



## ENHACING CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH PROBLEM BASED LEARNING IN ISLAMIC EDUCATION

Ahmad Sukardi<sup>1</sup>, Kholilurrohman<sup>2</sup>(✉), Fathi Hidayah<sup>3</sup>,  
Bannaga Taha Elzubair Hussen<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1,2,3</sup> Institut Agama Islam Ibrahimy, Banyuwangi, East Java, Indonesia

<sup>4</sup> University of Khartoum, Sudan

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### (✉)Correspondence to:

lilur66@gmail.com

**Abstract:** This research focused on evaluating the effectiveness of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) within the context of Islamic religious education at High School. A qualitative case study approach was used, with data collected from in-depth interviews with 20 participants, participatory observations, and analysis of curriculum documents. Data were collected through a series of in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and analysis of the curriculum documents used at the school. The findings indicate that PBL supports students not only in understanding theoretical religious concepts but also in applying these values practically in their daily lives. Moreover, this method has proven to enhance students' learning motivation and analytical abilities. This study offered concrete guidelines for integrating PBL into Islamic education curricula and suggests further research across different schools to assess generalizability. The implications of this study were highly relevant for the development of a more innovative and responsive curriculum to modern educational needs.

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## INTRODUCTION

Problem-Based Learning (PBL) has become the main focus in contemporary education, especially in the context of Islamic religious education (Anggraeni et al., 2023; Bulut Ates & Aktamis, 2024; Yang et al., 2023). Problem-Based Learning offers a systematic and interactive approach in facilitating a deep understanding of religious values and their application in daily life, as evidenced by several studies showing that PBL improves students' ability to integrate theoretical religious concepts with practical ethical decision-making (Deep et al., 2020; Huang & Wang, 2020; Zhao et al., 2020). In an era where global challenges such as digitalization and social complexity are increasingly affecting the

dynamics of education, PBL promises a method that is not only relevant but also encourages active involvement of students in the learning process (Balzer, 2020; Farrow et al., 2024; Sukackè et al., 2022). Through this approach, students are not only invited to understand religious theories, but also to integrate these values in a meaningful practical context, in accordance with the demands of the times (Ahmad et al., 2022; Cloutier et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2020).

The importance of considering PBL in depth in the context of Islamic religious education is supported by a strong theoretical foundation (Assalihee et al., 2024; Darmawan et al., 2024; Rohman, 2022). Effective learning occurs when students are actively involved in building their own understanding through reflection and practical application (Bell & Bell, 2020; Colomer et al., 2020; Howell, 2021). This theory is in line with the concept of PBL which places students as the main agents in their learning process, not just as passive recipients of information (Jiang et al., 2023; Kim, 2024; Pan et al., 2023). In addition, social cognitive theory highlights the importance of social interaction in strengthening the understanding and acceptance of religious values, which can be strengthened through collaboration in the context of PBL.

Although PBL offered a promising approach, there were still some challenges that need to be solved in the context of Islamic religious education. One of them was how to adapt the principles of PBL to include diverse and contextual Islamic values, according to the various backgrounds of students and the social realities where they study at Public senior high school 1 Glagah. The lack of clear guidelines on the implementation of PBL in the religious curriculum was also a significant problem, given the complexity in integrating religious theory and practice in active learning.

Previous studies have shown that the implementation of PBL in the context of Islamic religious education has produced promising results. For example, research by Santoso et al., (2022) found that PBL significantly improved students' understanding of religious concepts and learning motivation. This was consistent with the finding that PBL facilitates active and critical learning, as well as deepens students' understanding of religious values in a real-world context. On the other hand, Jiang et al., (Jiang et al., 2023) underlined that PBL encourages higher student collaboration and involvement in religious learning, creating an environment that supports the sustainable exploration of religious values. However, challenges in PBL implementation, as identified by Ngoasong, (2022), suggest that flexible and supportive curriculum adaptations are needed to optimize the potential of PBL in diverse religious contexts.

However, although there has been a lot of research on PBL in the general context of education, there are research gaps that need to be filled in the context of Islamic religious education. More in-depth research was needed to understand how PBL can be contextually adapted to meet the needs of complex and diverse religious curricula. In addition, research on the deep integration of religious values in PBL also needs to be further explored to optimize the potential of Islamic religious education in the face of increasingly complex global and local challenges.

This research would make a significant contribution by exploring the contextual and centered application of PBL in Islamic education. The uniqueness of this research lied in its holistic approach to understanding how PBL can meaningfully integrate religious theory and practice in a relevant and dynamic learning context. This study aimed to analyze the optimal strategy in integrating PBL with religious values in Islamic education. This research would focus on developing practical guidelines for the implementation of PBL that are appropriate to the context of varied religious curricula, as well as to develop a deeper understanding of how PBL can strengthen students' religious identities and experiences.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach with a case study research type to evaluate the effectiveness of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in Islamic religious education. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allowed the researcher to deeply understand the participants' experiences and perceptions regarding the implementation of PBL in the context of Islamic religious education (Köhler et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2021; Thompson Burdine et al., 2021). The case study method was chosen over other research methods such as surveys or experiments because it provides flexibility in exploring complex phenomena in their natural environment, allowing for a more comprehensive and holistic analysis of classroom dynamics and interactions between learners and teachers.

Data collection was conducted through three main techniques: in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation study. The research location was Public senior high school 1 Glagah, Banyuwangi, which was chosen because this school actively implements PBL in Islamic learning and provides good access to researchers to directly observe the learning process. The number of respondents consisted of 20 people consisting of 3 school administrators (1 Principal and 2 Vice Principals), 5 Islamic Religious Education teachers who have implemented PBL for at least one school year, and 12 final grade students who have participated in PBL-based learning. The following table illustrates the coding of the interviewees used in data collection:

**Table 1. Code of resource persons**

Code of resource person	Type of resource person	Number
I_KS_2024	Principal	1
I_Waka_2024	Vice Principal	2
I_Gr_2024	Islamic Religious Education Teacher	5
I_Sis_2024	Student	12

The data analysis technique in this study followed the framework of Miles and Huberman (Bingham, 2023; Hanifah et al., 2024; Price & Smith, 2021), which consisted of three main phases: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. In the data reduction phase, data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation were organized and thematically coded to identify recurring patterns and themes related to the effectiveness of PBL, the

development of critical thinking skills, and the application of religious values. The data presentation phase involved categorizing the data into main themes and sub-themes, as well as creating tables and diagrams to visualize the relationships between themes (Kiger & Varpio, 2020; Monaro et al., 2022; Spencer et al., 2021). Finally, in the conclusion phase, the identified patterns were further analyzed to draw comprehensive conclusions regarding the effectiveness of PBL in the context of Islamic religious education. This process also involved comparing the findings with existing literature to ensure that the conclusions drawn were supported by empirical data and a strong theoretical framework.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Result**

This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in improving students' critical thinking skills in Islamic religious education. Through interview methods with various sources, including school principals, vice principals, Islamic religious education teachers, and other informants, this study reveals various findings that support the implementation of PBL in the context of Islamic religious education. These findings included relevant aspects of curriculum design, facilitation of active learning, development of critical thinking skills, and real-life application.

### **Designing a Relevant Curriculum**

In an effort to improve students' critical thinking skills, one of the most important first steps were to design a curriculum that was relevant to the needs and challenges of the times. Relevant curriculum not only presents learning materials that are in accordance with the development of science and technology, but also is able to integrate Islamic religious values contextually. It was important to ensure that the education provided is not only theoretical, but also applicable, so that students can relate what they learn to real-life situations. In this study, interviews with school principals, vice principals, and Islamic religious education teachers expressed their views on the importance of adjusting the curriculum to increase students' active participation and encourage them to think critically in understanding and applying Islamic teachings in their daily lives.

Abdullah, the principal, emphasized the importance of adapting the curriculum to the needs and challenges of the times.

"The curriculum must be able to answer the challenges of the times and integrate Islamic values that are relevant to modern life. We cannot just stick to conventional methods," he said (I\_KS\_2024).

Ahmad Sukardi, as a PAI teacher, also revealed that "The application of PBL in the curriculum helps students associate theory with practice. They not only learn the concept of religion but also how to apply it in real situations (I\_Gr\_2024)."

Syawal Riyadi, as a vice principal, added that "Through PBL, we can develop a more dynamic and responsive curriculum to social change.

Students are invited to solve real problems they face in their daily lives (I\_Waka\_2024)."

The importance of an adaptive and integrative curriculum in facing the challenges of the times and combining Islamic values that are relevant to modern life was highly emphasized by the speakers. The principal emphasized that the curriculum must be able to answer the needs of the times and no longer rely only on conventional methods. In line with that, an Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teacher, underlined that the application of problem-based learning (PBL) in the curriculum is very helpful for students in relating theory to practice, so that they not only learn religious concepts but also understand how to apply them in real situations. The vice principal added that through PBL, the curriculum can be developed to be more dynamic and responsive to social changes, where students are invited to solve real problems, they face in their daily lives.

The following table showed a comparison between the conventional curriculum and the PBL-based curriculum:

**Table 2. Comparison between Conventional Curriculum and PBL-Based Curriculum**

Aspects	Conventional Curriculum	PBL-Based Curriculum
Learning Approach	Theory-dominant	Practice-dominant
Student Engagement	Passive	Active
Material Relevance	Static	Dynamic
Evaluation	Written test	Projects and presentations

Table 2 compared the Conventional Curriculum with the PBL-Based Curriculum in several key aspects. The Conventional Curriculum tends to use a theory-dominant approach with passive student involvement, static material, and written test-based evaluation. In contrast, the PBL-Based Curriculum emphasizes a practice-dominant approach with active student involvement in problem-solving, dynamic and relevant materials to real life, and project- and presentation-based evaluations to measure students' practical abilities. This shows that PBL not only promotes more interactive and applicable learning, but also adapts the curriculum to contemporary demands in education.

### Active Learning Facilities

Active learning facilitation was a key component in the implementation of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) to improve students' critical thinking skills. Active learning requires the direct involvement of students in the learning process, where they are not only recipients of information, but also as the main actors who seek solutions, discuss, and collaborate with fellow students. In the context of Islamic religious education, this active learning became more significant because it allows students to internalize religious values through real experience and critical reflection. Interviews with principals, vice principals, and Islamic religious education teachers showed that active learning facilitation not only increases students' motivation to learn, but also helped them develop critical thinking skills that are useful in daily life. Facilitating active learning was one of the important aspects of effective PBL implementation.

Abdullah, explained that "Active learning requires students to be directly involved in the learning process. They have to find solutions, discuss, and collaborate with their friends (I\_KS\_2024)."

Syawal Riyadi, added that "Teachers play the role of facilitators who help students find answers to their own questions. This is different from the conventional method where the teacher is the main source of information (I\_Waka\_2024)."

Ahmad Sukardi, also revealed that "With PBL, students are more motivated to learn because they feel involved in the learning process. They not only listen but also actively participate in discussions and projects (I\_Gr\_2024)."

Active learning played a crucial role in facilitating students' direct involvement in the learning process. In this context, students are not only given information but encouraged to find solutions, have active discussions, and collaborate with fellow students. The role of the teacher as a facilitator was also very important in supporting students to find answers to their own questions, which is in stark contrast to the conventional model where the teacher acts as the main informant. With the application of problem-based learning (PBL) methods, students tend to be more motivated because they feel more involved in the learning process, actively participate in discussions, and contribute to projects that support the development of their skills comprehensively.

The table below illustrated the differences between passive and active learning in the context of PBL:

**Table 3. Differences between Passive and Active Learning in the Context of PBL**

Aspects	Passive Learning	Active Learning
Student Engagement	Low	Tall
The Role of Teachers	Key sources of information	Facilitator
Evaluation Methods	Written test	Projects and discussions
Student Motivation	Low	Tall

Table 3 showed the difference between Passive and Active Learning in the context of Problem-Based Learning (PBL). Passive learning tended to have low student engagement with the teacher acting as the main source of information, evaluation using written tests, and generally low levels of student motivation. On the other hand, Active Learning in PBL showed high student engagement, where teachers act as facilitators, evaluations are carried out through projects and discussions, and students tend to have high motivation to learn and actively participate in the learning process.

### **Critical Thinking Skills Development**

The development of critical thinking skills was one of the main goals of the application of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in Islamic religious education. Critical thinking skills were the ability to analyze information in depth, evaluate various perspectives, and make rational and ethical decisions. In the context of Islamic religious education, these skills not only help students understand religious teachings more comprehensively but also apply them in daily life. This

research through interviews with school principals, vice principals, Islamic religious education teachers, and other informants revealed that PBL can significantly improve students' critical thinking skills. PBL encourages students to question information, explore various solutions, and develop analytical and creative thinking that is much needed in their lives.

The development of critical thinking skills was one of the main goals of the implementation of PBL in Islamic religious education.

Nur Patah, another informant, stated that "PBL provides opportunities for students to analyze problems, evaluate various solutions, and make logical and ethical decisions (I\_Gr\_2024)."

Ahmad Sukardi, added that "In PBL, students learn not only to receive information passively but also to question, investigate, and understand information in depth (I\_Gr\_2024)."

Syawal Riyadi, also explained that "Through PBL, students can develop critical thinking skills that are useful not only in academic contexts but also in their daily lives. They learn to solve problems in a creative and effective way (I\_KS\_2024)."

Through the results of the above interviews, problem-based learning (PBL), students had the opportunity to develop in-depth analytical skills on the problems they face, evaluate various existing solution options, and make decisions that are not only logical but also ethical. In this process, students not only passively receive information, but are taught to actively ask, investigate, and understand information in depth. PBL also provides opportunities for students to develop critical thinking skills that are essential in everyday life, where they learned to solve problems with creative and effective approaches. The following chart shows the steps to develop critical thinking skills through PBL:

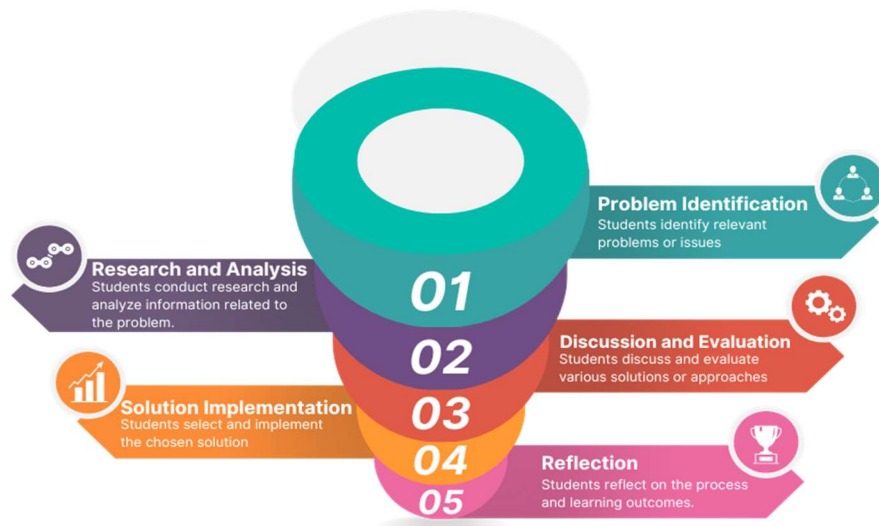


Figure 1. Critical Thinking Steps



### Real-Life Application

The application of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in real life was an important aspect that ensures that Islamic religious education is not only theoretical but also practical and relevant. PBL encourages students to relate religious concepts to everyday life situations, so that they can apply Islamic values in real contexts. In this study, interviews with school principals, vice principals, Islamic religious education teachers, and other informants revealed that students involved in PBL were better prepared to face real-life challenges because they had become accustomed to the critical and analytical problem-solving process. Through PBL, students learn to make ethical and practical decisions, which not only help them in their academic aspects but also in their personal and social lives.

The application of problem-based learning in real life was an important aspect that ensures the relevance and effectiveness of Islamic religious education.

Abdullah, revealed that "Students who are involved in PBL are better prepared to face real-life challenges because they are already familiar with the problem-solving process (I\_KS\_2024)."

Nur Patah, added that "In PBL, students learn to relate religious concepts to real-life situations. They learn to apply Islamic values in their daily decisions (I\_Gr\_2024)."

Syawal Riyadi, also explained that "PBL helps students see the relevance of religious lessons in the context of their lives. They learn to solve problems in an ethical way and in accordance with the teachings of Islam (I\_Waka\_2024)."

From the results of the interviews above, students who were involved in this method are proven to be better prepared to face real-life challenges because they have been trained in a systematic and structured problem-solving process. In addition, PBL allowed students to relate religious concepts to real-life situations, so that they can apply Islamic values in daily decision-making more thoroughly. PBL also helped students to see the relevance of religious lessons in their lives, allowing them to face challenges in an ethical and consistent manner with Islamic teachings.

Here is a table showing the benefits of PBL in real-life applications:

**Table 4. Benefits of PBL in Real-Life Application**

Benefit	Conventional Curriculum	PBL-Based Curriculum
Relevance to Life	Low	Tall
Practical Skills	Limited	Broad
Application of Values	Teoritis	Practical
Readiness to Face Challenges	Low	Tall

Table 4 illustrated the benefits of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in the context of real-life application compared to the Conventional Curriculum. Conventional Curriculum tended to have low relevance to life, with a primary focus on theory without relating it too much to everyday practical contexts. On the other hand, the PBL-Based Curriculum showed a high level of relevance to real life, where students can develop a broader range of practical skills as they



engage in solving actual problems. In addition, PBL allowed the practical application of values in daily life, in contrast to the Conventional Curriculum which tended to be more theoretical. It also creates a higher readiness for students to face various challenges in life, as they have been trained to apply knowledge in real-life situations in a more effective way.

### **Discussion**

The discussion of the results of this study compared the findings with several previous studies that were relevant in the context of problem-based learning (PBL) in Islamic religious education. Previous research conducted by Jiang et al., (Jiang et al., 2023) showed that the implementation of PBL significantly increased students' learning motivation and their ability to understand religious concepts. This was consistent with the findings from our research, which show that PBL was effective in facilitating active learning and strengthening students' critical thinking skills. Additionally, research by Revelle et al., (Balzer, 2020) highlights that PBL promoted collaboration between students and higher engagement in the context of religious learning. This supports our findings suggesting that PBL not only helps students relate theory to practice, but also broadens their understanding of Islamic values in real contexts. On the other hand, previous research by Santoso et al., (Irwandi et al., 2022) suggested that PBL can present challenges in its implementation, especially in the context of a religious curriculum that may be more rigid. Nonetheless, our findings suggest that with the right support from teachers and school leaders, PBL can be effectively adapted to meet the needs of contextual and dynamic religious curricula. This discussion affirmed that despite the challenges that exist, PBL remains a relevant and beneficial approach in developing Islamic religious education centered on deeper understanding and practice.

According to Jiang et al.'s research (2023), problem Based Learning (PBL) or problem-based learning is a learning strategy that can improve students' critical thinking skills. PBL can help students develop critical thinking skills by: Accustoming students to building critical thinking, Developing inquiry, Accustoming students to communicating effectively, Helping students solve everyday problems. Research from Santoso et al., (2022) showed that the implementation of PBL can improve student learning outcomes. The following are the steps in the research that can be done in PBL learning: First, the teacher gives students problems or reveals problems from student experiences. Second, students discuss problems in small groups. Third, students conduct independent studies to find solutions. Fourth, students return to the group to share information and solve problems. Fifth, students present the solutions they have found. Sixth, the teacher conducts an evaluation with students

This research made an important contribution to the development of Islamic religious education through the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) approach. Our findings show that PBL was effective in increasing students' motivation to learn, strengthening critical thinking skills, and linking theory with practice in the context of Islamic values. The practical implication was that PBL can be used as a strategy to design more student-centered learning, promote

collaboration between students, and increase their involvement in religious materials. In addition, this study confirms that with the right support from teachers and school leaders, PBL can be effectively adapted to meet the needs of a dynamic and contextual religious curriculum. Thus, the contribution of this research is to enrich relevant and useful learning methods in the context of Islamic religious education, promoting a deeper and applicable understanding of Islamic teachings in students' daily lives.

## CONCLUSION

This research revealed the importance of problem-based learning (PBL) in Islamic religious education, especially in increasing student engagement and developing critical thinking skills. The main findings of this study showed that the implementation of PBL at Public senior high school 1 Glagah Banyuwangi not only strengthens students' theoretical understanding, but also encourages them to integrate religious values in real life in a practical way. This provided an important lesson that Islamic religious education can be more dynamic and applicable, supporting students to become more adaptive and responsive to the challenges of the times. PBL proved to be an effective method in helping students dig into and solve real problems, improving the analytical and solutive skills needed in their daily lives.

In terms of scientific contribution, this study renewed the perspective on the implementation of PBL in the Islamic religious curriculum, showing that this approach can be successfully integrated in schools with diverse contexts. The uniqueness of this study lied in the application of qualitative methods in exploring the internal dynamics of the learning process through PBL, which is rarely found in religious education literature. However, this study had limitations in demographic coverage and location, which is limited to only one school in Banyuwangi. Broader follow-up research was needed to accommodate gender, age, and method variations, such as surveys, to get a more comprehensive picture. These results can be used as the basis for a more targeted education policy, especially in the context of modern Islamic religious education which aims to produce a young generation who are not only academically intelligent but also competent in facing life's challenges.

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