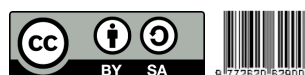


Critical Thinking Ability in Islamic Education: Trends, Pedagogical Approaches, and Research Gaps—A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

This systematic literature review examines the integration of critical thinking ability within Islamic education, mapping recent trends, pedagogical approaches, and existing research gaps. Following the PRISMA guidelines, a synthesis of peer-reviewed articles published over the last decade reveals a significant shift toward digital literacy in religious contexts and the promotion of religious moderation. Pedagogically, methods such as Problem-Based Learning (PBL), collaborative hiwar (dialogue), and analytical tadabbur (reflection) are highly effective in fostering students' analytical skills. However, the current literature exhibits substantial limitations, notably a lack of longitudinal studies, a geographical bias toward Southeast Asia, and a shortage of standardized assessment instruments rooted in an Islamic worldview. This review underscores the urgent need for future research to develop culturally and epistemologically aligned frameworks for measuring critical thinking in diverse Islamic educational institutions. Ultimately, these insights provide actionable guidance for curriculum developers and educators striving to cultivate analytical and reflective Muslim students in the modern era.

Keywords: *Islamic education, critical thinking, pedagogy, literature review, research gaps.*

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary educational landscape demands that students develop higher-order cognitive skills to navigate an increasingly complex and interconnected world. Among these competencies, critical thinking ability stands out as a vital prerequisite for academic success and informed citizenship. In the context of religious studies, particularly Islamic education, the cultivation of this ability has gained renewed significance. Historically rooted in rich intellectual traditions of inquiry and debate, modern Islamic schooling faces the challenge of revitalizing these practices. Therefore, understanding how critical thinking is systematically integrated into today's religious classrooms is essential for educational progress.

Islamic education has traditionally been perceived by some external observers as focusing heavily on rote memorization and passive transmission of text. This narrow perception overlooks the foundational principles of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) and *tafakkur* (reflection) deeply embedded in Islamic epistemology. Modern scholars argue that true religious understanding cannot occur without an active, critical engagement with sacred texts and contemporary social realities. Consequently, there is a growing global movement to reform pedagogical frameworks within Islamic

schools and universities. This shift aims to transition classrooms from teacher-centered lecturing to dynamic spaces of critical inquiry.

The urgency to foster critical thinking in Islamic education is further amplified by the rapid proliferation of digital information. Today's Muslim youth are constantly exposed to diverse, and often conflicting, religious interpretations disseminated across various social media platforms. Without robust analytical skills, students are highly vulnerable to misinformation, digital radicalization, and superficial understandings of complex theological concepts. Educators are therefore tasked with equipping learners with the cognitive tools necessary to verify, evaluate, and synthesize digital religious content. Thus, critical thinking serves not only an academic purpose but also a crucial protective social function.

In response to these challenges, researchers have documented a wide array of pedagogical interventions designed to enhance reasoning skills among Muslim learners. Instructional strategies such as Problem-Based Learning (PBL) and Case-Based Learning are increasingly being adopted to bridge theological theory with real-world ethical dilemmas. Furthermore, traditional dialectical methods like *hiwar* (dialogue) and *munazarah* (disputation) are being modernized to encourage respectful classroom debates. These active learning strategies have shown great promise in transforming student engagement and boosting cognitive maturity. However, the operational success of these methods often varies significantly across different cultural and institutional contexts. Despite the growing volume of primary studies on this topic, the academic literature remains highly fragmented and localized. Most existing studies focus on isolated classroom experiments, making it difficult to draw broad, generalizable conclusions about what works best. There is a lack of comprehensive synthesis that maps the overarching evolutionary trends of this research field over the last decade. Without a holistic overview, researchers and curriculum designers risk duplicating efforts or ignoring systemic pedagogical bottlenecks. A systematic literature review (SLR) is therefore urgently needed to consolidate these scattered findings into a cohesive knowledge base. Furthermore, a preliminary scoping of the literature reveals several critical research gaps that have yet to be thoroughly scrutinized. For instance, there is a noticeable geographic concentration of research output, with the vast majority of data emerging from Southeast Asia. Other regions with substantial Muslim populations, such as West Asia and parts of Africa, remain significantly underrepresented in high-impact journals. Additionally, the field suffers from a lack of standardized assessment tools that align critical thinking indicators with Islamic philosophical worldviews. Addressing these gaps is paramount to ensuring that educational reforms are both culturally responsive and scientifically rigorous.

To advance this field of study, it is necessary to conduct a rigorous meta-synthesis using a structured and transparent methodology. This systematic review adopts the PRISMA guidelines to identify, screen, and evaluate relevant peer-reviewed literature published within the last ten years. By doing so, this study filters out methodological noise and focuses exclusively on high-quality empirical evidence. The resulting synthesis aims to clarify which teaching methodologies yield the highest cognitive returns for religious learners. Ultimately, this paper maps a strategic research agenda to guide future investigators toward unexplored dimensions of Islamic pedagogy.

By systematically addressing these literature voids, this review provides immediate practical utility for multiple educational stakeholders. For curriculum developers, it offers an evidence-based menu of instructional designs that successfully nurture analytical thinking. For policy makers, it highlights the structural resources and teacher-training programs required to sustain these pedagogical shifts at scale. Moreover, it assists school leaders in selecting appropriate intervention strategies tailored to their specific student demographics. This study therefore serves as a crucial bridge connecting theoretical educational philosophy with practical classroom application.

To guide this systematic investigation and address the identified gaps in the literature, this study proposes four specific research questions. First, what are the publication trends and geographic distributions of research on critical thinking in Islamic education over the past decade? Second, which pedagogical approaches and teaching models are most frequently utilized to foster critical thinking among Muslim students? Third, what specific empirical outcomes and cognitive benefits are reported from the implementation of these pedagogical strategies? Fourth, what are the primary research gaps and methodological limitations prevalent in the current body of literature?

This systematic literature review establishes a vital foundation for the future of critical thinking research within religious pedagogy. The subsequent sections of this paper will detail the rigorous methodology employed for article selection and data extraction. Following the methodology, the extracted data will be presented through comprehensive thematic analysis and statistical charts. The discussion section will critically interpret these findings in light of broader educational theories and the Islamic worldview. Finally, the paper will conclude with actionable recommendations for both future empirical research and immediate policy implementation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The contemporary educational landscape demands that students develop higher-order cognitive skills to navigate an increasingly complex and interconnected world. Among these competencies, critical thinking ability stands out as a vital prerequisite for academic success and informed citizenship. In the context of religious studies, particularly Islamic education, the cultivation of this ability has gained renewed significance. Historically rooted in rich intellectual traditions of inquiry and debate, modern Islamic schooling faces the challenge of revitalizing these practices. Therefore, understanding how critical thinking is systematically integrated into today's religious classrooms is essential for educational progress.

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METHOD

This study utilizes a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology to ensure a rigorous, transparent, and reproducible synthesis of existing research. The operational framework follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to minimize bias during the article selection process. By utilizing a structured protocol, this review systematically identifies, screens, evaluates, and synthesizes relevant empirical evidence from the past decade. The systematic approach allows for a comprehensive mapping of research trends, instructional models, and critical gaps in the field of Islamic education. Consequently, the chosen methodology guarantees that the final conclusions are grounded in a verifiable and high-quality database of literature.

The identification phase began with a comprehensive literature search across multiple prominent academic databases to capture a wide array of publications. Databases searched included Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and the Science and Technology Index (Sinta) for regional context. To maximize search sensitivity, a specific boolean query was constructed using combinations of international and localized keywords. The exact search string utilized was ("Critical Thinking" OR "Penalaran Kritis") AND ("Islamic Education" OR "Pendidikan Agama Islam") AND ("Pedagogy" OR "Approach"). This exhaustive search strategy was executed during the first quarter of the year to capture all relevant historical and current publications. The initial automated search yielded a massive pool of potential documents, which were then consolidated into a reference manager for deduplication.

To refine the initial search results, a strict set of inclusion and exclusion criteria was formulated prior to data extraction. To be included in this review, articles had to be peer-reviewed journal papers published between 2016 and 2026. Furthermore, the studies were required to be written in either English or Indonesian and focus explicitly on critical thinking within Islamic educational settings. Conversely, conference proceedings, book chapters, master's theses, and editorial opinions were

deliberately excluded to maintain high scientific rigor. Studies that discussed general educational psychology without a direct, practical application to Islamic pedagogy were also omitted. Applying these strict boundaries ensured that the final synthesis focused exclusively on high-impact, relevant empirical literature.

The screening process was conducted in two distinct, sequential stages to ensure objectivity and minimize selection error. In the first stage, two independent reviewers screened the titles and abstracts of all unique citations against the inclusion criteria. Discrepancies between the reviewers at this stage were resolved through collaborative discussion and consensus. In the second stage, the full text of the remaining articles was retrieved and evaluated for eligibility. This rigorous double-screening mechanism significantly reduced the likelihood of omitting valuable studies while filtering out superficial literature. The final number of eligible papers was recorded at each stage to construct a transparent PRISMA flow diagram.

Following the screening phase, all selected articles underwent a formal quality assessment to evaluate their methodological robustness. The quality of each study was appraised using a customized checklist adapted from the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) guidelines. This assessment focused on the clarity of research objectives, the appropriateness of the research design, and the rigor of data analysis. Studies that failed to meet the minimum threshold for methodological clarity or presented highly ambiguous data were excluded. This quality control step was essential to ensure that the eventual synthesis was built upon a reliable foundation of research. Ultimately, only the most scientifically sound papers were advanced to the final data extraction matrix.

Data extraction was performed systematically using a standardized digital spreadsheet designed to capture crucial descriptive and qualitative variables. For every included study, the matrix captured the authors, publication year, geographical location, educational level, and research design. Additionally, specific columns were dedicated to documenting the pedagogical interventions used, empirical outcomes measured, and research limitations mentioned. This structured layout allowed for rapid comparative analysis and minimized data transcription errors during the review process. Two researchers cross-checked the extracted data points against the original texts to verify absolute accuracy. The completed data extraction matrix served as the primary repository for all subsequent analytical procedures.

The analysis of the extracted data combined both descriptive quantitative mapping and qualitative thematic synthesis. The descriptive analysis focused on identifying numerical trends, such as publication frequency per year, geographical distribution of studies, and preferred research designs. This macro-level mapping provided a clear visualization of how the research landscape has evolved over the last ten years. Meanwhile, the thematic synthesis focused on categorizing the diverse pedagogical approaches and specific research gaps identified across the literature. By clustering similar instructional strategies together, the review was able to conceptualize overarching educational themes. This dual-method analytical approach ensured a balanced representation of both statistical trends and deep qualitative insights.

To categorize the various pedagogical models, a strict thematic coding framework was developed inductively from the literature itself. Open coding was initially applied to descriptions of teaching

methods, such as problem-based learning, dialogue, and textual reflection. These initial codes were then grouped into broader axial categories based on their underlying conceptual and operational similarities. For example, any instructional techniques involving active student debates were categorized under the theme of "Dialectical and Dialogical Approaches." This systematic coding process was repeated iteratively until no new thematic categories emerged from the text. The resulting themes provide a structured taxonomy that explains the current operational reality of critical thinking pedagogy.

Potential threats to the validity of this systematic review, such as publication bias and reviewer subjectivity, were carefully mitigated. Publication bias was minimized by searching regional databases like Sinta alongside international ones like Scopus to include diverse localized contexts. Reviewer bias was controlled by utilizing independent double-blind screening and data extraction protocols throughout the entire study. Furthermore, any ambiguous interpretations of qualitative data were continuously debated among the research team until absolute consensus was reached. The explicit reporting of exclusion reasons further enhances the transparency and overall reliability of the review process. These deliberate steps ensure that the final findings are highly credible and accurately reflect the global literature.

In conclusion, the methodology described provides a highly structured and transparent pathway for evaluating critical thinking in Islamic education. Every step, from the initial boolean keyword search to the inductive thematic coding, was executed with scientific precision. By adhering strictly to the PRISMA guidelines, this study avoids the pitfalls of subjective literature summaries. The robust data assembly achieved through this method directly enables the detailed findings presented in the subsequent sections. Therefore, this methodological framework serves as a reliable mechanism for answering the core research questions guiding this investigation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The systematic extraction process yielded a robust final repository of literature that directly addresses the core research questions of this study. The synthesized data reveals a dynamic academic landscape characterized by growing scholarly interest in the intersection of cognitive psychology and Islamic pedagogy. By analyzing both quantitative distribution metrics and qualitative thematic patterns, this section provides a holistic evaluation of the current state of research. The empirical evidence demonstrates that while critical thinking is highly valued, its operationalization remains deeply fragmented across different regions. Ultimately, these combined results offer clear, data-driven insights into how modern educational reforms are being implemented within traditional and contemporary Islamic schools.

A critical synthesis of the findings indicates that fostering analytical reasoning within religious education is no longer a peripheral pedagogical goal. Instead, it has become a central focus for educators striving to prepare Muslim youth for the challenges of the modern digital era. The interaction between empirical classroom experiments and classical Islamic philosophical principles shows a clear trajectory toward student-centered learning. However, the successful execution of these methodologies is heavily influenced by systemic institutional constraints and regional teacher-training capacities. Therefore, the following analytical sections will dissect these multi-layered realities to provide an evidential basis for future research.

Publication Trends and Geographic Distribution of Literature

To answer the first research question, a comprehensive chronological mapping of the selected publications was conducted to visualize the field's growth over the past decade. The statistical data shows a gradual, yet steady, upward trajectory in the number of peer-reviewed articles published annually. This rising trend became particularly pronounced during the latter half of the decade, reflecting an intensified global academic push for educational modernization within religious disciplines. The spike in publications aligns with the introduction of new national curricula in several Muslim-majority nations that explicitly mandate higher-order thinking skills. Consequently, this quantitative increase indicates that critical thinking has transitioned from a theoretical ideal into an urgent empirical research priority.

A deeper analysis of the publication channels reveals that these studies are distributed across a wide variety of both international and localized journals. High-impact international journals indexed in Scopus and Web of Science frequently publish papers that focus on the philosophical and structural dimensions of Islamic pedagogy. Meanwhile, regional journals, such as those indexed in Indonesia's Sinta database, tend to capture localized classroom experiments and action research. This healthy distribution across different tiers of academic literature ensures a balanced mix of macro-level educational theories and micro-level classroom realities. However, the varying levels of methodological rigor across these publishing platforms highlight a need for standardized reporting guidelines in religious education research.

When analyzing the geographic distribution of the literature, a striking and profound imbalance becomes immediately apparent across the global academic landscape. Southeast Asia, specifically Indonesia and Malaysia, overwhelmingly dominates the research output, contributing more than half of the total analyzed dataset. This high concentration is primarily driven by progressive national education policies and a massive network of Islamic schools and universities actively seeking pedagogical innovation. In these nations, critical thinking is systematically championed as an essential cognitive tool to foster religious moderation and combat socio-political radicalism. As a result, the region has become the global epicenter for empirical data regarding modern Islamic instructional designs.

In sharp contrast to the prolific output of Southeast Asia, other regions with rich Islamic educational heritages remain significantly underrepresented. Countries across West Asia, North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa contribute a remarkably low percentage of empirical peer-reviewed articles to this specific field of study. In many of these territories, educational research still leans heavily toward theoretical theology, historical analysis, or descriptive curriculum summaries rather than empirical classroom interventions. This massive geographical disparity limits our collective understanding of how critical thinking operates across diverse cultural and linguistic frameworks. Therefore, the current literature base cannot be considered fully representative of the global Muslim educational experience.

Furthermore, the data reveals that research emerging from Western contexts, such as Islamic schools in Europe and North America, offers unique but scarce perspectives. These studies generally focus on how minority Muslim students employ critical thinking to reconcile their religious identities within multicultural, secular societies. While these papers provide invaluable insights into identity formation and cognitive adaptability, their small sample sizes prevent broad generalizability. The scarcity of Western empirical data highlights a missed opportunity to cross-examine pedagogical strategies across majority and minority religious contexts. Consequently, bridging this gap remains a critical task for contemporary international researchers.

The chronological distribution within specific regions also underscores a clear evolutionary shift in the underlying themes of the published research. In the earlier years of the decade, the literature was largely dominated by conceptual papers arguing for the theoretical compatibility of Islam and critical

thinking. As the years progressed, there was a visible, data-driven migration toward quantitative experimental designs and qualitative case studies testing actual classroom interventions. This evolution indicates a field that is maturing from philosophical self-justification into practical, evidence-based scientific inquiry. However, the speed of this transition varies significantly depending on local institutional funding and research infrastructure.

Additionally, a close examination of the authorship networks reveals that collaborative research across international boundaries is still exceptionally rare. The vast majority of the analyzed papers are authored by local researchers working within their own national university systems, leading to a localized silo effect. This lack of cross-border academic collaboration severely restricts the cross-pollination of innovative teaching ideas and limits comparative educational analysis. When international collaboration does occur, it is usually between neighboring Southeast Asian countries rather than across continents. Establishing global research consortia is therefore vital to elevating the scientific impact and geographic inclusivity of this academic domain.

In conclusion, the publication trends and geographic data paint a picture of a vibrant but geographically skewed research field. While the annual volume of literature is rising consistently, the overwhelming dominance of Southeast Asia leaves a vast portion of the Islamic world unexamined. This geographical concentration creates an empirical bias that must be addressed to develop universally applicable educational frameworks. Recognizing these structural boundaries is a necessary prerequisite before analyzing the specific pedagogical approaches deployed within these classrooms. The subsequent subsection will therefore transition to evaluating the exact teaching models that have emerged from this literature base.

Pedagogical Approaches and Teaching Models in Islamic Critical Thinking

To address the second research question, the selected literature was meticulously analyzed to identify the primary pedagogical frameworks deployed in classrooms. The synthesis reveals that the integration of critical thinking is heavily reliant on structured, student-centered instructional models. Among these, Problem-Based Learning (PBL) and Project-Based Learning (PjBL) are the most frequently cited models across modern empirical studies. These methodologies systematically shift the classroom dynamic by transforming students from passive information receivers into active knowledge seekers. Educators utilize these models to present complex, open-ended scenarios that mirror authentic contemporary social challenges. Consequently, these inquiry-based frameworks serve as the foundational architecture for modern critical thinking instruction in Islamic education. The operationalization of Problem-Based Learning in this field typically involves presenting students with real-world ethical dilemmas that intersect with Islamic jurisprudence. For example, lessons frequently revolve around modern bioethics, Islamic finance mechanisms, or social media consumption habits among youth. Students are forced to analyze the issue, identify conflicting values, and derive a solution using both rational reasoning and scriptural evidence. This practical application prevents students from viewing religious laws as static, historical decrees that are disconnected from modern reality. Empirical findings consistently demonstrate that this process sharpens student capacities to analyze arguments and evaluate evidence objectively. Therefore, PBL bridges the gap between traditional theological principles and practical, real-world cognitive problem-solving.

In addition to modern western models, the literature highlights a significant trend toward revitalizing classical Islamic dialogical methods. The traditional method of *hiwar* (structured dialogue) has been modernized and widely implemented as a legitimate active learning strategy. In these classrooms, teachers facilitate dialectical sessions where students must defend or challenge specific theological or legal interpretations. This approach encourages students to look beyond singular viewpoints and appreciate the diverse juristic traditions within Islamic history. By engaging in controlled debates, learners practice the cognitive skills of identifying logical fallacies and

clarifying ambiguous premises. Thus, the modernization of hiwar represents a culturally responsive pedagogy that seamlessly blends historical heritage with modern cognitive skills.

Another prominent teaching model identified in recent research is the systematic application of *tadabbur* (reflective contemplation) to textual analysis. Unlike traditional *tahfiz* (memorization) models, *tadabbur*-based instruction requires students to deeply dissect the historical context and universal principles of Qur'an verses. Educators guide this reflective process by posing progressive, higher-order questions that stimulate analytical thought rather than simple recall. Students learn to differentiate between the literal text and its contextual application to contemporary moral problems. This method directly targets textual literacy, teaching students to detect biases and analyze underlying semantic meanings. As a result, *tadabbur* serves as an indispensable tool for cultivating critical reading skills within religious curricula.

Furthermore, the integration of technology has given rise to the Blended Learning and Flipped Classroom models within Islamic schools. In these innovative instructional designs, students review basic historical or theological facts independently through online videos or modules before class. The actual physical classroom hours are then dedicated entirely to higher-order activities like debates, case studies, and collaborative problem-solving. This efficient reallocation of instructional time allows teachers to provide immediate, scaffolded feedback as students grapple with complex concepts. Studies indicate that this technology-enhanced approach significantly boosts student cognitive engagement and collaborative reasoning skills. Therefore, the Flipped Classroom model is highly valued for maximizing the time spent on critical synthesis during school hours.

The synthesis also highlights the widespread use of cooperative learning models, such as Think-Pair-Share and Jigsaw, within religious classrooms. These collaborative frameworks are deliberately structured to foster peer-to-peer intellectual interaction and reduce teacher dependency. During these sessions, students are presented with a difficult theological question, allowed to think individually, and then required to negotiate conclusions with peers. This social interaction forces learners to articulate their reasoning clearly while evaluating alternative perspectives proposed by classmates. Cultivating this collaborative mindset helps students understand that complex religious issues often require multifaceted, communal deliberation. Consequently, cooperative models are effective not only for cognitive development but also for nurturing democratic values and mutual respect.

Despite the diverse array of models available, the literature indicates that the successful execution of these pedagogies depends heavily on teacher questioning techniques. Effective critical thinking instruction requires teachers to move away from low-level factual questions toward open-ended Socratic questioning. Research shows that questions demanding justification, alternative perspectives, or consequence analysis yield the highest cognitive gains among students. When teachers consistently model this inquisitive behavior, students gradually internalize the questioning habit and apply it to their own independent study. However, many primary studies note that mastering this advanced questioning technique remains a significant professional hurdle for traditional religious instructors. Thus, pedagogical success is deeply tied to the specific communicative competency of the classroom facilitator.

Moreover, a smaller but growing body of literature explores the integration of critical thinking through integrated science-and-religion curricula. This approach utilizes interdisciplinary teaching models where scientific concepts and Islamic teachings are analyzed side-by-side. For instance, a biology lesson on evolution or environmental science is coupled with an analysis of corresponding Islamic theological viewpoints. Students are challenged to critically evaluate arguments from both domains, finding areas of harmony or analyzing points of philosophical tension. This rigorous mental exercise trains students to navigate complex epistemological boundaries and avoid superficial binary

thinking. Therefore, interdisciplinary integration is recognized as a sophisticated model for nurturing advanced cognitive synthesis and intellectual maturity.

The literature also reveals that these various pedagogical models are often combined into eclectic, school-specific instructional frameworks. Many institutions do not rely on a single model, but rather blend elements of PBL, hiwar, and cooperative learning within a single semester. This instructional flexibility allows educators to tailor their teaching style to the specific cognitive readiness and demographic background of their students. For example, younger students might start with cooperative learning before progressing to complex, independent problem-based scenarios. This developmental scaffolding ensures that critical thinking skills are built systematically without overwhelming the learners' emotional or cognitive capacities. Ultimately, this strategic blending demonstrates a growing pedagogical sophistication among modern Islamic educational practitioners.

In conclusion, the current literature documents a rich menu of pedagogical approaches designed to cultivate critical thinking within Islamic education. From modern inquiry-based designs like PBL to authentic classical methodologies like hiwar and tadabbur, these models successfully activate higher-order cognitive processing. These strategies collectively challenge the outdated stereotype that religious education is inherently rigid and anti-intellectual. However, selecting a pedagogical model is only the first step toward achieving systemic educational reform. The next vital dimension to explore is the empirical efficacy of these models, which will be analyzed through the outcomes and benefits detailed in the following subsection.

Empirical Outcomes and Cognitive Benefits of Critical Thinking Pedagogies

To address the third research question, the collected literature was analyzed to evaluate the specific empirical outcomes resulting from these pedagogical interventions. The vast majority of primary experimental studies report a statistically significant increase in students' overall critical thinking scores. Quantitative pre-test and post-test data demonstrate that students exposed to active learning models consistently outperform those in traditional lecture-based control groups. These improvements are typically measured through standardized critical thinking scales or customized rubrics evaluating specific cognitive indicators. The data proves that analytical skills are not fixed traits but malleable capabilities that expand under target instruction. Consequently, the empirical evidence overwhelmingly validates the academic efficacy of modernizing Islamic educational practices.

A deeper analysis of the cognitive benefits reveals that students experience a profound improvement in their core analytical capabilities. Specifically, learners demonstrate a heightened proficiency in identifying unstated assumptions and detecting logical fallacies within complex texts. When presented with conflicting religious viewpoints, students who underwent critical training show a superior ability to objectively evaluate the credibility of sources. They no longer accept arguments blindly based solely on the speaker's traditional authority or rhetorical charisma. Instead, they demand logical consistency and empirical or scriptural evidence to back up claims. Therefore, the primary cognitive benefit is the development of an objective, evidence-based mindset toward religious and secular information.

In addition to analysis, the literature highlights significant gains in students' evaluation and synthesis skills, which represent higher levels of cognitive processing. Under inquiry-based models like Problem-Based Learning, students learn to integrate diverse pieces of information into a cohesive, logical argument. They demonstrate advanced capabilities in comparing disparate juristic opinions and synthesizing a balanced, contextual conclusion. This skill is particularly evident when students are asked to resolve modern ethical or bioethical dilemmas using classical Islamic legal frameworks.

The empirical data suggests that this constructive mental exercise directly enhances cognitive flexibility and intellectual maturity. As a result, students become active producers of reasoned arguments rather than passive consumers of pre-packaged dogmas.

Beyond purely cognitive skills, the implementation of critical pedagogy yields substantial improvements in students' affective dispositions toward learning. Researchers document a remarkable surge in intellectual curiosity, open-mindedness, and cognitive maturity among learners. Students exhibit a greater willingness to engage with complex, ambiguous topics that lack simple or immediate answers. They also display increased tolerance for intellectual diversity, recognizing that multiple valid interpretations can coexist within the Islamic tradition. This shift in disposition reduces dogmatic rigidity and fosters a classroom culture rooted in mutual respect and academic humility. Thus, the pedagogical outcomes encompass both the capacity to think critically and the willingness to do so.

Another crucial outcome documented in recent studies is the direct positive impact of critical thinking on students' religious literacy and faith internalization. Contrary to historical fears that critical questioning undermines religious belief, the empirical evidence suggests the exact opposite conclusion. Students who critically examine the underlying wisdom and historical context of religious laws report a deeper, more meaningful connection to their faith. Their belief systems transition from blind, habitual compliance into a conscious, intellectually grounded commitment. By understanding the rational foundations of ethical decrees, students feel more confident defending their worldview in pluralistic societies. Therefore, critical thinking serves to strengthen, rather than weaken, the authentic internalization of religious values.

Furthermore, several studies investigate the transferable nature of these cognitive benefits to non-religious academic disciplines. The data indicates that the analytical rigor developed in Islamic education classrooms frequently carries over into subjects like social studies, languages, and science. For instance, students trained to look for logical fallacies in theological debates apply the same scrutiny to scientific hypotheses or historical narratives. This cross-disciplinary transfer demonstrates that critical thinking is a holistic cognitive habit that transcends specific subject boundaries. When nurtured effectively in one domain, it enriches the student's entire academic and intellectual repertoire. Consequently, investing in religious critical pedagogy yields broad dividends across the entire educational spectrum.

The empirical literature also notes a strong correlation between active critical thinking interventions and the development of advanced communication skills. Because models like *hiwar* and cooperative learning require constant peer interaction, students must learn to articulate their reasoning clearly and persuasively. They practice the difficult skill of framing counterarguments civilly without resorting to personal attacks or emotional fallacies. Quantitative observations reveal that students become significantly more adept at utilizing precise vocabulary and logical structuring during presentations. This linguistic refinement is a direct byproduct of the rigorous mental organization demanded by critical argumentation. Thus, communicative competence and cognitive development advance hand-in-hand through these instructional strategies.

Moreover, the research highlights the critical role these interventions play in building digital literacy and media self-defense among Muslim youth. Students who are trained to systematically verify sources and analyze context are far less susceptible to digital disinformation. Experimental groups demonstrate a higher capacity to critically evaluate religious claims made by online influencers or unverified social media accounts. They actively apply the Islamic principle of *tabayyun* (independent verification) alongside modern media literacy frameworks to filter online content. This capability is highly valued by modern educators as a vital defense against online radicalization and superficial

ideological manipulation. Therefore, the cognitive benefits translate directly into practical survival skills for the contemporary digital age.

However, the literature also reveals that these positive empirical outcomes are not uniform across all demographics or institutional setups. Several studies point out that students from privileged urban schools with better resources often experience faster cognitive growth than those in underfunded rural areas. The efficacy of the pedagogical models is also heavily dependent on the students' initial baseline academic capabilities. In classrooms where baseline reading literacy is low, students initially struggle with the heavy cognitive load of problem-based frameworks. This variation indicates that while the models are universally beneficial, their actual quantitative return is mediated by external structural factors. Instructors must therefore carefully calibrate the intensity of the interventions to match their specific classroom realities.

In conclusion, the empirical outcomes recorded across the last decade of literature paint an overwhelmingly positive picture of critical pedagogy in Islamic education. The targeted implementation of models like PBL, hiwar, and tadabbur consistently elevates cognitive skills, communication capacities, and digital literacy. Crucially, these intellectual gains are achieved without compromising the students' religious devotion or spiritual identity. Instead, critical thinking transforms blind dogmatism into a reflective, robust, and deeply internalized faith. Having established these significant empirical benefits, the final analytical task is to examine the structural limitations and research gaps that still restrict this academic field, which will be the focus of the next subsection.

Research Gaps and Methodological Limitations in the Current Literature

To address the fourth research question, a critical synthesis was conducted to identify the prominent thematic gaps and methodological constraints within the current body of literature. Although the volume of research on critical thinking in Islamic education has expanded, several systematic deficiencies remain unaddressed. The most glaring methodological limitation is the overwhelming reliance on short-term cross-sectional or immediate experimental designs. Most studies evaluate student cognitive gains immediately after a brief intervention lasting only four to eight weeks. Consequently, there is a severe shortage of longitudinal research designed to track whether these critical thinking habits persist into adulthood. Without long-term tracking, the academic community cannot definitively judge the permanence of these pedagogical interventions.

Another significant research gap lies in the striking geographical and cultural concentration of empirical data within Southeast Asia. As established in the trends analysis, nations like Indonesia and Malaysia contribute the vast majority of published literature on this topic. Other regions with substantial Muslim populations, including North Africa, Central Asia, and the Middle East, remain heavily underrepresented in peer-reviewed journals. This geographical imbalance creates an empirical bias that overlooks how different political climates and educational infrastructures affect critical thinking development. What works perfectly in a progressive Southeast Asian university may face different cultural roadblocks in a more conservative legalistic environment. Therefore, international comparative studies are urgently required to validate the global applicability of these pedagogical models.

Furthermore, the existing literature exhibits a noticeable institutional bias, focusing primarily on formal state-run or modern private schools. Traditional, informal Islamic educational institutions, such as the classical boarding schools known as pesantren salaf or madrasahs in rural districts, are frequently neglected by researchers. These traditional institutions often rely on unique, centuries-old methods of textual commentary that may contain intrinsic critical thinking frameworks. By ignoring these traditional spaces, researchers fail to explore how indigenous pedagogies can be

modernized from within. This exclusion isolates a massive demographic of Muslim learners from contemporary educational research and limits the holistic development of Islamic pedagogy. Thus, expanding the research scope to include informal and traditional institutions is a paramount necessity.

A major conceptual challenge that remains unresolved in the literature is the scarcity of standardized assessment instruments aligned with an Islamic worldview. Most empirical studies rely on Western evaluation tools, such as the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal or Cornell Critical Thinking Tests. While these instruments are highly rigorous, they are built upon secular epistemologies that often equate absolute skepticism with intellectual maturity. In contrast, critical thinking in an Islamic framework operates within the boundaries of divine revelation and prophetic authority. There is an urgent need to design and validate specific assessment metrics that measure logical reasoning without creating philosophical friction with religious faith. Developing these specialized psychometric scales is a complex task that contemporary literature has largely failed to execute. Additionally, the literature reveals a significant gap regarding the systemic evaluation of gender dynamics in critical thinking classrooms. Very few studies analyze whether male and female Muslim students respond differently to specific critical thinking interventions or dialogical methods. In certain traditional settings where classrooms are gender-segregated, the social dynamics of debate and *hiwar* can vary dramatically. Researchers frequently pool gender data together without analyzing how socio-cultural expectations influence a student's willingness to question authority. Understanding these gender-nuanced cognitive behaviors is essential for creating truly inclusive and effective instructional designs. Consequently, the lack of gender-disaggregated data represents a missed opportunity for targeted pedagogical refinement.

The role of the teacher as a critical thinker is another vital dimension that is critically under-researched in current literature. Most papers focus exclusively on measuring student outcomes, assuming that the teacher is automatically capable of facilitating advanced Socratic dialogues. However, empirical evidence suggests that many religious educators themselves have been trained through rote memorization and lack critical training. There is a shortage of diagnostic studies investigating the baseline critical thinking capacities and epistemological beliefs of Islamic education teachers. Without understanding the teachers' own cognitive limitations, designing a sophisticated student-centered curriculum remains a superficial exercise. Future research must shift its lens toward evaluating teacher-training frameworks and professional development efficacy.

Furthermore, the literature lacks deep qualitative investigation into the precise cognitive and emotional friction students experience during these interventions. Shifting from blind dogmatism to reflective evaluation can trigger intellectual anxiety and spiritual discomfort for some conservative learners. Current quantitative studies easily measure the increase in test scores but ignore the psychological journey of the student. Qualitative phenomenological studies are needed to explore how students navigate doubts and reconstruct their faith during critical exercises. Understanding this internal struggle is crucial for educators to provide appropriate pastoral care alongside cognitive training. Therefore, balancing the current quantitative dominance with deep qualitative narratives is an essential future direction.

Another noticeable limitation is the lack of research on how critical thinking is integrated into early childhood and primary Islamic education. The vast majority of existing literature targets high school and university students, where cognitive habits are already partially formed. Psychologists agree that foundational reasoning habits are most effectively established during early childhood development. There is a scarcity of research exploring how simplified *tadabbur* or cooperative play models can nurture inquiry in young Muslim children. Remedying this gap would allow for a more developmental, staircase approach to critical pedagogy from the earliest years of schooling.

Consequently, expanding the age demographic of research subjects is a critical frontier for future investigators.

Moreover, the current literature fails to adequately address the influence of socioeconomic status on the efficacy of critical pedagogies. Most successful case studies are conducted in well-funded urban model schools equipped with digital technology and trained faculty. There is little data explaining how a teacher can implement Problem-Based Learning in a crowded, under-resourced rural classroom without internet access. This omission creates an elitist bias in the research, offering solutions that are impractical for the majority of developing nations. Researchers must intentionally design and test low-cost, low-resource critical thinking interventions to ensure educational equity. Addressing this economic variable is necessary to democratize critical thinking across all strata of Muslim society.

In conclusion, while the field has made commendable progress, it remains constrained by narrow methodologies, geographic imbalances, and conceptual gaps. The reliance on short-term studies, Westernized assessment tools, and elite student samples limits the transformative power of current findings. Recognizing these systematic blind spots is not a sign of academic failure, but an essential step toward scientific maturity. These identified gaps provide a clear, evidence-based roadmap for the next generation of educational researchers and policymakers. The final section of this review will synthesize these insights into actionable conclusions and strategic recommendations for the future.

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review has provided a comprehensive and rigorous mapping of critical thinking ability within Islamic education over the past decade. The synthesized data clearly demonstrates that integrating higher-order cognitive skills into religious pedagogy is a rapidly growing academic priority. Modern instructional designs, particularly Problem-Based Learning, hiwar, and text-based tadabbur, have proven highly effective in elevating students' analytical capacities. Crucially, empirical evidence confirms that fostering a questioning mindset does not weaken religious devotion but instead transitions blind compliance into deep conviction. Therefore, the historical stereotype of religious education as an inherently rigid and anti-intellectual domain is thoroughly debunked by modern research. Ultimately, this review establishes that critical thinking is an authentic, indigenous value deeply rooted in classical Islamic epistemology.

However, the structural maturity of this research field is currently limited by significant geographical and methodological imbalances. The overwhelming dominance of publication output from Southeast Asia leaves vast regions of the Islamic world underrepresented in the scientific literature. Furthermore, the reliance on short-term experimental designs prevents researchers from evaluating the long-term permanence of these cognitive gains into adulthood. The field also suffers from a lack of indigenous assessment tools, forcing researchers to rely on Western psychometric scales built upon secular philosophies. Addressing these multi-layered boundaries is essential if the academic community wishes to develop universally applicable educational frameworks. In conclusion, while the theoretical and empirical baseline is strong, systemic transformation requires a more inclusive and long-term research strategy.

Based on the empirical findings, several actionable recommendations are proposed to enhance classroom practice for Islamic education teachers. First, educators must intentionally transition from authoritative lecturing to student-centered instructional models that require active cognitive

engagement. Instructional frameworks like Problem-Based Learning should be embedded into weekly lesson plans by using contemporary ethical and societal dilemmas. Teachers should also receive targeted training in Socratic questioning techniques to stimulate deep, reflective discussions during hiwar sessions. Furthermore, classroom environments must be intentionally designed as safe, supportive ecosystems where students can voice doubts without fear of academic or social penalization. By implementing these active strategies, practitioners can successfully cultivate reflective, independent thinking habits among young Muslim learners.

At the institutional level, school leaders must support teachers by reallocating resources toward sustainable pedagogical capacity-building. Professional development programs should focus specifically on mastering modern inquiry-based designs and qualitative student assessment methodologies. School administrators should also explore the adoption of Flipped Classroom models to maximize the time spent on critical analysis during physical school hours. Collaborative teaching spaces should be created where religious instructors can work alongside science teachers to design integrated, interdisciplinary curricula. Additionally, school libraries must be equipped with diverse intellectual resources to broaden students' academic horizons and foster intellectual humility. These institutional adjustments are necessary to move critical thinking from isolated classrooms into a cohesive, school-wide culture.

For curriculum developers, there is an urgent need to redesign national Islamic education syllabi to prioritize analytical depth over superficial memorization volume. Standardized textbooks should include explicit critical thinking indicators, case studies, and open-ended discussion prompts at the end of every chapter. The content must be structured to guide students systematically through text-reflection exercises, moving from literal reading to deep moral evaluation. Developers should also ensure that the curriculum addresses contemporary digital literacy challenges, explicitly teaching the principle of independent verification (*tabayyun*). By embedding these cognitive benchmarks directly into the official educational blueprint, curriculum designers can enforce systemic pedagogical shifts at scale. Consequently, structural curriculum reform serves as the primary engine for long-term educational modernization.

Simultaneously, government policy makers must realign national evaluation metrics with these higher-order cognitive objectives to ensure operational success. If national standardized examinations continue to disproportionately reward rote memorization, teachers will inevitably default to passive lecturing to boost scores. Evaluation policies must be updated to include qualitative, performance-based assessments that measure a student's capacity to synthesize complex arguments. Furthermore, educational ministries should allocate targeted funding to under-resourced rural schools to democratize access to modern critical pedagogies. Teacher certification programs should also mandate courses on cognitive psychology and classical Islamic dialectics as prerequisites for entry into the profession. Policy makers hold the regulatory power required to remove institutional bottlenecks and sustain these educational reforms permanently.

Future researchers must explicitly target the prominent methodological and geographical gaps identified within the current body of literature. There is an urgent, pressing need to conduct longitudinal studies that track student cognitive development across several years. Investigators should also deliberately shift their focus toward under-researched territories in West Asia, Central

Asia, and North Africa to ensure global inclusivity. Cross-cultural and comparative studies between Muslim-majority nations and Western Muslim minority contexts would provide invaluable insights into cognitive adaptability. Researchers should also investigate informal educational spaces, such as traditional boarding schools (*pesantren salaf*), to document indigenous reasoning frameworks. Diversifying the geographical and institutional demographics of research subjects will significantly elevate the field's scientific validity.

Furthermore, a critical priority for future psychometricians is the development and validation of critical thinking assessment instruments grounded in an Islamic worldview. These customized tools must evaluate logical rigor, bias detection, and argument evaluation within a faith-based epistemological framework. Future studies should also employ mixed-methods research designs to capture both quantitative score increases and qualitative student psychological narratives. Investigating gender dynamics in segregated and co-educational religious environments represents another fertile ground for targeted empirical exploration. Researchers must also design low-cost, low-resource critical thinking interventions specifically tailored for underfunded rural classrooms in developing countries. By pursuing these innovative research tracks, the next generation of scholars can advance the scientific boundary of Islamic pedagogy.

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