A more practical approach would involve integrating critical thinking questions into daily lessons, prompting students to analyse and apply their knowledge in real-world contexts consistently.

Need for Curriculum Reform

The study highlights the need for curriculum reform to support critical thinking more effectively. The current curriculum outlines the importance of reflection and independent reasoning but lacks specific guidance on how to incorporate these skills into everyday teaching. For instance, while the curriculum encourages students to "critically reflect" on Islamic teachings, it does not provide concrete activities or examples of how this reflection can be structured.

From a practical standpoint, curriculum designers could include more detailed frameworks that guide teachers in fostering critical thinking. This might involve incorporating case studies, debates, and problem-solving tasks into lesson plans, all of which are aligned with Islamic principles. For example, a history lesson could include a case study where students must analyze different historical interpretations of a key event in Islamic history, encouraging them to critically evaluate the evidence and perspectives. By offering these structured activities, the curriculum would better support teachers in moving beyond memorization and fostering the deeper, analytical engagement that Islamic pedagogy aspires to cultivate.

Conclusion and Suggestion

The findings of this study highlight the potential of Islamic pedagogy to foster critical thinking among students, yet also reveal significant gaps between its theoretical ideals and classroom practices. While Islamic educational principles like Ijtihad and Tafakkur emphasize reflection and independent reasoning, the predominant reliance on rote memorization and fact-based instruction limits opportunities for deeper intellectual engagement. Teachers, though aware of the importance of critical thinking, face practical challenges such as time constraints, curriculum pressures, and cultural norms that discourage questioning established interpretations. Furthermore, student responses to critical thinking activities varied, indicating that while some students are capable of engaging analytically with the material, many struggle without consistent exposure to reflective practices. The study suggests that reforms are needed at the curriculum level to provide teachers with more structured methods, activities, and support to promote critical thinking within the framework of Islamic teachings. By aligning classroom practices with the principles of Islamic pedagogy and offering practical tools for implementation, Islamic schools can better equip students to apply their faith critically and thoughtfully in the context of modern-day challenges.

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