

The Competence of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) Teachers in Fostering Critical Thinking and Tolerance among Students at Sekolah Dasar Negeri 01 Medan Kota

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the competence of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in fostering critical thinking and tolerance among students at Sekolah Dasar Negeri 01 Medan Kota. The competence of PAI teachers not only encompasses mastery of teaching materials but also pedagogical, social, and personal skills that support the creation of a learning environment that encourages students to think critically while cultivating mutual respect. The research employed a qualitative approach with in-depth interviews involving teachers, students, and the school principal, conducted from late June to early August 2025. The findings reveal that PAI teachers implement reflective strategies through thematic discussions to stimulate students' critical thinking, as well as contextual approaches based on religious values to instill tolerance. These results highlight the strategic role of PAI teachers as agents of religious moderation in elementary schools.

Keywords: *Islamic Religious Education (PAI) Teacher; Competence; Critical Thinking; Tolerance; Sekolah Dasar Negeri 01 Medan Kota.*

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Introduction

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in elementary schools plays a fundamental role in shaping students' personalities, morals, and patterns of thinking from an early age [1]. Within the framework of the national education system, PAI is not merely intended to teach rote memorization of verses or religious doctrines but also serves as a medium for internalizing moral values that contribute to nation-building and character formation [2]. At the elementary school level, students are in a crucial stage of cognitive and social development; therefore, PAI teachers are expected to lay the foundation of critical thinking [3], while simultaneously nurturing tolerance as an essential life skill for the future [4].

Aligned with the vision of national education that emphasizes the development of well-rounded individuals, PAI teachers carry a significant responsibility in directing the learning process to be more meaningful [5]. Critical thinking in the context of basic education is crucial for training children to analyze problems, pose questions, and make sound decisions [6]. Without being accustomed to critical thinking from an early age, students risk becoming passive individuals who are less adaptive to social change and scientific advancement [7]. Hence, PAI teachers must integrate pedagogical, professional, personal, and social competencies into their teaching practices [8].

Beyond fostering critical thinking, PAI teachers are also required to instill tolerance among students. Tolerance is a key to maintaining harmony in Indonesia's plural society, which is diverse in religion, ethnicity, and culture [9]. The emergence of intolerance at various levels of education serves as a reminder that religious education should not be taught in an exclusive manner, but inclusively, with an emphasis on universal human values. In this regard, PAI teachers at the elementary level hold a strategic role in teaching children to appreciate differences from an early age [10], enabling them to grow into open-minded individuals capable of living harmoniously with others [11].

The multicultural context of Medan City further underscores the urgency of this study. As a large city with diverse communities, elementary schools in Medan provide spaces where children from various social and cultural backgrounds interact. SD Negeri 01 Medan Kota, as the research site, reflects the conditions of urban society with significant diversity. In such a setting, PAI teachers face both challenges and opportunities to integrate moderate Islamic teachings with the social needs of children in a multicultural environment.

The competence of PAI teachers in building critical thinking and tolerance cannot be separated from Indonesia's legal and educational policy framework. The Teacher and Lecturer Law No. 14 of 2005 emphasizes that teachers must possess four core competencies: pedagogical, professional, social, and personal. When optimally implemented, these competencies foster creative and critical learning processes that are oriented toward character formation. Mastery of subject matter alone is not sufficient; PAI teachers must be able to relate religious teachings to the real-life contexts faced by students.

Previous studies reveal that PAI learning at the elementary level often remains dominated by traditional approaches, such as one-way lectures or rote memorization. Such patterns tend to make students passive and less engaged in critical thinking processes. Furthermore, intolerance within educational settings remains a serious concern, as evidenced by cases in some schools where children displayed discriminatory attitudes toward peers of different religious or cultural backgrounds. This suggests that PAI teachers' competence in integrating tolerance values has not yet been fully realized.

Accordingly, this research seeks to address the need for PAI learning models that can simultaneously foster critical thinking and instill tolerance. The focus of this study lies in examining the strategies, approaches, and competencies of PAI teachers in daily classroom practices. It also aims to explore how PAI teachers at SD Negeri 01 Medan Kota navigate challenges in creating a dialogical, inclusive, and life-relevant learning environment.

The significance of this study also lies in its contribution to the discourse on strengthening religious moderation in education. The Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of

Indonesia has mainstreamed religious moderation programs, one of which emphasizes strengthening the role of PAI teachers as agents of moderation. In this regard, teachers are not only tasked with transmitting religious knowledge but also with educating students to live with respect for diversity. At the elementary level, PAI teachers serve as the foundation for ensuring that children develop a moderate and tolerant worldview from an early age.

Moreover, the competence of PAI teachers is closely tied to their ability to integrate technology and creative learning methods. In the digital era, students are increasingly exposed to diverse sources of information, making critical thinking an urgent necessity to prevent susceptibility to misinformation. PAI teachers must bridge religious teachings with the digital realities children encounter, thereby ensuring that tolerance values and critical thinking skills remain relevant in contemporary contexts.

Ultimately, this research seeks to investigate in depth how the competence of PAI teachers at SD Negeri 01 Medan Kota fosters critical thinking and tolerance among students. The findings are expected to provide practical contributions to the development of more innovative PAI learning strategies, as well as theoretical contributions to the broader discourse on Islamic education in Indonesia. Thus, this study not only addresses academic challenges but also offers practical solutions for cultivating a young generation that is both critical and tolerant within a multicultural society.

Literature Review

In the perspective of Law No. 14 of 2005, teacher competence encompasses pedagogical, personal, social, and professional domains. These competencies serve as the primary foundation for enhancing the quality of learning. Several studies indicate that critical thinking can be cultivated through discussion-based learning models, problem-solving approaches, and case studies that emphasize active student participation. Meanwhile, tolerance is viewed as the outcome of multicultural education and moderate Islamic values that stress respect for diversity [12]. As authoritative figures and role models, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers are expected to demonstrate exemplary behavior by being fair, open-minded, and wise [13]. Previous research has largely discussed the role of PAI teachers in character building, yet it remains limited in linking teacher competence with two equally essential aspects: the development of critical thinking and the cultivation of tolerance among elementary school students.

Research Methodology

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach. The research site was SD Negeri 01 Medan Kota, with a focus on Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers and upper-grade students (grades IV–VI). Data were collected through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and documentation. The interviews, conducted from late June to early August 2025, involved one PAI teacher, the principal, and eight students from diverse backgrounds. Data were analyzed thematically through the stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. To ensure data validity, source triangulation (teachers, students, and the principal) and member checking were applied. This study emphasizes the exploration of narratives, experiences, and practical strategies employed by teachers in fostering students' critical thinking and tolerance.

Result

4.1 The Competence of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) Teachers in Fostering Critical Thinking among Students at SD Negeri 01 Medan Kota

The PAI teacher at SD Negeri 01 Medan Kota demonstrates strong pedagogical competence in classroom management by applying discussion-based learning strategies. This approach goes beyond mere knowledge transmission; it encourages students to actively express opinions, pose questions, and respond to peers' perspectives. Such a method becomes an

effective vehicle to stimulate critical thinking skills, which fundamentally emphasize students' ability to analyze and evaluate issues.

A concrete example was observed when the teacher discussed the theme of "honesty" in PAI learning in early July 2025. The teacher presented a case involving cheating behavior and asked students to assess whether such conduct could be justified. Students were given the opportunity to discuss the issue in small groups before presenting their arguments to the class. Through this activity, students learned to weigh logical reasoning and the consequences of actions.

In an interview on July 5, 2025, the PAI teacher explained: *"I don't want them to merely memorize verses but to understand the meaning behind them. I ask them to reflect—what if everyone acted dishonestly, would the world still be fair?"* This statement illustrates that the teacher's role extends beyond teaching dogma to cultivating reflective thinking, which lies at the core of critical thought.

Student responses also indicated positive development. A fifth-grade student remarked: *"During discussions, we can have different opinions. Sometimes a friend disagrees, but the teacher says that is fine as long as there are reasons."* This testimony highlights that dialogical learning provides students with a safe space to articulate ideas without fear of being wrong, which is a key feature of a critical learning environment.

The PAI teacher also employs problem-solving methods in instruction. For example, while discussing the theme of "mutual assistance," the teacher presented real-life problems such as minor quarrels among peers. Students were then asked to analyze the best resolution strategies based on religious teachings. Such practices not only engage students in critical thinking within real-life contexts but also instill Islamic moral values.

The school principal affirmed the effectiveness of this strategy in enhancing students' critical thinking. In an interview on July 10, 2025, the principal stated: *"We notice that students are now more confident in speaking, more logical in their reasoning, and less likely to simply mimic the teacher's answers. This is one of the significant changes we have observed."* This observation underscores the teacher's pedagogical skills in fostering students' cognitive growth.

In addition to discussions, the teacher integrates basic literacy by assigning students to read exemplary stories from Islamic storybooks. Afterwards, students are asked to draw moral lessons from the narrative and relate them to daily life. In this way, they not only comprehend the story but also analyze its relevance and implications, further sharpening their critical faculties.

By the end of July 2025, researchers observed a class session where the teacher asked students to differentiate between "doing good out of fear of punishment" and "doing good out of inner consciousness." This reflective question challenged students to distinguish moral motivations and evaluate the depth of intention. The discussion was lively, with students attempting to justify their arguments through personal experiences.

Observation findings also revealed the teacher's consistency in habituating students to ask questions and think critically. For instance, the teacher often prompted: *"Does anyone have a different opinion?"* or *"What if the situation were reversed?"* Such inquiries opened broader spaces for dialogue, trained logical reasoning, and enriched students' perspectives.

In conclusion, the pedagogical and professional competence of the PAI teacher has been proven to play a crucial role in fostering critical thinking among students. Through discussions, problem-solving exercises, story-based literacy, and reflective questioning, students not only learn Islamic teachings but also develop analytical, logical, and argumentative thinking skills. This demonstrates that the competence of PAI teachers is not limited to knowledge transfer but extends to shaping thinking abilities essential for navigating life's challenges.

Table 1. The Competence of Islamic Education Teachers in Developing Students' Critical Thinking

Teacher Strategy	Implementation Description	Interview Excerpt	Impact on Students
<i>Thematic Discussion</i>	The teacher presents real-life cases (e.g., cheating during exams) for students to analyze in small groups.	Teacher (July 5, 2025): <i>"I don't want them to just memorize verses, but to think about what would happen if everyone acted dishonestly."</i>	Students become more confident in expressing opinions and providing logical reasoning.
<i>Problem Solving</i>	The teacher presents daily issues, such as quarrels among friends, and asks for solutions based on Islamic values.	Principal (July 10, 2025): <i>"Students are more logical in solving problems, not merely imitating the teacher's answers."</i>	Students are able to analyze problems and generate solutions.
<i>Reflective Questions</i>	The teacher challenges students to distinguish moral motivation (doing good out of fear of punishment vs. genuine sincerity).	Classroom Observation (July 25, 2025): Teacher asked, <i>"What is the difference between doing good because of fear and doing good out of sincerity?"</i>	Students learn to differentiate deeper moral meanings.
<i>Islamic Story Literacy</i>	Students read exemplary stories and are then asked to compare them with daily life situations.	Student (Grade V): <i>"We can have different opinions, and the teacher says that's fine."</i>	Critical thinking improves as students connect stories with real-life experiences.
<i>Interactive Dialogue</i>	The teacher consistently encourages Q&A by asking: <i>"Does anyone have a different opinion?"</i>	Classroom Observation: Teacher prompted students with follow-up questions.	Students become more engaged in discussion and accustomed to critical and argumentative thinking.

4.2 The Competence of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) Teachers in Cultivating Tolerance among Students at SD Negeri 01 Medan Kota

In addition to fostering critical thinking, the PAI teacher at SD Negeri 01 Medan Kota demonstrates strong social and personal competence in instilling tolerance. The teacher not only delivers lessons on harmony but also embodies the values of tolerance in daily interactions with students. This underscores that teacher role modeling is the most effective medium for teaching tolerance.

During a PAI lesson in early August 2025, the teacher illustrated differences in worship practices within society. The teacher explained that although modes of worship may vary, their ultimate purpose remains the same: to draw closer to God. This explanation helped students understand that differences should not be a reason to demean others but rather something to be respected.

An interview with the teacher on August 2, 2025 reinforced this approach. The teacher stated: “I always emphasize that Islam is rahmatan lil alamin. If a friend has different habits or beliefs, don’t mock them—invite them to play together.” This expression reflects the teacher’s consistency in conveying tolerance using simple language easily grasped by young learners.

The school principal also provided a positive testimonial regarding the teacher’s efforts. In an interview on August 3, 2025, the principal noted: “We see students becoming more open and less likely to make an issue of minor differences. They are taught to coexist and complement one another.” This statement indicates that PAI learning contributes to broader cultural change within the school.

A sixth-grade student offered a striking reflection: “The teacher said it’s not good to insult friends who are different, so now if someone has a different habit, we try to accept them.” This highlights how the teacher’s message was effectively internalized by students in their daily social interactions.

The cultivation of tolerance is also evident in the teacher’s practice of involving all students without discrimination in classroom activities. For example, when forming discussion groups, the teacher ensures diversity in each group. This practice encourages children to collaborate and interact without drawing distinctions.

Observation in mid-July 2025 further demonstrated the teacher’s social competence in handling minor conflicts among students. The teacher responded to a small dispute by emphasizing the importance of mutual respect, stating: “Differences of opinion are normal, but what matters is that we continue to respect one another.” Such interventions prevent minor disagreements from escalating into intolerance.

The teacher also integrates the value of tolerance through contextual approaches, linking religious teachings with real-life events such as local religious celebrations. Students are encouraged to appreciate the meaning of various festivities while respecting cultural and religious diversity within the Medan community.

Additionally, tolerance is fostered through exemplary stories. The teacher frequently recounts narratives about the Prophet Muhammad’s tolerance toward people of other faiths, using these accounts to inspire students to emulate the Prophet’s noble conduct in their daily lives. This strategy proves effective, as primary school students are more inclined to imitate role models they admire.

In conclusion, the social and personal competence of the PAI teacher plays a pivotal role in instilling tolerance among students. Through role modeling, contextual approaches, exemplary storytelling, and the habituation of respectful behavior, students at SD Negeri 01 Medan Kota learn to coexist harmoniously in diversity. This demonstrates that moderate religious education can provide a crucial foundation for social harmony from an early age.

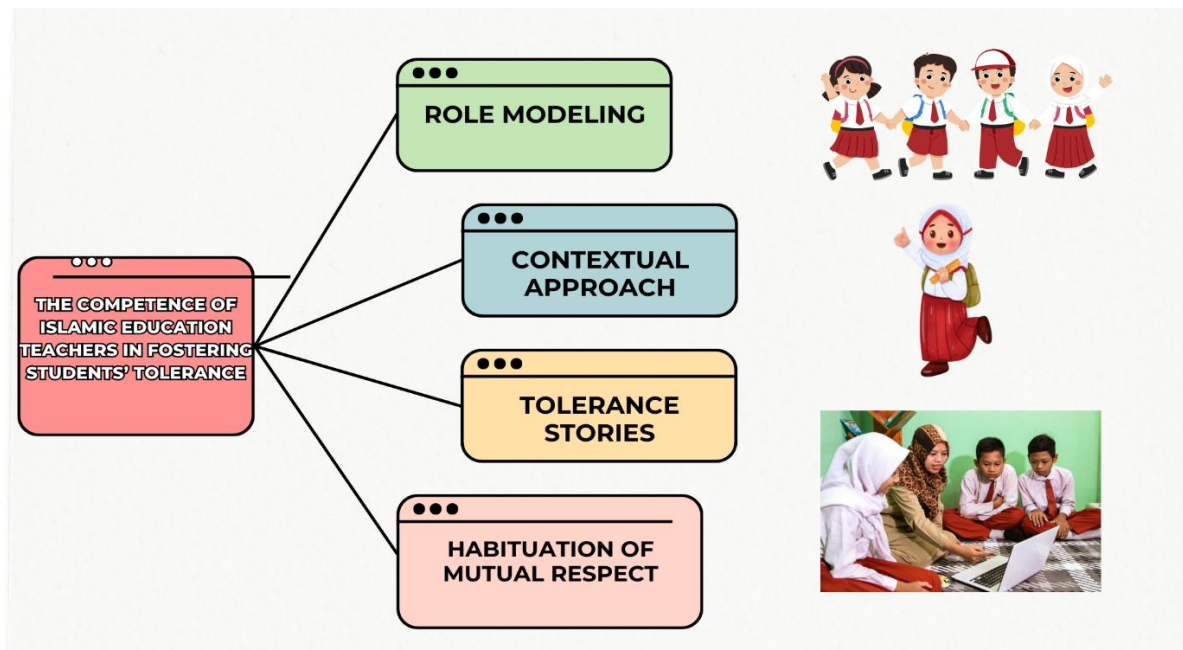


Figure 1. Concept Map of Key Strategies

Conclusion

The competence of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at SD Negeri 01 Medan Kota has been proven to make a significant contribution to fostering students' critical thinking and tolerance. Critical thinking is developed through thematic discussions, case studies, and reflective approaches that encourage students to analyze issues and articulate opinions with logical reasoning. Meanwhile, tolerance is cultivated through the integration of moderate Islamic values, teacher role modeling, and the promotion of respect for differences in everyday life. This study underscores the importance of strengthening the competence of PAI teachers as both educators and moral exemplars in shaping a younger generation that is both critical and tolerant.

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