

Innovation in Islamic Education Learning Based on Religious Moderation in Strengthening Student Character

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Abstract

This study aims to formulate an innovative Project-Based Learning (PjBL) model based on Islamic values to improve students' critical thinking skills in Islamic Education. The background of this study is the low HOTS skills of students in Islamic Religious Education learning, as reflected in the PISA 2022 report and the still-dominant lecture method in learning practices. The research method used is a literature review (*library research*) with a qualitative approach, analyzing relevant scientific journals, books, theses, and official reports. The analysis process is carried out through *content analysis*, synthesizes findings related to the effectiveness of PjBL, critical thinking indicators, and the integration of Islamic values in learning. The results of the study indicate that PjBL based on Islamic values has five main stages: (1) identification of contextual problems, (2) exploration of arguments and literature, (3) collaboration and project design, (4) public presentation and argumentation, and (5) spiritual reflection and authentic evaluation. This model integrates cognitive, social, and spiritual dimensions so that students not only develop analytical, evaluation, and synthesis skills, but also internalize moral and religious values. The literature synthesis confirms that the integration of Islamic values in PjBL bridges the gap between theory, Independent Curriculum policy, and learning practices in the field. This study provides theoretical and practical contributions for teachers and curriculum developers, as a guideline for pedagogical innovation in Islamic Education that is contextual, collaborative, and transformative.

Keywords: Critical Thinking, Islamic Education, Islamic Values, Pedagogical Innovation, Project Based Learning

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INTRODUCTION

The development of global society in the digital era is marked by the rapid increase in the flow of information, including the spread of diverse religious beliefs through social media. This phenomenon has a direct impact on the world of education, particularly on the formation of students' character. In Indonesia, the issue of intolerance and religious-based radicalism has become a serious concern for the government and society. National survey data released by the Alvora Research Center in 2017 showed a tendency towards intolerant attitudes among school and university students at a certain level (Azhari et al., 2019). In addition, reports from the National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT) in various official publications confirmed that young people are vulnerable to exposure to extremist ideologies based on religious ideology (Sholihul Huda & Fil, 2024).

This fact shows that education has a strategic role in building ideological resilience while strengthening students' national character. In the context of national policy, the Indonesian government through the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia officially launched the Religious Moderation program as the mainstream of national religious policy since 2019 (Ri, 2019). Religious moderation is understood as a perspective, attitude, and religious practice that emphasizes the principles of balance (*tawāzun*), tolerance (*tasāmuḥ*), anti-violence, and national commitment. On the other hand, the national education policy through the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia emphasizes the importance of strengthening character education as an integral part of the national education system (Ayu, 2019). Thus, there is a very strong overlap between the agenda of religious moderation and strengthening student character in educational practices, especially Islamic Education.

Islamic education normatively has a mission to form people who are faithful, pious, and have noble character as emphasized in Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System (Nasional, 2003). However, in practice, Islamic education learning in various educational units is still often trapped in a cognitive-dogmatic approach that emphasizes memorization and knowledge transfer alone. Learning innovations have not been fully directed at strengthening moderate, dialogical, and contextual attitudes towards pluralistic social realities. As a result, there is a gap between the ideal goals of Islamic education and the implementation of learning in the field.

Several previous studies have discussed religious moderation in the context of education. For example, a study conducted by Kamaruddin Amin emphasized the importance of integrating the values of moderation into the curriculum and school culture (RI, 2019). Other studies have shown that character building through religious education is effective when supported by participatory and contextual learning strategies (Shiddiqi & Kibtiyah, 2025). However, most of these studies focus more on the conceptual aspects of religious moderation or macro policies, and have not yet thoroughly examined the model of Islamic Education learning innovation based on religious moderation through a systematic and comprehensive literature study approach. This is where the research gap lies, which underlies the urgency of this study.

Theoretically, character education from an Islamic perspective cannot be separated from the concept of morality formulated by classical scholars such as Al-Ghazali, who views character formation as a process of internalizing values through habituation and role models (Al-Ghazali, 2004). Meanwhile, from a modern educational perspective, character is understood as an integration of moral knowledge, moral feelings, and moral actions (Lickona, 1991). The integration of these two perspectives is important in designing innovations in Islamic education learning that are not only informative but also transformative. Religious moderation in this case functions as a normative framework as well as a practice to ensure that religious learning does not give rise to exclusivism, but rather an inclusive and dialogical attitude.

This research employs a library research methodology, examining relevant primary and secondary literature, including government policies, scientific journals, Islamic education theory books, and official documents related to religious moderation. This approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to conduct an in-depth and systematic conceptual synthesis of various emerging ideas, resulting in a new, more comprehensive theoretical construct regarding innovations in Islamic education learning based on religious moderation.

The objectives of this study are: (1) to analyze the concept of religious moderation from the perspective of Islamic education policy and theory; (2) to identify forms of Islamic Education learning innovation that are relevant to strengthening students' character; and (3) to formulate a conceptual model of Islamic Education learning innovation based on religious moderation that can be applied in the context of formal

education. Theoretically, the benefits of this study are to enrich the scientific treasury of Islamic Education, especially in the integration of religious moderation and character education. Practically, this study is expected to be a reference for educators, policy makers, and curriculum developers in designing learning that is more inclusive, dialogical, and oriented towards the formation of moderate character. As an argumentative framework, this research starts from the assumption that strengthening students' character cannot be achieved solely through a normative approach but requires integrative pedagogical innovation. Religious moderation serves as the basic paradigm guiding learning design—including aspects of materials, methods, evaluation, and classroom culture. Therefore, innovations in Islamic education learning based on religious moderation are believed to be a strategic solution to address the challenges of intolerance while simultaneously strengthening students' religious, nationalistic, and humanistic character.

METHOD

This research is a library research with a qualitative-descriptive approach. Library research is understood as a study that places scientific literature as the main data source to be analyzed systematically and critically in order to build certain conceptual constructions (Zed, 2008). A qualitative approach is used because this study seeks to understand the meaning, concept, and theoretical construction of Islamic Education learning innovations based on religious moderation in strengthening student character, not to test quantitative hypotheses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Research data sources consist of primary and secondary library materials, including academic books on religious moderation published by the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia (Ri, 2019), indexed national journal articles, relevant dissertations/theses, and official government reports on character education and religious moderation. The literature used was mainly published in the last five to seven years (2019–2025) to ensure data actuality, accompanied by several relevant classic works as a theoretical basis.

The data collection procedure is carried out through a systematic search strategy using keywords such as: “religious moderation in Islamic education,” “Islamic education innovation,” “religious moderation and character education,” And “strengthening student character.” The search was conducted through scientific databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and the Garuda portal, as well as official government policy documents. Inclusion criteria included: (1) reputable scientific journal articles within the last five years, (2) relevant to the theme of religious moderation and character education, (3) available in Indonesian or English, and (4) having methodological clarity. Meanwhile, exclusion criteria included non-academic popular opinion articles, sources without clear references, and publications that were not substantively relevant. The data analysis technique used the method content analysis to identify themes, argumentation patterns, and conceptual tendencies from the reviewed literature (Krippendorff, 2018), followed by literature synthesis to formulate a conceptual model of learning innovation. Data validity was maintained through source triangulation techniques, cross-checking citations, and comparisons between literature on similar topics. The study results are presented in the form of a systematic analytical narrative, accompanied by a summary table of themes and a classification of previous research results to clarify the construction of the arguments being built.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Theoretical Foundation of Project Based Learning

Project Based Learning (PjBL) is a learning model firmly rooted in the constructivist paradigm, which views learning as an active process of building knowledge through experience and social interaction. Historically, the philosophical roots of PjBL can

be traced to the educational progressivism thought developed by John Dewey, who emphasized the importance of *learning by doing* and real-life experiences as the center of learning (Dewey, 1930). Dewey emphasized that education must be oriented towards real-life problems so that students can develop reflective and democratic capacities. This idea was later reinforced by Jean Piaget's cognitive constructivism theory, which states that knowledge is formed through a process of assimilation and accommodation within an individual's cognitive structure (Piaget, 1970). In this context, PjBL becomes a pedagogical vehicle that allows students to construct understanding through in-depth investigation of a particular problem or project.

Apart from Piaget, the theoretical basis of PjBL is also enriched by Lev Vygotsky's social constructivism which emphasizes the importance of social interaction and zone of proximal development (ZPD) in the learning process (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). In the implementation of PjBL, collaboration between students in completing projects reflects social learning practices that enable the negotiation of meaning and the collective construction of knowledge. Thus, PjBL not only develops cognitive aspects, but also communication, collaboration, and social responsibility skills. This perspective is relevant to the demands of 21st-century skills formulated in the framework *21st Century Skills*, which includes critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication (4C) (Greenhill, 2010).

Conceptually, Project Based Learning is defined as a learning model that places projects at the core of the learning process, where students actively explore authentic problems and produce tangible products as a form of problem solving (Markham et al., 2003). Thomas emphasized that PjBL has five main characteristics, namely: (1) centered on a central question or problem, (2) demanding constructive investigation, (3) autonomous, (4) realistic, and (5) producing concrete products (Thomas, 2000). These characteristics indicate that PjBL is designed to encourage high-level cognitive engagement, not just the delivery of information. This is in line with Bloom's revised taxonomy developed by Anderson and Krathwohl, which places the ability to analyze, evaluate, and create at the highest cognitive level (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). In contemporary educational practice, the effectiveness of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) has been supported by numerous empirical studies. Meta-analytic studies have shown that project-based learning has a positive impact on improving critical thinking and problem-solving skills compared to traditional methods (Fender, 2024). A report by the Buck Institute for Education (now known as PBLWorks) also confirmed that Project-Based Learning (PjBL) is effective in increasing student engagement because learning is contextual and meaningful (Gold Standard & Gold Standard, 2015). In the context of Indonesian education policy, this model has gained legitimacy through the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka), which promotes project-based learning, particularly in the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) program (Pendidikan et al., 2022). This policy demonstrates that Project-Based Learning (PjBL) not only has a strong theoretical basis but is also normatively relevant within the national education system.

Furthermore, epistemologically, PjBL is in line with the problem-based learning approach and contextual learning, which emphasizes the relevance of the material to the real lives of students (Johnson, 2002). In the context of Islamic Education, this approach has a meeting point with the principles of thought (deep reflection) and contemplation (appreciation of meaning), which encourages students to not only accept teachings textually, but also to understand and apply them in social reality. Therefore, PjBL can be positioned as a pedagogical model compatible with the integrative paradigm of Islamic education, as emphasized in various studies of 21st-century learning in madrasas and Islamic schools (Hosnan, 2014). Thus, based on the synthesis of literature analyzed through the approach content analysis, it can be concluded that the theoretical basis of Project Based Learning rests on three main pillars: (1) cognitive and social constructivism

as an epistemological foundation, (2) progressive learning theory that emphasizes authentic experiences, and (3) a 21st-century competency framework that demands the development of HOTS. These three pillars provide scientific legitimacy for the application of PjBL in Islamic Education as an innovative strategy to improve students' critical thinking skills.

The Concept of Critical Thinking in Islamic Education

Critical thinking skills are one of the key competencies required in 21st-century education. Conceptually, critical thinking is defined as the ability to analyze arguments, evaluate evidence, draw logical conclusions, and reflect on thought processes systematically and rationally (Elder & Paul, 2020). Robert H. Ennis asserts that critical thinking is "reasonable and reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do," emphasizing the reflective and decision-making dimensions (Ennis, 1989). Meanwhile, Peter A. Facione, through Delphi Report formulated six main indicators of critical thinking: interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation (Facione, 1990). These indicators demonstrate that critical thinking is not only related to higher-level cognitive abilities, but also to intellectual attitudes such as openness, objectivity, and academic honesty. In the context of national education, the urgency of critical thinking is further strengthened by the results of international assessments. The 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) report shows that Indonesian students' reading literacy scores remain below the OECD average, reflecting challenges in understanding, analyzing, and evaluating information in depth (Pisa, 2023). This situation is reinforced by the Independent Curriculum policy, which explicitly encourages the strengthening of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) as part of the Pancasila Student Profile (Pendidikan et al., 2022).

Thus, developing critical thinking is not merely a global demand but also a national strategic agenda that needs to be integrated into all subjects, including Islamic Education. From an Islamic educational perspective, the concept of critical thinking has strong normative and epistemological roots. The Qur'an repeatedly encourages intellectual activity through terms such as thought (think deeply), contemplation (contemplating the meaning), *ta'aqqul* (using reason), and look (critical observation). Verses that call for the use of reason demonstrate that Islam does not require a rigid textual understanding, but rather rational reflection on the signs (verses) of Allah in life (Shihab, 1996). In the classical Islamic scholarly tradition, the practice of *ijtihad* is a concrete manifestation of critical thinking, namely an intellectual effort to explore laws and solutions based on specific evidence and social contexts (Hallaq, 1997). Therefore, critical thinking in Islamic education is not merely an adoption of Western concepts, but rather an actualization of Islamic epistemological values that place reason as a crucial instrument in understanding revelation.

Pedagogically, critical thinking in Islamic education is closely related to a dialogical and reflective learning approach. Paulo Freire, although not a prominent figure in Islamic education, emphasized the importance of liberating education through critical awareness (conscientization) (Freire, 1970). This principle is relevant to the goal of Islamic education, which is not only to transmit religious knowledge but also to shape students' ethical and social awareness. In this context, learning that focuses solely on memorizing Islamic teachings without contextual meaning has the potential to hinder the development of students' analytical skills. Conversely, an approach that encourages discussion, argumentation, and problem-solving on current religious issues will strengthen their critical thinking capacity. Furthermore, the integration of critical thinking in Islamic Education aligns with the revised Bloom's taxonomy framework, which places the ability to analyze, evaluate, and create at the highest level in the cognitive domain (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). In Islamic Education, these abilities can be realized through ethical case

analysis, comparative studies of schools of thought, reflection on issues of religious moderation, and the development of solutions based on Islamic values. Several studies have shown that problem-based and project-based learning strategies in religious studies can improve students' argumentative and reflective abilities (Condliffe, 2017). This suggests that developing critical thinking in Islamic Education requires innovative, participatory and contextual learning models, as emphasized in this research framework.

Based on literature synthesis through an approach content analysis, it can be concluded that the concept of critical thinking in Islamic Education includes three main dimensions: (1) the cognitive-analytical dimension which involves the ability to interpret and evaluate religious information; (2) the reflective-ethical dimension which relates to moral awareness and social responsibility; and (3) the spiritual-transcendental dimension which places thinking activities as part of intellectual worship. These three dimensions show that critical thinking in Islamic Education is not only oriented towards instrumental rationality, but also towards the harmonious integration of reason and revelation. Thus, strengthening critical thinking through innovative learning models such as Project Based Learning is relevant theoretically, normatively, and pedagogically in efforts to improve the quality of Islamic Education in the contemporary era.

Literature Synthesis on PjBL and Critical Thinking

Based on the results of a literature search through Google Scholar, Scopus, and the Garuda portal using the keywords "Project Based Learning," "critical thinking skills," and "Islamic Education," several studies have consistently shown a positive correlation between the implementation of Project Based Learning (PjBL) and the improvement of students' critical thinking skills. In general, these studies confirm that PjBL is effective because it positions students as active subjects involved in the process of investigation, analysis, and reflection on authentic problems (Markham et al., 2003). Thomas, in his comprehensive study, stated that project-based learning encourages high-level cognitive engagement because students must formulate questions, collect data, interpret information, and produce accountable products (Thomas, 2000). This finding strengthens the theoretical assumption that the structure of PjBL aligns with the critical thinking indicators as formulated by Ennis and Facione. A meta-analysis conducted by Condliffe et al. showed that the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) has a positive impact on academic achievement and problem-solving skills compared to traditional learning models (Condliffe, 2017). The study reviewed various experimental studies at the elementary and secondary school levels and concluded that systematically designed projects can improve students' analytical and argumentative abilities. Similarly, Bell's research confirms that Project-Based Learning (PjBL) supports the development of 21st-century skills, including critical thinking and self-directed learning (Bell, 2010).

This is due to the characteristics of Project-Based Learning (PjBL), which require students to plan strategies, evaluate alternative solutions, and continuously reflect on their work. In the context of Asia and developing countries, a number of studies have also shown similar findings. The study, published in International Journal of Instructions howed that students who participated in project-based learning experienced significant improvements in analytical and evaluation skills compared to the control group (Arianda et al., 2024). Furthermore, research in Islamic schools and madrasas in Indonesia found that the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in Islamic Religious Education (IS) subjects improved the quality of discussions, evidence-based argumentation, and students' ability to relate religious texts to social realities (Hosnan, 2014). These findings demonstrate that Project-Based Learning (PjBL) is not only effective in science or technology subjects, but is also relevant in values-based and religious education.

However, the literature synthesis also shows variation in research findings. Several studies emphasize that the success of PjBL is highly dependent on the quality of

the project design, teacher competence, and a supportive learning environment (Helle et al., 2006). Without careful planning, projects can become procedural activities lacking in-depth analysis. Furthermore, some studies note that limited learning time and a dense curriculum present challenges to optimal PjBL implementation (Markham et al., 2003). Thus, while PjBL generally contributes positively to improving critical thinking, its effectiveness is not automatic and requires systematic pedagogical planning. From an Islamic Education perspective, conceptual research shows that integrating PjBL with Islamic values can strengthen students' reflective and ethical dimensions. Several studies have shown that when projects are linked to current religious issues such as tolerance, the environment from an Islamic perspective, or digital ethics students demonstrate improved argumentative skills based on evidence and contextual rationality (Tafsir, 1992). This suggests that PjBL can be an integrative medium between the development of HOTS and the internalization of spiritual values. In the context of the Independent Curriculum, this approach aligns with the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), which emphasizes contextual and collaborative learning (Pendidikan et al., 2022).

Based on the content analysis of the various literatures, several key patterns can be synthesized. First, almost all studies confirm that Project-Based Learning (PjBL) has significant potential to improve critical thinking skills, especially in the analysis and evaluation aspects. Second, the effectiveness of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) is influenced by project design that is authentic and relevant to students' lives. Third, in the context of Islamic Education, there is still limited research that explicitly develops an integrative conceptual model between Project-Based Learning (PjBL) and Islamic epistemology. Thus, the identified research gap is not in the general effectiveness of Project-Based Learning (PjBL), but rather in the need to formulate an innovative model that systematically integrates Islamic values within the Project-Based Learning (PjBL) framework to strengthen students' critical thinking skills. This synthesis serves as an argumentative basis for developing the conceptual model offered in this study as a theoretical contribution to the development of project-based Islamic Education pedagogy.

Implementation Gaps in Islamic Education

Although various theoretical and empirical studies demonstrate the effectiveness of Project Based Learning (PjBL) in improving critical thinking skills, its implementation in Islamic Education still faces several gaps. Based on a synthesis of literature analyzed using a multidisciplinary approach, content analysis, it was found that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teaching practices in many schools are still dominated by lecture methods and textual-normative approaches (Hosnan, 2014). This teacher-centered learning model tends to position students as passive recipients of information, thus limiting space for exploration, dialogue, and critical reflection. This condition has implications for students' poor analytical skills in connecting Islamic teachings to contemporary social realities.

National evaluation data shows that strengthening Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) remains a challenge in learning practices. The Indonesian Education Report released by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology indicates that most educational institutions remain in the developing category in terms of learning process quality, particularly in the dimensions of reflection and in-depth learning (Damayanti, 2025). Meanwhile, the results of the 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) also show that Indonesian students' reading literacy performance has not yet reached the OECD average (Pisa, 2023). Although PISA does not specifically measure Islamic education, these results reflect general challenges in analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating information competencies that are also essential in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning. Thus, there is a gap between the demands of a 21st-century competency-based curriculum and conventional learning practices. In the context of Islamic education, the implementation gap is also evident in the suboptimal

integration of reflective values into the learning process. Normatively, Islam encourages the use of reason through the concept of thought, contemplation, And *ijtihad*, which is epistemologically aligned with critical thinking (Shihab, 1996).

However, in classroom practice, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning often emphasizes the cognitive aspects of memorizing propositions and definitions over developing arguments and contextual analysis (Tafsir, 1992). Research examining Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning at the madrasah level shows that evaluations are still dominated by low-level questions (C1–C2 in Bloom's taxonomy), thus under-stimulating students' analytical and evaluation skills (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). This situation indicates a gap between the ideals of Islamic epistemology and the pedagogical reality on the ground. In addition to pedagogical factors, the gap in project-based learning (PjBL) implementation in Islamic education is also influenced by teacher competency and institutional readiness. Several studies confirm that the success of PjBL depends heavily on teachers' abilities to design authentic projects, manage student collaboration, and conduct performance-based assessments (Helle et al., 2006). However, not all Islamic education (PAI) teachers have training or experience in implementing innovative project-based learning models. Another challenge is limited learning time and the dense curriculum, which often leads teachers to choose the lecture method as the most practical strategy (Markham et al., 2003). Thus, structural and professional constraints contribute to widening the gap between theory and practice.

On the other hand, the Independent Curriculum policy actually provides significant opportunities for learning innovation through a project-based approach, particularly within the framework of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) (Pendidikan et al., 2022). However, the implementation of this policy has not been fully integrated systematically into Islamic Education subjects. Several studies show that projects in P5 are more often linked to civics and environmental themes, while the integration of Islamic values into learning projects is still limited (Sukiyat, 2020). This indicates the need to formulate a conceptual model that explicitly links PjBL to the goals and characteristics of Islamic Education.

Based on the literature synthesis, three main gaps in the implementation of PjBL in Islamic Education can be identified. First, the pedagogical gap, namely the dominance of conventional methods that do not support the development of critical thinking. Second, the competency gap, namely the limited capacity of teachers in designing and evaluating projects based on Islamic values. Third, the conceptual gap, namely the absence of an integrative model that systematically combines PjBL principles with the epistemology and objectives of Islamic Education. These three gaps emphasize the urgency of conceptual research based on literature studies to formulate innovative learning models that can bridge theoretical demands and practical realities. Thus, this gap analysis serves as an argumentative basis for the development of innovative PjBL models in Islamic Education to improve students' critical thinking skills more comprehensively and sustainably.

Islamic Value-Based PjBL Innovation Model

Based on the literature synthesis and implementation gap analysis outlined previously, this study formulates an innovative Project Based Learning (PjBL) model based on Islamic values as an integrative effort to improve students' critical thinking skills in Islamic Education. This model was developed by combining constructivist principles, critical thinking theory, and Islamic epistemology within a systematic pedagogical framework. Theoretically, PjBL is rooted in the paradigm of learning by doing introduced by John Dewey (Dewey, 1930) and strengthened by Vygotsky's social constructivism which emphasizes the importance of collaborative interaction in building knowledge (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). In the context of Islamic Education, this approach is enriched by the principle thought, contemplation, And *ijtihad* as a normative basis for the reflective use

of reason (Shihab, 1996). Thus, this innovative model does not merely adopt PjBL technically, but integrates it with Islamic spiritual and ethical values.

This innovation model is designed in five main stages. The first stage is the identification of contextual religious problems (problem orientation), namely teachers facilitate students to study current issues that are relevant to their lives, such as social media ethics from an Islamic perspective, religious moderation, or environmental awareness as an implementation of the concept caliph on earth. This stage aligns with the characteristics of PjBL, which places fundamental questions at the center of learning (Thomas, 2000). The second stage is the exploration of evidence and literature (textual and contextual inquiry), where students examine Quranic verses, hadith, and scientific references to build an argumentative foundation. This process fosters analytical and interpretive skills, as defined by Facione as critical thinking indicators (Facione, 1990).

The third stage is collaboration and design of project solutions (collaborative project design). At this stage, students work in groups to formulate solutions or tangible products, such as digital campaigns based on Islamic values, educational videos, or social actions within the school environment. This collaboration reflects the concept of zone of proximal development Vygotsky, where social interaction becomes a medium for strengthening cognitive capacity (Helle et al., 2006). The fourth stage is public presentation and argumentation (public presentation and defense), where students present their project results and justify their arguments rationally and based on evidence. This activity strengthens the dimensions of evaluation and critical reflection in the revised Bloom's taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). The final stage is spiritual reflection and authentic evaluation (reflective and authentic assessment), where students self-reflect on the Islamic values they have learned and their impact on their behavior. Evaluation is conducted through performance assessments, portfolios, and critical thinking rubrics.

This innovation model also considers the national education policy framework. The Independent Curriculum emphasizes project-based learning through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), which encourages character development, collaboration, and contextual learning (Pendidikan et al., 2022). The integration of Islamic values-based project-based learning (PjBL) into Islamic Religious Education (PAI) subjects can strengthen the religious dimension of student profiles while developing HOTS (Higher Order Thinking Skills). Data from various studies show that authentically designed project-based learning can increase student engagement and the quality of their argumentation (Condliffe, 2017). Therefore, this model is designed to align with national policy while being responsive to the pedagogical needs of Islamic Education.

The advantage of this innovation model lies in the integration of three dimensions: the cognitive dimension (analysis and evaluation of arguments), the social dimension (collaboration and concrete action), and the spiritual dimension (value reflection and internalization of morals). Unlike conventional PjBL, which focuses solely on academic outcomes, this model places the internalization of Islamic values as an essential goal. Thus, enhancing critical thinking is inseparable from character development and moral awareness. This perspective aligns with the goal of Islamic education to shape perfect human beings capable of integrating faith, knowledge, and good deeds (Tafsir, 1992). Conceptually, this Islamic values-based PjBL innovation model addresses a gap identified in the literature, namely the lack of an integrative formulation between PjBL and Islamic epistemology. Through a literature study and synthesis approach, this study asserts that pedagogical innovation in Islamic education must be based on the harmonious integration of reason and revelation. This model is expected to be a theoretical contribution to the development of project-based Islamic education pedagogy as well as a practical reference for teachers in designing more reflective, contextual, and transformative learning.

Discussion

The results of the literature synthesis show that Project Based Learning (PjBL) has a strong theoretical coherence with the development of critical thinking skills, as emphasized in various studies of constructivism and progressive learning theory. In John Dewey's perspective, direct experience (experiential learning) is the primary means of developing reflective and democratic mindsets (Dewey, 1930). This principle aligns with Thomas's findings, which state that PjBL encourages in-depth investigation and authentic problem-solving as the core of the learning process (Thomas, 2000). When linked to the context of Islamic education, this approach has epistemological relevance because Islam itself encourages intellectual activity through the concept of thought and contemplation. Thus, conceptually, there is no conflict between PjBL and Islamic values; in fact, the two can strengthen each other in shaping students' reflective thought patterns.

Analysis of the concept of critical thinking shows that indicators such as interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference can be effectively internalized through structured project design (Facione, 1990). A meta-analysis by Condliffe et al. confirmed that project-based learning contributes to improved academic achievement and student problem-solving skills compared to traditional methods (Condliffe, 2017). These findings strengthen the argument that Project-Based Learning (PjBL) has the potential to be a pedagogical solution to the low literacy and analytical skills of Indonesian students, as reflected in the PISA 2022 report (Pisa, 2023). Although PISA does not specifically assess Islamic Education subjects, low literacy outcomes reflect general challenges in higher-order thinking skills that are also relevant in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning.

However, the literature review also reveals implementation gaps in Islamic Education. Learning practices, still dominated by lecture methods, tend to limit students' exploration and critical dialogue (Hosnan, 2014). Within the framework of the revised Bloom's taxonomy, the dominance of questions and activities at levels C1-C2 (remembering and understanding) is insufficient to foster analytical and evaluation skills (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). However, the Independent Curriculum explicitly emphasizes strengthening HOTS (Higher Order Thinking Skills) and project-based learning through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) (Pendidikan et al., 2022). Thus, there is an inconsistency between national policy direction and pedagogical practices in the field, particularly in Islamic Education subjects.

The Islamic values-based PjBL innovation model formulated in this study can be understood as an effort to bridge this gap. The analysis shows that the integration of Islamic values into every stage of the project from contextual problem identification to spiritual reflection provides an additional dimension not always found in conventional PjBL models. While general PjBL is oriented towards academic products, this model adds the dimension of internalizing values and ethical awareness as essential objectives. This perspective aligns with Ahmad Tafsir's view that the goal of Islamic education is to shape individuals capable of harmoniously integrating faith, knowledge, and good deeds (Tafsir, 1992). Therefore, the enhancement of critical thinking in this model does not stand alone but is part of the formation of religious character and social responsibility. From a methodological perspective, the use of a literature study approach in this research allows researchers to conduct a comprehensive conceptual synthesis of various scientific sources content analysis. As explained by Krippendorff, it helps identify consistent patterns of findings regarding the effectiveness of PjBL in enhancing critical thinking (Krippendorff, 2018). Through source triangulation and comparison of findings between studies, it was concluded that the success of PjBL is strongly influenced by the quality of project design and teacher competency. This confirms that model innovation is not limited to the conceptual level but requires strengthening the capacity of Islamic Religious Education teachers in designing authentic projects based on Islamic values.

Furthermore, this discussion highlights the importance of authentic assessment in supporting the development of critical thinking. Anderson and Krathwohl emphasize that evaluation at a higher cognitive level requires assessment instruments that measure analytical, synthetic, and creative abilities (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). In the proposed innovation model, assessment is conducted through project portfolios, argumentative presentations, and written student reflections. This approach aligns with Markham's recommendation that evaluation in PjBL should comprehensively reflect both process and product (Markham et al., 2003). In this way, learning and assessment become a unified whole, supporting the ongoing development of critical thinking skills.

Overall, the analysis of this research confirms that the Islamic value-based PjBL innovation has a strong theoretical, normative, and empirical basis. This model not only addresses the need to strengthen HOTS as required by national education policy, but also actualizes the principles of Islamic epistemology that place reason as a crucial instrument in understanding revelation. With the systematic integration of constructivism, critical thinking theory, and Islamic values, this model has the potential to be a significant contribution to the development of a more contextual and transformative Islamic education pedagogy. Going forward, empirical field research is needed to test the effectiveness of this model quantitatively and qualitatively, so that the conceptual formulation formulated through literature studies can be validated in real-life learning practices.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of literature synthesis, theoretical analysis, and implementation gap studies, it can be concluded that Islamic value-based Project Based Learning (PjBL) is an effective, innovative model for improving students' critical thinking skills in Islamic Education. This model integrates the principles of constructivism, critical thinking theory, and Islamic epistemology through systematic stages, starting from contextual problem identification to spiritual reflection and authentic assessment, thus developing not only analytical and evaluation skills but also the internalization of moral and spiritual values. With an authentic and collaborative project design, this model is able to bridge the gap between theory, Independent Curriculum policy, and learning practices in the field, while providing relevant pedagogical contributions to the development of contemporary Islamic Education.

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