

From Dogma to Dialogue: A Case Study of Islamic Education Teachers in Madrasah Aliyah, Indonesia

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Abstract: This study explores how Islamic Religious Education teachers at Madrasah Aliyah in Indonesia shift from dogmatic, memorization-based teaching toward dialogic and inquiry-oriented pedagogy. Responding to the urgent need for critical thinking in Islamic education, this qualitative case study at Madrasah Aliyah collected data through observations, interviews, and document analysis involving six teachers, eighteen students, and school administrators. Findings show that teachers integrate rational-critical reasoning and Problem-Based Learning (PBL) to relate classical Islamic principles to real-life issues, enhancing students' motivation, participation, and analytical ability. Despite limited resources and training, dialogic practices foster deeper understanding and spiritual reflection. The study contributes to Islamic pedagogy by demonstrating that faith and critical inquiry can coexist harmoniously. It offers an empirical model for reforming Islamic education through reflective and dialogic teaching—bridging tradition and modernity to nurture devout, intelligent, and adaptive learners.

Abstrak: Penelitian ini menelaah bagaimana guru Pendidikan Agama Islam di Madrasah Aliyah Indonesia bertransformasi dari pembelajaran dogmatis berbasis hafalan menuju pedagogi dialogis dan inkuiri. Menjawab kebutuhan mendesak akan pengembangan berpikir kritis dalam pendidikan Islam, studi kasus kualitatif ini menggunakan observasi, wawancara, dan analisis dokumen terhadap enam guru, delapan belas siswa, dan pihak manajemen sekolah. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa guru mengintegrasikan penalaran rasional-kritis dan *Problem-Based Learning* (PBL) untuk mengaitkan ajaran Islam klasik dengan persoalan aktual, sehingga meningkatkan motivasi, partisipasi, dan kemampuan analitis siswa. Meski terbatas sumber daya dan pelatihan, pendekatan dialogis memperdalam pemahaman dan refleksi spiritual. Kontribusi penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa iman dan nalar kritis dapat berjalan seiring. Studi ini menawarkan model empiris reformasi pendidikan Islam melalui pengajaran reflektif-dialogis yang memadukan tradisi dan modernitas guna membentuk generasi Muslim saleh, cerdas, dan adaptif.

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INTRODUCTION

The role of Islamic Religious Education (*Pendidikan Agama Islam/PAI*) teachers in shaping students' intellectual and moral capacities has become increasingly vital in the twenty-first century. In Indonesia, Islamic education is legally mandated to foster faith, knowledge, and virtuous action among students (Syam, 2024). Yet, as global challenges require critical reasoning, problem solving, and dialogical skills, traditional modes of instruction that emphasize rote memorization and passive reception are no longer sufficient ((Wijaya, 2024). The shift from doctrinal transmission to dialogic engagement represents a crucial transformation for PAI teachers who aspire to cultivate students' critical thinking abilities while maintaining the core values of Islamic faith (Rasyidi, 2024).

Critical thinking, broadly defined as the capacity to analyze information, evaluate evidence, and make reasoned judgments, has been identified as an essential skill for twenty-first-century learning. In Islamic education, critical thinking allows students to engage the Qur'an and Hadith not merely as static texts but as dynamic sources of guidance applicable to contemporary issues (Alharbi, 2022). Scholars argue that Islamic pedagogy must therefore balance reverence for sacred knowledge with methods that encourage questioning, analysis, and reasoned dialogue (A. Abdullah, 2017).

Despite this imperative, many Indonesian madrasahs continue to rely on conventional, teacher-centered methods. Previous studies have documented that PAI instruction frequently emphasizes mastery of doctrinal content and memorization of verses, limiting opportunities for students to develop higher-order thinking skills (Akbar et al., 2024). Structural barriers such as inadequate teacher training, scarce instructional resources, and limited institutional support compound these pedagogical challenges. Consequently, students often lack the analytical capacity needed to navigate moral dilemmas and societal complexities in a rapidly changing world (Azra, 2019).

The present study addresses these gaps by examining the professional skills of PAI teachers in developing students' critical thinking at Madrasah Aliyah Swasta (MAS) Ma'arif Wuluhan, Jember, East Java, Indonesia. This madrasah provides an illuminating case because it reflects both the promise and the tensions of Islamic education reform in rural contexts. Teachers at MAS Ma'arif have experimented with innovative strategies, including Problem-Based Learning (PBL), to stimulate student inquiry and collaborative problem solving (Barrows, 2000). PBL encourages learners to engage with real-world issues, work in small groups, and construct knowledge through dialogue, thus aligning well with the goals of Islamic critical pedagogy (Amiri, 2025).

Preliminary observations and interviews reveal that MAS Ma'arif's PAI teachers have adopted a variety of approaches—integrating logical reasoning into lessons on *aqidah* (faith), designing Fiqh modules around contemporary problems, and facilitating open discussions that allow students to question and internalize concepts. These methods contrast with the more didactic styles documented in earlier research (Altinyelken, 2021). However, the teachers also face significant constraints, including limited professional development opportunities, insufficient

technological resources, and inconsistent institutional support. Student motivation and digital literacy likewise vary, affecting the consistency of outcomes (Hasanah et al., 2022).

International scholarship underscores that teacher professional development and school-level management are decisive factors in sustaining pedagogical innovation. In faith-based settings, reforms must also attend to the religious and cultural sensibilities of teachers and communities (Siregar et al., 2025). Indonesian studies show that professional training tailored to Islamic educators—covering inquiry-based learning, technology integration, and reflective practice—can significantly enhance classroom dialogue and student. Yet such initiatives often remain sporadic and unevenly distributed between urban and rural madrasahs (El Garah et al., 2012).

Against this background, the present research pursues three interrelated objectives. First, it analyzes the current skill set of PAI teachers at MAS Ma'arif Wuluhan in promoting students' critical thinking. Second, it identifies institutional and contextual factors—such as training opportunities, resource availability, and administrative support—that influence these pedagogical practices. Third, it explores strategies, including the use of technology and collaborative learning models, that may strengthen the teachers' capacity to foster critical reasoning. By situating these questions within a qualitative case-study design, the research provides an in-depth understanding of how a specific madrasah navigates the challenges of educational transformation (Tisdell et al., 2025).

This inquiry contributes to both theory and practice. Theoretically, it enriches the discourse on Islamic critical pedagogy, demonstrating how the principles of dialogue and reasoning can be operationalized in a rural Indonesian context. Practically, it offers policy-relevant insights for madrasah administrators, teacher-training institutes, and government agencies seeking to enhance the quality of Islamic education nationwide. In doing so, it aligns with Indonesia's broader educational agenda to produce graduates who are "faithful, knowledgeable, and righteous" while also capable of critical and creative thought (Muzayanah et al., 2022).

The study also responds to global conversations about integrating faith and reason in education. Critical engagement with religious knowledge does not diminish faith; rather, it can deepen students' understanding and commitment. Mayasari similarly argues that dialogic learning empowers Muslim youth to reconcile tradition with modernity, enabling them to address contemporary ethical and social challenges (Mayasari, 2025). By highlighting the lived experiences of teachers and students at MAS Ma'arif Wuluhan, this research illustrates how local innovation contributes to the universal quest for educational models that cultivate both spiritual integrity and intellectual rigor.

METHOD

This research adopted a qualitative case-study design to explore in depth how Islamic Religious Education teachers at MAS Ma'arif Jember, cultivate students' critical thinking skills. A qualitative approach was considered most appropriate because it allows the researcher to capture rich descriptions of teaching practices

and the complex social settings in which those practices unfold (Tisdell et al., 2025). The single-site case study offered the opportunity to examine a bounded system—one school community—while remaining attentive to the broader educational and cultural context of Indonesian Islamic schooling.

The study was carried out at MAS Ma'arif Wuluhan, a rural madrasah in East Java that has begun to integrate dialogic and problem-based learning strategies into its curriculum. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure information-rich perspectives. All six PAI teachers at the school were invited to participate, along with eighteen students representing different grade levels and several school administrators who could provide institutional insight (Tisdell et al., 2025). This sampling strategy enabled the researcher to capture multiple voices and to illuminate the research questions from different vantage points.

Data collection relied on three mutually reinforcing techniques that unfolded over several months. The researcher conducted repeated non-participant classroom observations to document the instructional strategies used by teachers, the nature of teacher–student interactions, and visible indicators of critical-thinking prompts. Semi-structured interviews followed with teachers, students, and administrators, allowing participants to reflect on their experiences and to elaborate on barriers or supports related to critical-thinking pedagogy. Document analysis complemented these methods, drawing on lesson plans, teacher reflection notes, and samples of student work to triangulate the observational and interview data. Field notes and audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, when no new insights emerged from additional interviews or observations (Sholeh et al., 2024).

Analysis proceeded concurrently with data gathering and followed the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman. Transcripts and documents were read repeatedly to identify significant statements, which were coded inductively. These initial codes were refined into broader categories that captured teacher skills, institutional conditions, and student outcomes related to critical thinking. Constant comparison across data sources helped sharpen the emerging themes and ensured that interpretations remained grounded in the participants' accounts (Miles et al., 2014).

To establish trustworthiness, several strategies were employed. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation of data sources and methods, while member checking allowed participants to review and confirm key findings. Peer debriefing sessions with colleagues provided an additional layer of critical reflection on analytic decisions. An audit trail of field notes, coding schemes, and analytic memos was maintained to support dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Through this careful design, the study sought to present a nuanced portrayal of the transformation from “dogma to dialogue” among PAI teachers, capturing the interplay between pedagogical innovation, institutional context, and the development of students' critical-thinking capacities.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

The findings of this study demonstrate a clear convergence between the theoretical frameworks of critical thinking, constructivism, and Problem-Based Learning (PBL) and the actual classroom practices of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at Madrasah Aliyah (MAS) Ma'arif Wuluhan. Data drawn from classroom observations, teacher and student interviews, and document analysis reveal that PAI teachers translated these theories from abstract principles into concrete pedagogical action. The notion of purposeful, self-regulatory judgment articulated by Baron is evident in the way teachers guide students to interpret religious texts and evaluate competing arguments (Baron, 1981). Likewise, the constructivist view of knowledge as actively co-created through interaction and reflection is reflected in classrooms where dialogue, collaborative inquiry, and structured reflection have replaced traditional rote memorization.

This transformation signals more than the adoption of new methods; it marks a cultural shift in the intellectual life of the madrasah. Teachers invoke the Islamic imperatives of *tafakkur* (deep contemplation) and *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) to legitimize and encourage critical engagement, thereby aligning religious tradition with the problem-centered inquiry that defines PBL. Their evolving professional practices illustrate how sustained development, institutional support, and an Islamic epistemological grounding can collectively foster a dialogic learning environment. Against this backdrop, the following subsections present the detailed results, highlighting how the movement “from dogma to dialogue” unfolds in the daily realities of teaching and learning at MAS Ma'arif Wuluhan.

Rational–Critical Thinking as the Core of Islamic Education

The cultivation of rational and critical thinking occupies a central place in the philosophy and practice of Islamic education. Classical Islamic scholarship has long emphasized the imperative of *'aql* (reason) and *tafakkur* (deep reflection) as pathways to understanding divine revelation. The Qur'an itself repeatedly calls believers to “reflect” (*yatafakkarūn*) and “consider” (*ya'qilūn*), highlighting the complementary roles of reason and faith (Halstead, 2004). Within this tradition, education is not merely the transmission of dogma but the dynamic engagement of the intellect in service of spiritual and moral growth (Alrumayh et al., 2025).

In contemporary Indonesia, this ideal is codified in the National Education System Law (Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia No. 20, 2003), which mandates that religious education foster students who are both faithful and intelligent. Yet research repeatedly demonstrates that many Islamic Religious Education (PAI) classrooms remain dominated by lecture and memorization, limiting opportunities for students to question, analyze, and apply religious knowledge ((N. Boyle, 2006). Such conditions risk producing graduates who can recite scripture but struggle to connect it to modern social realities (Azra, 2019).

Findings from MAS Ma'arif Wuluhan Jember underscore both the urgency of change and the promise of reform. Observations revealed that PAI teachers are beginning to integrate logical reasoning into lessons on *aqidah* (creed) and *fiqh* (jurisprudence). For example, when introducing the concept of divine existence,

teachers now guide students to examine natural phenomena—the order of the cosmos, the complexity of biological systems—as empirical signs of God’s presence. This approach moves beyond rote acceptance, inviting students to weigh evidence and formulate reasoned conclusions. Interviews with students indicated that such lessons made the subject matter more comprehensible and personally meaningful, strengthening rather than weakening their faith.

The theoretical foundation for this shift draws from modern critical thinking scholarship, which defines critical thought as “purposeful, self-regulatory judgment” (Altinyelken, 2021). Critical thinkers question assumptions, evaluate evidence, and draw reasoned conclusions—skills essential for navigating the ethical and technological complexities of the twenty-first century. Educational theorists from Dewey to contemporary constructivists argue that these abilities develop when students actively engage in inquiry rather than passively receive information (Dewey, 1916). The MAS Ma’arif teachers’ strategies—posing open-ended questions, encouraging debate, and connecting doctrine to everyday experience—align closely with this constructivist model.

Islamic pedagogy provides its own rich resources for such engagement. Concepts such as *ijtihad* (independent legal reasoning) historically required scholars to apply critical analysis to the Qur’an and Hadith when addressing new circumstances (El Garah et al., 2012). By framing critical thinking as an Islamic imperative rather than a foreign import, teachers at MAS Ma’arif reduce potential resistance from students and the wider community. For dialogic learning deepens rather than dilutes religious commitment, enabling Muslim youth to reconcile tradition with modernity.

Teacher testimony highlighted the transformative impact of this approach. One educator explained that guiding students through logical proofs of God’s existence “makes them feel ownership of their belief,” contrasting it with earlier experiences where students memorized arguments without understanding their rationale. Another teacher reported that classroom discussions of contemporary ethical dilemmas—such as environmental stewardship or digital ethics—sparked lively debate and helped students apply Islamic principles to current issues. These accounts echo international findings that dialogic religious instruction fosters both cognitive and moral development (Sahin, 2018).

Nevertheless, challenges remain. Teachers noted that some students initially resisted critical questioning, fearing it signaled doubt in religious truth. This reaction reflects what Halstead describes as a “misconception that critical engagement undermines faith,” a tension familiar in many faith-based schools (Sahin, 2018). Through patient explanation and consistent modeling, teachers at MAS Ma’arif sought to reframe questioning as a form of devotion—an effort to know God more deeply. Over time, classroom observations recorded a marked increase in student participation and willingness to articulate their reasoning, supporting the idea that safe, dialogic spaces can normalize inquiry within an Islamic context (Syafuruddin et al., 2025).

Resource limitations also pose obstacles. While teachers aspire to incorporate more multimedia evidence—such as scientific videos illustrating natural order—they often lack technological infrastructure or training. Similar barriers have been

reported across rural Indonesian madrasahs (A. H. Abdullah et al., 2025). Professional development tailored to Islamic educators is therefore critical. Studies show that sustained, practice-based training significantly enhances teachers' ability to promote higher-order thinking (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). The experience of MAS Ma'arif reinforces these findings: teachers who had attended inquiry-based workshops were the most confident in leading classroom debates and Socratic questioning.

The implications of this sub-study are substantial. First, it challenges the false dichotomy between reason and revelation, demonstrating that critical thinking can be authentically grounded in Islamic tradition. Second, it illustrates how relatively modest pedagogical adjustments—open-ended questions, evidence-based discussion, integration of contemporary issues—can significantly elevate students' cognitive engagement. Finally, it underscores the need for systemic support: continuous professional development, technological resources, and administrative encouragement to sustain a culture of dialogue.

In summary, the case of MAS Ma'arif Wuluhan shows that cultivating rational-critical thinking within Islamic education is not only possible but profoundly beneficial. By drawing on Qur'anic imperatives to reflect and reason, aligning with global theories of critical pedagogy, and responding to local realities, the school offers a model for other madrasahs seeking to move "from dogma to dialogue." The findings affirm that when teachers treat questioning as an act of faith and provide structured opportunities for analysis, students develop both stronger intellects and deeper religious commitment—a synthesis that meets the aspirations of Indonesia's national education goals and the timeless call of Islamic scholarship.

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Implementation of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in Fiqh and Its Impact

The third strand of the findings concerns the systematic introduction of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) within the Fiqh curriculum at Madrasah Aliyah (MAS) Ma'arif Wuluhan Jember and the measurable influence of this innovation on students' critical thinking and motivation. PBL, originally popularised in medical education, places authentic, open-ended problems at the centre of instruction and requires learners to collaborate, investigate, and construct knowledge through dialogue (Zahara et al., 2025). Its philosophical foundation resonates with Islamic pedagogy, which has long valued *ijtihad*—independent reasoning—as a means to derive guidance for novel situations. By foregrounding inquiry and group problem solving, PBL offers a pedagogical bridge between the classical Islamic imperative to reflect (*tafakkur*) and the twenty-first-century need for critical thinking (Halstead, 2004).

Field data show that teachers at MAS Ma'arif deliberately wove PBL into the Fiqh syllabus rather than treating it as an occasional enrichment activity. Lesson modules were redesigned around real-world issues such as financial ethics, environmental stewardship, and contemporary questions of halal consumption. Each module began with a contextual problem—for example, how to apply classical rulings on water purity to modern waste-management challenges. Students worked in small groups to define the problem, research relevant Qur'anic verses and Hadith, and develop reasoned legal opinions. Teachers served primarily as facilitators, posing guiding questions and ensuring that each group grounded its arguments in credible textual and empirical evidence.

Classroom observations revealed that this approach produced a distinct shift in classroom dynamics. Students who were previously passive listeners became active participants, engaging in debate, dividing tasks, and presenting collective findings. Interviews indicated that learners appreciated the relevance of the problems to their daily lives, reporting that the method “made Fiqh feel alive” and “connected religion to society.” These experiences echo international research showing that PBL enhances intrinsic motivation by granting students autonomy and responsibility for their learning (Saad et al., 2024).

The impact on critical thinking was equally evident. Using the analytic framework of Facione, the research team noted frequent demonstrations of interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference during PBL sessions. Students routinely questioned each other’s evidence, compared classical juristic opinions, and weighed competing arguments before reaching conclusions. Teachers confirmed that assessment scores on higher-order questions improved after one semester of sustained PBL, supporting prior findings that problem-centred inquiry strengthens reasoning skills in religious education contexts (Fikri, 2023; Sahin, 2018).

DISCUSSION

The results of this study affirm that critical thinking can be cultivated within Islamic Religious Education (PAI) without undermining religious commitment. Teachers at MAS Ma’arif Wuluhan demonstrated that reasoning, analysis, and open dialogue can coexist with reverence for sacred texts. By inviting students to interrogate assumptions and evaluate evidence, the teachers embodied what Baron calls purposeful, self-regulatory judgment. This practice illustrates that the Qur’anic imperatives to *tafakkur* (deep contemplation) and *ya’qilūn* (reasoning) are not merely spiritual exhortations but practical pedagogical tools. Rather than diminishing faith, dialogic inquiry strengthened students’ conviction, showing that critical thinking and devotion are mutually reinforcing rather than oppositional (Baron, 1981).

Constructivist learning theory provides a useful lens for understanding these dynamics. Vygotsky and Cole emphasize that knowledge is actively constructed through social interaction and reflection, a process evident in the collaborative problem-solving sessions observed in the classrooms. The shift from teacher-centered recitation to student-led inquiry aligns with global research demonstrating that active engagement fosters deeper conceptual understanding and long-term retention (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). The teachers’ willingness to relinquish some authority, allowing students to debate and defend their reasoning, exemplifies the constructivist principle that learning occurs through negotiation of meaning rather than passive reception.

Problem-Based Learning (PBL) emerged as a particularly effective vehicle for this transformation. By situating fiqh instruction around authentic, contemporary dilemmas—such as environmental ethics or digital behavior—teachers linked classical jurisprudence to lived experience. Barrows describes PBL as a catalyst for higher-order thinking because it requires learners to define problems, gather evidence, and justify conclusions collaboratively (Alharbi, 2022; Barrows, 2000). The MAS Ma’arif case validates this claim: students displayed marked

improvements in interpretation, analysis, and evaluation, confirming international findings that PBL enhances critical reasoning across diverse educational contexts.

Professional development proved to be a decisive factor. Teachers who had attended sustained inquiry-based training sessions were more adept at facilitating discussion and guiding Socratic questioning, reflecting the principles outlined by Darling-Hammond et al.. These findings resonate with Indonesian studies showing that continuous, practice-oriented training significantly boosts teachers' capacity to promote higher-order thinking (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Zahara et al., 2025). However, the uneven distribution of resources and training opportunities between urban and rural madrasahs remains a systemic challenge. Without consistent institutional support and investment, the gains observed in this study may be difficult to replicate on a wider scale.

The cultural context further complicates this landscape. Initial student hesitation to engage in critical questioning underscores a broader tension within faith-based education: the perception that inquiry equates to doubt. Teachers addressed this by framing questioning as an act of devotion, thereby transforming a potential obstacle into an opportunity for deeper engagement. This reframing aligns with Islamic epistemology, which historically values *ijtihad*—independent reasoning—as an essential method for applying divine guidance to new situations (Sari, 2024; Zahara et al., 2025). By rooting critical pedagogy in Islamic tradition, the teachers mitigated resistance and cultivated a safe space for intellectual exploration.

Collectively, these findings suggest that the movement “from dogma to dialogue” requires more than methodological innovation; it demands an integrated approach that combines theoretical grounding, professional development, and cultural sensitivity. The MAS Ma’arif experience offers a replicable model for other Indonesian madrasahs seeking to balance fidelity to tradition with the demands of twenty-first-century education. By embedding critical thinking within the framework of Islamic values and national education goals, the school demonstrates that nurturing intellectually agile, ethically grounded graduates is not only possible but essential for preparing Muslim youth to navigate the complexities of contemporary society.

Tabel 1. Key Themes and Main Findings from the Discussion

Key Theme	Main Findings
Integration of Critical Thinking and Faith	Critical inquiry strengthens, rather than weakens, students' faith by encouraging reasoning and evidence-based reflection.
Constructivist Learning in Practice	Student-led inquiry and dialogue support deeper understanding and long-term retention, consistent with constructivist theory.
Impact of Problem-Based Learning (PBL)	Authentic problem scenarios improve interpretation, analysis, and evaluation skills, validating global PBL research.
Role of Professional Development	Continuous, practice-oriented training enhances teachers' ability to foster higher-order thinking; lack of resources remains a barrier.
Cultural and	Reframing questioning as an act of devotion mitigates resistance and

Religious Context	aligns critical thinking with Islamic epistemology.
Implications for Islamic Education Reform	A holistic approach—grounded in theory, teacher development, and cultural sensitivity—offers a model for other madrasahs seeking balanced educational reform.

Successful implementation required deliberate capacity-building. Interviews with administrators and teachers revealed that PBL was preceded by targeted professional development workshops organised in collaboration with local Islamic higher-education institutions. These trainings introduced teachers to the PBL cycle, techniques for crafting authentic problems, and strategies for formative assessment. Teachers stressed that peer support and regular reflective meetings were crucial for overcoming initial uncertainty. Such professional learning communities mirror best practices highlighted by Darling-Hammond, who argue that collaborative, practice-based training is the most effective route to lasting pedagogical change.

Despite these achievements, several constraints surfaced. Limited technological infrastructure restricted the use of digital resources that could enrich problem scenarios or facilitate student research, a challenge echoed in studies of rural Indonesian madrasahs (Basri, Yusof, & Fauzi, 2020). Time allocation within the national curriculum also posed difficulties, as PBL requires extended class periods for inquiry and discussion. Teachers reported negotiating with school leaders to create flexible schedules and sometimes integrating PBL with extracurricular study circles to maintain depth of inquiry.

Overall, the MAS Ma'arif experience demonstrates that PBL can move Islamic education “from dogma to dialogue” by transforming both pedagogy and classroom culture. It validates global evidence that students learn religious principles more deeply when they apply them to concrete, contemporary issues and defend their reasoning in collaborative settings (Sari, 2024). At the same time, it affirms the Islamic pedagogical tradition of *ijtihad* as a living practice, not merely a historical concept. By embedding PBL within Fiqh instruction and supporting teachers through sustained professional development, MAS Ma'arif Wuluhan offers a model for other madrasahs seeking to cultivate intellectually agile, ethically grounded graduates capable of addressing the complexities of modern Muslim life.

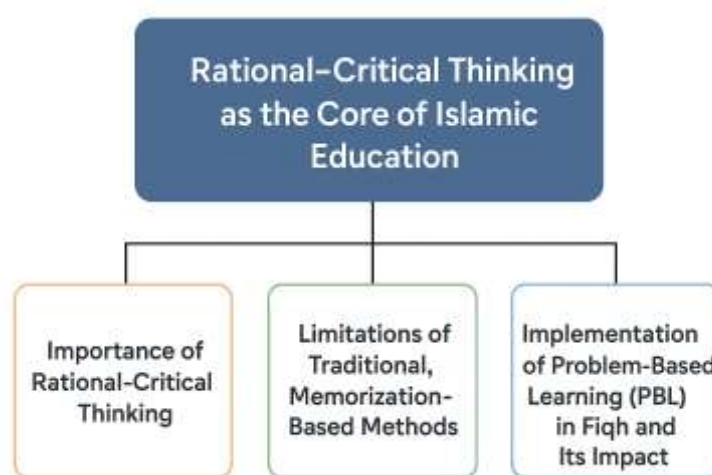


Figure 1. Rational–Critical Thinking as the Core of Islamic Education

The three strands of this study come together to tell one story: a quiet but decisive shift in Islamic Religious Education at MAS Ma'arif Wuluhan Jember—from dogma to dialogue. The first discussion showed that rational and critical thinking is not an imported ideal but a pulse already beating within the Islamic tradition. When teachers invite students to reason, to weigh evidence, and to ask questions, belief becomes something owned, not merely memorized. Faith grows sturdier when it is tested and understood. The second strand exposed why this shift matters. A classroom ruled by recitation and unquestioned authority leaves little room for curiosity. Students learn the words but miss the wonder. Our observations confirmed what earlier scholars have warned: a pedagogy built only on memory can quiet the very intellect the Qur'an calls to life. The final section revealed a path forward. Through Problem-Based Learning, Fiqh lessons turned into collaborative explorations of real dilemmas—environmental ethics, financial practice, daily moral choices. Students debated, researched, and defended their ideas; teachers guided rather than dictated. The result was unmistakable: higher motivation, deeper understanding, and the spark of genuine critical thinking.

Seen together, these findings sketch a model of Islamic education that is both faithful and fearless. MAS Ma'arif Wuluhan shows that nurturing sharp minds need not weaken devotion; in fact, dialogue strengthens belief. By coupling the courage to question with the discipline of tradition, the school offers a living example of how Muslim learners can remain rooted in scripture while ready for the complexities of the modern world.

CONCLUSION

This study of Islamic Religious Education at MAS Ma'arif Wuluhan Jember reveals a compelling narrative of change. What began as an inquiry into teachers' skills in cultivating critical thinking has unfolded into evidence of a broader transformation—a move from dogma to dialogue that reshapes how faith and reason meet in the classroom.

The research shows that rational–critical thinking can be woven naturally into Islamic pedagogy. Teachers who lead students to question, compare evidence, and reason through religious concepts find that belief deepens rather than erodes. At the same time, the limitations of traditional memorization-based methods become clear: when lessons rely solely on recitation, curiosity fades and the intellect that the Qur'an itself calls to action is left untapped.

The integration of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in Fiqh provides a concrete, workable alternative. By anchoring jurisprudential study in real-life problems and encouraging group inquiry, PBL energizes students, sharpens their analytical abilities, and gives new vitality to Islamic legal reasoning. Professional development and collegial support have proven essential for sustaining this approach, while resource constraints remain a challenge to be addressed.

Taken as a whole, the findings demonstrate that Islamic education need not choose between fidelity to tradition and cultivation of critical minds. MAS Ma'arif Wuluhan illustrates how teachers, armed with dialogue, reflective practice, and innovative pedagogy, can nurture graduates who are both devout and intellectually agile. The school stands as a model for other madrasahs in Indonesia and beyond:

proof that when educators embrace inquiry as an act of faith, they prepare students to engage thoughtfully and confidently with the moral and social complexities of the contemporary world.

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