

Transforming Religious Pedagogy: The Implementation of Inquiry-Based Learning in Aqidah Akhlak Instruction

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Abstract

This study investigates the transformation of religious pedagogy through the implementation of inquiry-based learning in the teaching of Aqidah Akhlak. The study addresses the persistent issues of rote memorization and passive learning in madrasahs, which frequently fail to cultivate critical moral reasoning. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected at a junior high school (Madrasah Tsanawiyah) in North Sumatra through interviews with subject teachers and field observations. The findings demonstrate that although students initially encountered difficulties with hypothesis formulation and data analysis, consistent procedural inquiry stimulated significant cognitive engagement and reflective thinking. The study identifies teacher competence and evocative stimulation as crucial catalysts, while cognitive disparities among students serve as a primary barrier. Theoretically, this research proposes that inquiry-based learning reactualizes the Islamic tradition of critical reasoning (*ijtihad*), bridging the gap between theological dogma and modern constructivist education. The results suggest that fostering an "inquisitive soul" is essential for developing a resilient religious identity within a contemporary context.

Keywords: *Inquiry-Based Learning; Islamic Pedagogy; Aqidah Akhlak.*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini menginvestigasi transformasi pedagogi agama melalui implementasi pembelajaran berbasis inkuiri dalam pengajaran Aqidah Akhlak. Studi ini menjawab masalah persisten mengenai hafalan dan pembelajaran pasif di madrasah, yang seringkali gagal menumbuhkan penalaran moral kritis. Menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif, data dikumpulkan di madrasah tsanawiyah di Sumatera Utara melalui wawancara kepada guru mata pelajaran dan observasi lapangan. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa meskipun siswa awalnya kesulitan dengan perumusan hipotesis dan analisis data, inkuiri prosedural yang konsisten merangsang keterlibatan kognitif dan pemikiran reflektif yang signifikan. Studi ini mengidentifikasi kompetensi guru dan stimulasi evokatif sebagai katalis krusial, sementara disparitas kognitif di antara siswa berfungsi sebagai hambatan utama. Secara teoretis, penelitian ini mengajukan bahwa pembelajaran berbasis inkuiri mereaktualisasi tradisi Islam tentang penalaran kritis (*ijtihad*), menjembatani kesenjangan antara dogma teologis dan pendidikan konstruktivistis modern. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa menumbuhkan jiwa pencari sangat penting untuk mengembangkan identitas keagamaan yang tangguh dalam konteks kontemporer.

Kata Kunci: *Pembelajaran Berbasis Inkuiri; Pedagogi Islam; Aqidah Akhlak.*

Introduction

The contemporary landscape of Islamic education faces a significant pedagogical challenge: the tension between preserving religious doctrine and promoting students' critical engagement with knowledge. In many madrasahs, Aqidah Akhlak instruction is still dominated by transmission-oriented teaching, where theological and ethical concepts are presented as fixed truths to be memorized rather than interpreted, discussed, and internalized through reflective learning. Such conditions risk producing passive religiosity that is less responsive to the ethical complexity of modern life, making pedagogical transformation increasingly urgent (Pedaste et al., 2015; Gholam, 2019).

Recent scholarship consistently shows that student-centered and inquiry-oriented instruction contributes more effectively to higher-order thinking, participation, and meaning-making than teacher-centered methods. Although this tendency has been widely reported in general education research, its application to Islamic religious education remains underexplored, especially in the affective and moral domain of Aqidah Akhlak. This gap is important because religious learning is not only expected to transmit doctrinal correctness, but also to nurture moral judgment, reflective awareness, and responsible action among students (Furtak et al., 2012; Lazonder & Harmsen, 2016; Gómez & Suárez, 2020).

The choice of MTs Yayasan Pembangunan Didikan Islam as the research site is academically relevant because it represents a private madrasah context in which traditional religious instruction and contemporary educational demands intersect directly. Initial observations showed that although the formal curriculum was implemented, students' opportunities to inquire, argue, and test their understanding remained limited. The teacher's use of stories, films, and problem situations therefore becomes important as a means of connecting abstract theological content with students' everyday moral experience (Jaelani, 2020; Febriansyah & Achadi, 2025).

A review of prior literature reveals at least two competing orientations in religious pedagogy. One orientation emphasizes doctrinal stability and tends to preserve confessional teaching patterns, while another stresses dialogical and constructivist learning in order to maintain the relevance of religious education in contemporary society. Within this debate, inquiry-based learning offers a middle path by treating learning as an exploration process that remains guided, purposeful, and value-conscious rather than relativistic or doctrinally detached (Pedaste et al., 2015; Nurhamzah & Amarullah, 2021; Parhan et al., 2024).

Based on this academic context, the present study investigates how inquiry-based learning is implemented in Aqidah Akhlak instruction, how it affects student engagement and understanding, and what structural factors support or hinder its effectiveness. The study proceeds from the assumption that inquiry can be pedagogically aligned with Islamic traditions of verification, reflection, and reasoned understanding, while

also strengthening students' participation and moral agency in the classroom (Suryawati, 2016; Galaksi, 2025).

Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to explore the implementation of inquiry-based learning in Aqidah Akhlak instruction at MTs Yayasan Pembangunan Didikan Islam. The qualitative approach was selected because the study sought to understand classroom processes, pedagogical interactions, and the meanings attached by teachers and students to inquiry activities, rather than merely measuring outcomes numerically. Such an approach is suitable for examining how inquiry unfolds within the cultural and religious ecology of a madrasah classroom (Gholam, 2019; Suryawati, 2016).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the principal, subject teacher, and selected students, non-participant classroom observation, and document analysis. The operational focus of the study followed the general stages of inquiry learning, namely stimulation, problem formulation, data collection, verification, and conclusion drawing. These stages were used to identify shifts in students' cognitive participation, classroom interaction, and reflective engagement during Aqidah Akhlak lessons (Pedaste et al., 2015; Jaelani, 2020).

Data analysis was conducted interactively through data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Triangulation across interviews, observation, and documentation was used to strengthen the credibility of findings, while repeated comparison across data sources enabled the researcher to capture both supporting factors and structural constraints in the implementation of inquiry learning. This procedure also made it possible to relate empirical findings to broader discussions on constructivist and contextual Islamic pedagogy (Miles et al., 2014; Parhan et al., 2024).

Results and Discussion

The Implementation of Inquiry-Based Learning in Aqidah Akhlak Instruction

The implementation of inquiry-based learning in Aqidah Akhlak at MTs Yayasan Pembangunan Didikan Islam represents a clear attempt to shift religious instruction from a passive-receptive model to an active-constructivist one. Before the model was applied more systematically, students tended to approach creed and ethics as static material to be received from the teacher. Inquiry learning altered this pattern by inviting students to identify problems, seek supporting information, and participate more actively in making sense of moral and theological content (Pedaste et al., 2015; Gholam, 2019).

Teacher-designed stimuli such as stories, films, and visual images functioned as pedagogical triggers that connected Aqidah Akhlak concepts to students' lived realities. This is important because inquiry rarely

emerges spontaneously in classrooms long shaped by lecturing; it needs carefully designed prompts that provoke curiosity and moral reflection. In this study, the use of evocative media enabled students to relate abstract themes to real social situations, thereby making religious learning more dialogical and context-sensitive (Hwang & Chen, 2017; Jaelani, 2020; Parhan et al., 2024).

The teacher's persistence in applying inquiry procedures also appeared to be a decisive factor. Students were encouraged not only to answer questions, but to formulate problems, search for information from different sources, test tentative ideas, and defend conclusions. This gradual movement from knowledge reception to knowledge construction indicates that inquiry in religious education can cultivate intellectual autonomy when the teacher consistently functions as a facilitator instead of the sole authority in the classroom (Lazonder & Harmsen, 2016; Nurhamzah & Amarullah, 2021).

At the same time, the findings show that inquiry in *Aqidah Akhlak* carries specific pedagogical complexity. Unlike inquiry in natural science, moral-theological inquiry requires students to negotiate between reasoning, religious norms, and textual references. Several students showed enthusiasm at the stimulation stage but struggled when asked to move toward analysis and verification. This suggests that inquiry in Islamic education needs stronger scaffolding, especially for students who are unfamiliar with open-ended reasoning tasks (Furtak et al., 2012; Aidoo et al., 2022).

These findings support the argument that inquiry learning is compatible with constructivist pedagogy because it situates students as active makers of understanding. In the present case, the teacher scaffolded students' movement from prior knowledge to more refined comprehension by asking them to compare information, verify answers, and formulate conclusions. Such classroom practice demonstrates that inquiry is not merely a technique for content delivery, but a structured mode of meaning-making within religious learning (Pedaste et al., 2015; Pahrudin et al., 2021).

A notable limitation, however, concerned procedural consistency across the full inquiry cycle. Time constraints within the madrasah schedule often shortened the final stages of verification and conclusion, which reduced the depth of students' reflection. This finding matters because inquiry becomes superficial when the process stops at stimulation and discussion without sufficient space for synthesis and evaluation. In other words, successful inquiry requires not only innovative methods but also institutional room for slow thinking (Lazonder & Harmsen, 2016; Gómez & Suárez, 2020).

The integration of learning media also proved important in sustaining students' attention and willingness to participate. Students who were normally quiet in conventional lessons became more engaged when the lesson began with visual or narrative prompts. This suggests that inquiry-based Islamic learning benefits from multimodal pedagogy, especially

when moral concepts need to be linked to concrete and emotionally intelligible situations (Hwang & Chen, 2017; Galaksi, 2025).

Overall, the implementation observed in this study indicates that inquiry-based learning can be meaningfully localized in madrasah settings. Rather than functioning as a foreign pedagogical import, inquiry was reinterpreted through Islamic values such as verification, reflection, and responsible judgment. This localization is crucial because it allows modern pedagogy to reinforce rather than displace the ethical aims of Islamic education (Nurhamzah & Amarullah, 2021; Parhan et al., 2024).

The Effectiveness of Inquiry-Based Learning: Bridging Cognitive Gaps in Moral Education

The effectiveness of inquiry-based learning in this study can be seen primarily in the gradual transition of students from passive listeners to active participants in classroom learning. Although many seventh-grade students initially struggled with independent analysis and hypothesis building, repeated exposure to inquiry procedures strengthened their engagement with the material. This confirms that inquiry effectiveness is often developmental rather than immediate, particularly in settings where students are not accustomed to student-centered learning (Gholam, 2019; Aidoo et al., 2022).

The data also indicate that instructional consistency is central to student adaptation. As the teacher repeatedly employed the stages of questioning, information seeking, verification, and conclusion, students became more familiar with the logic of inquiry and more confident in participating. In this sense, the effectiveness of inquiry learning depends not only on the quality of the model itself but also on the regularity with which it is practiced in the classroom (Pedaste et al., 2015; Pahrudin et al., 2021).

Another important aspect of effectiveness lies in the stimulative character of inquiry. Students were compelled to think beyond memorized textbook statements because they had to respond to problems, test temporary answers, and justify their reasoning. Even when they made mistakes, the process of struggling with the material deepened their understanding more than conventional lecturing would have done. Inquiry therefore appears effective precisely because it transforms cognitive effort into part of the learning process (Duran & Dökme, 2016; Furtak et al., 2012).

Nevertheless, the study also reveals that inquiry effectiveness is shaped by classroom culture. In contexts where the teacher has long been positioned as the uncontested source of truth, students may initially hesitate to question, interpret, or challenge ideas. This cultural dimension helps explain why inquiry in religious schools often requires a longer adaptation period than in classrooms already familiar with exploratory learning norms (Gómez & Suárez, 2020; Febriansyah & Achadi, 2025).

From the perspective of self-regulated learning, inquiry activities trained students to monitor their own understanding, seek relevant

information, and refine their answers. In Aqidah Akhlak instruction, this is particularly valuable because students are not only expected to know religious concepts but also to make reasoned moral sense of them. Repeated inquiry practice thus contributes to the growth of metacognitive awareness alongside content mastery (Aidoo et al., 2022; Pahrudin et al., 2021).

The findings also show that student diversity affects overall effectiveness. Some learners adapted quickly to inquiry tasks, while others remained dependent on teacher guidance, especially at the stages of problem formulation and data interpretation. This suggests that inquiry should ideally be accompanied by differentiated support so that students with lower analytical readiness are not marginalized by the very model intended to empower them (Lazonder & Harmsen, 2016; Gholam, 2019).

Even so, inquiry learning demonstrated considerable motivational strength. Students reported that stories, films, and discussion-based tasks made the lesson feel more meaningful and less monotonous than lecture-based instruction. This affective benefit is significant in religious education, where student involvement is closely tied to the internalization of ethical values rather than to cognitive achievement alone (Galaksi, 2025; Suryawati, 2022).

Taken together, these results suggest that the effectiveness of inquiry-based learning in Aqidah Akhlak should be understood in both cognitive and formative terms. The model not only supports comprehension and analysis, but also reshapes students' learning identities by positioning them as active seekers of understanding. For madrasah education, this identity shift may be one of the most important outcomes of inquiry pedagogy (Pedaste et al., 2015; Nurhamzah & Amarullah, 2021).

Determinants of Success and Structural Constraints in Inquiry-Based Islamic Education

The success of inquiry-based learning in this madrasah depended on the interaction between internal student readiness and external pedagogical support. One major challenge was the disparity in students' prior knowledge and analytical capacity. When all students were expected to perform similar inquiry tasks without equal readiness, the model risked benefiting only those who were already academically advantaged (Lazonder & Harmsen, 2016; Gholam, 2019).

Teacher competence emerged as the strongest supporting factor. The subject teacher's ability to structure inquiry stages, provide prompts, and guide verification reduced students' procedural anxiety and kept the learning process focused. This finding is consistent with broader research showing that inquiry learning is most effective when strong facilitation accompanies student autonomy, especially in complex or unfamiliar learning environments (Furtak et al., 2012; Nurhamzah & Amarullah, 2021).

The availability of learning resources such as books, images, and contextual media also functioned as an important form of instructional scaffolding. These resources helped students search for information and

test their ideas rather than relying solely on the teacher's explanation. However, facilities alone were not sufficient; the more fundamental issue remained students' habit of waiting for correct answers instead of constructing tentative explanations independently (Hwang & Chen, 2017; Parhan et al., 2024).

Administrative support from the principal was another enabling condition. The teacher was able to experiment with inquiry procedures because school leadership did not reduce lesson quality to mere syllabus completion. Such institutional encouragement matters greatly, since pedagogical innovation often fails when teachers are pressured to prioritize speed, coverage, and compliance over depth of learning (Gómez & Suárez, 2020; Febriansyah & Achadi, 2025).

At the same time, the study identified limitations related to students' intellectual endurance. While many students enjoyed the stimulation phase, their engagement tended to decline when the lesson moved toward analysis, verification, and conclusion. This pattern indicates that enjoyable learning media must be paired with sustained cognitive guidance, otherwise inquiry may stop at surface-level excitement without producing deeper understanding (Aidoo et al., 2022; Duran & Dökme, 2016).

Interpersonal trust within the school also played a subtle but meaningful role. Inquiry becomes more viable when students feel safe to offer incomplete answers, revise mistakes, and speak without fear of embarrassment. The teacher's willingness to position herself as a facilitator rather than an infallible authority helped create that atmosphere, which in turn enabled students to participate more openly in the inquiry process (Suryawati, 2016; Galaksi, 2025).

Toward a Constructivist Paradigm in Madrasah

The broader significance of this study lies in its demonstration that inquiry-based learning can move madrasah pedagogy away from rigid transmission models toward a more reflective and constructivist paradigm. Rather than threatening doctrinal commitment, guided inquiry can strengthen students' understanding by allowing them to connect religious concepts with lived moral questions. In this sense, inquiry supports a deeper form of religious learning grounded in comprehension, reflection, and ethical judgment (Pedaste et al., 2015; Nurhamzah & Amarullah, 2021).

This transformation is especially important for Aqidah Akhlak because the subject is concerned not only with correct belief, but also with character formation and moral reasoning. When students formulate questions, test interpretations, and draw conclusions, they are not merely learning about values; they are actively constructing their own moral orientation. Inquiry therefore contributes to the internalization of religious values rather than their superficial memorization (Suryawati, 2016; Jaelani, 2020).

The study also suggests that inquiry-based learning resonates with the Islamic intellectual tradition of reasoned understanding, verification, and reflective search for truth. When properly guided, inquiry does not dissolve normative boundaries; instead, it helps students understand why moral and theological positions matter. This makes inquiry a potentially productive bridge between Islamic educational aims and contemporary learner-centered pedagogy (Parhan et al., 2024; Febriansyah & Achadi, 2025).

At the same time, sustainability remains a key issue. The long-term success of inquiry learning will depend on whether a culture of inquiry can be institutionalized across the school, supported by flexible curriculum implementation, adequate teacher development, and assessment practices that value process as well as outcomes. Without these structural supports, inquiry risks remaining an isolated classroom innovation rather than becoming a durable pedagogical orientation (Lazonder & Harmsen, 2016; Gómez & Suárez, 2020).

Another major implication concerns contextualization. The findings show that inquiry becomes more powerful when linked to local realities, familiar narratives, and culturally resonant examples. This reinforces the principle that pedagogical models should not be transferred mechanically; they should be adapted to the social, religious, and developmental conditions of learners so that inquiry becomes both intellectually rigorous and educationally meaningful (Hwang & Chen, 2017; Galaksi, 2025).

Ultimately, inquiry-based learning in this study points toward the possibility of forming reflective believers: students who do not merely repeat religious formulas, but understand, evaluate, and embody them in socially responsible ways. Such an orientation is increasingly important for Islamic education in the twenty-first century, where students must navigate complex moral environments while remaining grounded in religious values (Gholam, 2019; Parhan et al., 2024).

Conclusion

The implementation of inquiry-based learning in Aqidah Akhlak instruction at MTs Yayasan Pembangunan Didikan Islam shows strong potential to transform religious education from passive indoctrination into active and reflective engagement. Although students initially encountered difficulties in formulating hypotheses, analyzing information, and drawing conclusions independently, consistent use of inquiry procedures gradually increased their participation, critical engagement, and ownership of learning. Teacher competence, media support, and institutional encouragement emerged as major enabling factors, while cognitive disparities and limited instructional time remained the main constraints.

These findings imply that inquiry-based learning should be considered a viable strategy for strengthening Aqidah Akhlak instruction in madrasahs, provided that it is supported by careful scaffolding,

contextualized materials, and a school culture that values reflective learning. More broadly, the study indicates that inquiry pedagogy can help Islamic education integrate doctrinal teaching with critical understanding, thereby fostering students who are not only knowledgeable, but also morally reflective and intellectually responsible.

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