CRITICAL THINKING APPROACH TO ISLAMIC EDUCATION IN NU AND PERSIS PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN WEST JAVA: TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS, PRACTICES, AND CHALLENGES

A Thesis

Submitted to the Master's Study Program of Education at the Faculty of Education in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (M.A.)



by:

Santi Dianah

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UNIVERSITAS ISLAM INTERNASIONAL INDONESIA
DEPOK
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ABSTRACT

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Critical thinking is one of the core competencies of 21st century education, developed to prepare citizens to flourish and contribute optimally to a global society. However, critical thinking is often regarded as a sensitive issue in religious education, including Islamic education, due to concerns that it may challenge the authority of established religious texts and doctrines. This study explores the perceptions of teachers at primary schools affiliated with *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU) and *Persatuan Islam* (PERSIS), two major Islamic organizations in Indonesia, regarding critical thinking in religious education, the approaches they employ to foster it, and the challenges they encounter in its implementation. Adopting an interpretivist paradigm, this study employed a qualitative approach through a multi-case study design conducted in NU and PERSIS primary schools in West Java province, Indonesia. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 16 participants, classroom observations, as well as documents analysis, and analyzed thematically through within-case and cross-case analysis using Ennis' critical thinking framework as the analytical lens. The findings reveal that both institutions implement a practice *of 'guided critical thinking'* which provides students with opportunities to engage in critical reasoning about religious teachings within the moral and traditional boundaries of each organization. The two schools differ in three areas; 1). the scope of issues open to critical inquiry, with NU excluding theological matters *(ilahiyyah)* and PERSIS excluding matters related to the unseen *(ghaibiyyah);* 2). the sources of religious authority, with NU emphasizing *sanad*-based authority and PERSIS adopting *ittiba*' approach; and 3). the orientation of critical thinking, with NU using it to contextualize religious teachings in relation to local traditions and contemporary developments, whereas PERSIS employs it to purify religious teachings from practices considered illegitimate. In classroom practice, both schools adopted an infusion approach. Another significant finding is that ideological influence is not internalized uniformly among teachers within the same school. Teachers holding structural roles within the organization tend to demonstrate more rigid interpretations of organizational principles than non-structural teachers. Furthermore, the findings indicate that the successful implementation of critical thinking in primary religious education is not determine by organizational ideology but rather by the quality of the educational ecosystem that supports it. Key enabling factors include digital media management, teacher readiness, and student psychological safety, while challenges arise from student-, teacher-, and parent/community-related factors. Future research should involve a greater diversity of schools, examines students' critical thinking development across different educational institutions, and further refine the concept of 'guided critical thinking' as an indigenous Indonesian framework with the potential to enrich global discourse on Islamic education.

Keywords: guided critical thinking, Islamic education, teacher perception, NU, PERSIS, primary school

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

Critical thinking is one of the four competencies (along with creativity, communication, and collaboration) that constitute the main focus of 21st century skills (Lombardi et al., 2022). For this reason, global researchers, educators, and policymakers have long positioned critical thinking as one of the highest priorities in the development of all areas of education in contemporary democratic societies (Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023). International organizations such as UNESCO and the OECD (2025; 2020; 2019) state that critical thinking is needed to shape citizens into lifelong learners who are able to flourish and thrive in global society. Therefore, they strongly advocated for a comprehensive education system to optimally support the development of this competency by making it a core learning outcome of the curriculum, providing teacher training, and formulating clearer and more measurable teaching and assessment techniques.

The OECD report (2025) outlines several positive impacts of teaching students how to think, including expanding disciplinary understanding, improving problem-solving skills, promoting meaningful and authentic learning, developing value-based and ethical reflection, and enhancing their well-being and social contributions. Other studies have shown that critical thinking also enables individuals to make better decisions (Ayala et al., 2024), adapt to various changes (Halpern & Dunn, 2021), and achieve better academic performance (Ren et al., 2020). Equally important, the massive use of social media and AI that can facilitate and accelerate the spread of misinformation, as well as the phenomenon of *echo chambers* that may reinforce bias and narrow perspectives, make critical thinking an urgent competency that every individual must possess today (Butler, 2024). Critical thinking enables individuals to develop a strong understanding even of complex information (Dwyer et al., 2014).

In the context of religious education, however, critical thinking remains a sensitive and dynamically debated issue, especially when associated with life in diverse societies. According to the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture formulated by the Council of Europe, critical thinking of religious beliefs and practices is essential in multireligious, multicultural, and democratic societies, intended to enable individuals to appreciate different ways of life (Barrett et al., 2018). This is further

reinforced by the view that critical thinking enables individuals to listen to one another and engage in public discourse in a reflective and inclusive manner (Saada, 2015).

As an example, Norway and Sweden promote the development of critical thinking in religious education in schools by studying religion through various scientific perspectives and through both insiders and outsiders. Students are therefore expected not only respect religion but also critically examine religious teachings as a social and cultural phenomenon (Brekke, 2025; Löfstedt and Sjöborg, 2020). However, there are also religious fundamentalists who focus solely on following what has been taught by their group dogmatically, absolutistically, and with minimal space for reflection due to fear of deviating (Ghufron et al., 2020). One example is found among Christian fundamentalist groups in Africa, which emphasize a literal interpretation of religious texts as absolute truth and consider any critical approach as a threat to faith and a cause of sin (Zireva & Pitsoe, 2025).

Similar tensions also occur within Islamic education. Zarkasyi (2020) highlights the threat of secularism and liberalism, or what he terms *ghazwul fikr* (the war of thought), arising from the promotion of undergrounded critical thinking in religious matters. He emphasized that Islamic education cannot be separated from the cultivation of faith and morals, where memorization serves as its foundation, without dismissing rational knowledge. On the other hand, Abdullah (2014) advocates for the wide opening of the gate of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) in contemporary Islamic education by encouraging critical reasoning and dialogue to redevelop fresh Islamic thought, which according to Arkoun has stagnated from the 12th to the 19th century. Abdullah (2014) asserts that religious knowledge is not religion itself but is comparable to other forms of knowledge compiled by humans (Muslims) in their respective eras; therefore, it is not sacred and can be critiqued, corrected, or revised *(qabilun li-niqasy wa al-taghyir).* Furthermore, Edward Said argues that religious teachings are not presented in a neutral manner but are shaped by social, cultural, and political contexts (Hart, 2004). Therefore, Guessoum (2011) firmly states that Islamic education needs to move away from hegemonic and static approaches, because if such approaches are maintained, Islamic teachings will conflict with and be overtaken by modern knowledge, ultimately making religious principles appear increasingly foreign and irrelevant.

Nevertheless, although the discourse on the importance of critical thinking in Islamic education has been widely accepted, its implementation in various educational institutions remains suboptimal. Comparative studies across many European countries

find that Islamic religious education tends to be textual, normative, and dogmatic, with limited encouragement of critical thinking, dialogue, and inclusivity (Franken & Gent, 2021). This also occurs in non-formal Islamic educational institutions in the Netherlands and madrassas in the United Kingdom (Altinyelken, 2021), as well as Islamic schools in the United Arab Emirates and Australia (Memon et al., 2021). Similar issues are also evident in Muslim-majority countries, such as Pakistan and India, where Islamic education is still dominated by a classical curriculum with a normative approach (Ali et al., 2022; Ali, 2015; Sikand, 2005). In Indonesia, Islamic religious instruction in schools also remains focused on cognitive development with an indoctrinative and authoritarian approach (Tolchah, 2020).

Analysis of learning in various contexts of these countries indicate a relatively similar pattern of problems, especially in terms of teacher incompetence, lack of student participation, and insufficient encouragement of critical thinking and dialogue in Islamic religious education at the global level. This phenomenon highlights the need for policy intervention and pedagogical innovation for the future development of Islamic education.

In this study, the emphasis on strengthening critical thinking in religious education is not intended to promote secularism or liberalism, but rather to deepen students' understanding of religiosity. As MacIntyre (1999) states, in relation to religion, skeptics tends to occupy a position of understanding, whereas believers occupy a position of believing in religion. Likewise, Sahin (2013) argues that Qur'anic pedagogy inherently promotes critical and dialogical approach in educating Muslim generations in order to foster critical awareness so that they develop mature faith. According to Fazlur Rahman, within the Islamic tradition itself, the teaching of values is commonly carried out through a *tadabburi* approach, in which learners are encouraged to reflect, develop deep understanding, and connect the substance of religious text to their daily lives. He further emphasized that Islam regards responsible freedom *(hurriyyah)* as a natural disposition bestowed by God upon human beings. Therefore, Islamic education should not restrict students' freedom of thought but rather guide it in accordance with the principles of revelation. In this way, Islamic education can develop reflective awareness and a higher sense of responsibility among students (Rahman, 1982, as cited in Sulhan, 2025).

Critical thinking in religious learning directs students to evaluate the accuracy of claims, appreciate diversity, avoid stereotypes, and become accustomed to referring to scientific concepts, understanding the legitimacy and power relations within religious teachings, and reflecting on the social, psychological, and ethical impacts of religious

beliefs or practices (Jarmer, 2024). Conversely, religious education that limits students' critical thinking may result in the closure of the gate of *ijtihad* which leads to intellectual sterility, namely the stagnation of religious knowledge that potentially narrows Muslims' perspectives and make them more emotional, sectarian, and prone to violent (Arman, 2024; Abdullah, 2014). In addition, the lack of emphasis on critical thinking in religious education can significantly contribute to the weakening of students' critical reasoning (Sahin, 2013), identity confusion and religious disorientation (Altinyelken, 2021), inability to respond to complex religious questions (Andreassen, 2019), inability to filter and evaluate religious information in digital media (Ju'subaidi et al., 2024), as well as failing to prepare Muslim generations to live reflectively and constructively in pluralistic and modern societies (Yağdı, 2025).

Thus, Islamic education today faces the task of reorienting and reconstructing its approach to move beyond mere textual competence toward contextual competence and social practice, thereby fostering the development of morally upright and socially responsible individuals. Critical, reflective, and dialogical religious education will enable students to integrate spiritual values into issues of social justice, the environment, and humanity which indirectly also demonstrates Islam contribution to the future development of humankind (Abdullah et al., 2026). This approach is in line with the principle of *Islam rahmatan lil 'alamin* (Islam as a blessing for all humanity), which emphasizes the importance of balance between knowledge, action, and ethics in creating a civilized society (Sulhan, 2025). The challenges of globalization also require Islamic education to prepare students to become global citizens with critical thinking skills, an open religious identity, and adaptive capacity toward change (Wahab, 2025). Therefore, Islamic education in the 21st century should dare to shifts its paradigm from teaching the content to teaching for life, so that students are able to face the increasingly complex challenges of the modern world (Trilling & Fadel, 2009).

However, in its implementation, the institutionalization of progressive education in a serious manner remains difficult, especially at the elementary school level. This is because such an educational model requires well-trained and dedicated teachers who are fully engaged in their work (Gardner, 1991). Meanwhile, McLaren (2015) study found insufficient teacher knowledge of critical thinking and limited training provided to them. Other studies have also identified that learning in elementary schools across various countries still emphasizes "what to think" rather than "how to think" (David & Huin, 2004, as cited in Lombardi et al., 2022). As for the context of Islamic education, religious

learning at this level is often trapped in a rote memorization and teacher-centered approaches, resulting in minimal for reasoning and critical dialogue (Fitria *et al.,* 2025). In fact, through learning critical thinking, students can be trained to value reasons and truth, be open-minded, respect others in discussion, and be willing to consider ideas from different perspectives (Bailin et al., 1999, as cited in Aktoprak & Hursen, 2022; Metcalfe, 2024). Learning to think critically, especially in religious education, should be well designed at the primary school level because this stage is crucial in shaping students' character, attitudes, and self-development.

In addition, stereotypes regarding the supposedly underdeveloped cognitive function and critical thinking ability of primary school students often becomes an obstacle to the creation of critical and dialogical religious learning in the classroom (Altinyelken, 2021). On the other hand, various studies show that primary school is actually a very appropriate phase for the development of children's critical thinking competencies. Ennis' study (1971) demonstrated that children aged 6 to 9 are already capable of logical reasoning based on premises they believe to be false, even when such premises are presented by others. Likewise, Pasquinelli et al., (2021) state that young children already possess cognitive functions underlying critical thinking, including the ability to determine that information is false. Furthermore, Lombardi et al., (2022) emphasized the importance of teaching critical thinking from primary education, as Osakwe's (2009) research showed that students who studied critical thinking from early age develop significantly stronger higher-order thinking in adulthood compared to those who do not.

Based on the results of the comparative curriculum mapping studies, critical thinking emerged in 60% of cases and therefore identified as the most emphasized cognitive competency in curricula (OECD, 2020) and the most frequently mentioned competency in national policy documents in many countries worldwide (Aktoprak & Hursen, 2022). However, in educational practice, Hess (2013) notes a significant gap between policy and classroom practice. Policy implementation is often characterized by contradictions, contextual challenges, and adaptation to local contexts (Bayeni & Bhengu, 2018). In terms of curriculum, Ornstein and Hunkins (2017) also said that its effectiveness is not determined by the sophistication of its planning document, but by teacher's professional ability to interpret, adapt, and bring it to life in the classroom. In fact, various studies have found that primary school teachers still lack a solid understanding of what critical thinking is and how to effectively stimulate it in learning, even though de jure this competency is being strongly promoted (Lombardi et al., 2021; Davies, 2013).

Therefore, Viennet and Pont (2017) emphasized that in formulating education policy, it is necessary to ensure that all aspects influencing its implementation in the field (such as funding, facilities and teacher training) are well-coordinated and synchronized so that the policy can be effectively implemented in schools. Teachers hold a crucial role and far beyond that of technical executors; they are key decision-makers who determine the success or failure of a curriculum (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2017). Fullan (2007) also emphasized that how teachers perceive and take action will determine whether educational change occurs. Therefore, teachers are the ones who determine whether religious teaching in primary schools becomes an educational process or indoctrination for students.

Research on the importance of teaching critical thinking in primary schools has been widely conducted in various countries. However, these studies mostly focus on general subjects, while those specifically exploring critical thinking in religious education, particularly Islamic education, remain very limited (Jegstad et al., 2025; Aktoprak & Hursen, 2022). In addition, existing studies are mainly focused on exploring teaching approaches used by teachers to enhance students' critical thinking and/or testing their effectiveness. In these studies, teachers are positioned as implementers of instruction rather than as primary research subjects whose beliefs and perspectives are examined in depth (Susanti, 2024; Nugraha & Suparman, 2021). On the other hand, studies on critical thinking in Islamic education are mostly conducted at the secondary or higher education level and in theoretical-conceptual forms, thus they do not sufficiently illustrate how Islamic primary school teachers perceive critical thinking and implement it in daily classroom practice (Judijanto & Arwen, 2025; Inda et al., 2023; Salsabilah et al., 2025; Ramadhan & Arsyad, 2025).

As previously explained, teachers play a crucial role in shaping the direction of religious education, determining whether it facilitates students in developing critical understanding or merely reinforces the memorization of religious texts. Nevertheless, the limited number of studies on teachers' perceptions and practices in the classroom leaves a critical point; namely, the promotion of critical thinking may be formulated in educational policies and curricula without being accompanied by an adequate understanding of how it is actually perceived and implemented by religious education teachers. This risks creating a gap between policy intentions and the realities of classroom practice.

Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by examining teachers' perceptions of critical thinking, how they interpret it in teaching, and identifying the challenges they encounter when practicing it in Islamic primary schools. Moreover, because previous studies tend to treat Islamic schools as a homogeneous entity and are less sensitive to the diversity of ideologies and intellectual traditions, this study examines critical thinking instruction in religious subjects across two primary schools with different institutional backgrounds, namely those affiliated with NU (Nahdlatul Ulama) and PERSIS (Persatuan Islam; The Unity of Islam), two major Islamic organizations in Indonesia (Hasyim, 2020). While both organizations promote critical thinking, they represent contrasting religious and educational orientations, namely traditionalist and reformist, making them analytically valuable cases for comparison.

Indonesia is the country with the largest Muslim population in the world (CNBC Indonesia, 2025). However, Azra (2006) described Indonesian Islam as moderate and accommodative, distinct from Islam in the Middle East. This is because Indonesian Muslims are known for their ability to adapt to modernity, democracy, and pluralism without weakening their religious identity. International magazines such as Time and Newsweek have even labelled Islam in Indonesia as "Islam with a Smiling Face" (Tan, 2011). Hasyim (2013) stated that the face of Indonesian Islam cannot be separated from the contributions and support of civil society organizations, one of which is NU, which since their establishment have sought to develop a more inclusive and friendly conception of Islam. In addition, there is also PERSIS which although often described as a puritanical Islamic organization, is also known for its *tajdid* (Islamic reform and modernization) movement and has played a significant role strengthening moderate Islam in Indonesia (Anas et al., 2019; Elwatis, 2022; Federspiel, 2002).

In addition to their engagement in social and religious affairs, these two organizations also place strong emphasis on the development of education in Indonesia by managing thousands of schools, *madrasas*, and Islamic boarding schools ranging from primary to university level, spread throughout Indonesia (Azra, 2006). Tan (2011) states that schools under these organizations can be categorized as inclusive, progressive, and modern, where the educational they employ is rooted in educational traditions rather than indoctrination.

Therefore, based on the above discourse, this study aims to critically examine how critical thinking, as a core component of inclusive, progressive, and modern education, is understood and implemented by teachers in religious education subjects in primary

schools affiliated with NU and PERSIS in West Java province, Indonesia. Furthermore, this study also seeks to explore how ideological and educational orientations of these two Islamic organizations influence the formation of teachers' understanding and the implementation of critical thinking in their respective primary schools, as well as to identify possible similarities and differences among them.

West Java was selected because it represents a melting pot of Islamic organizations with hybrid characteristics (Hasyim, 2024). Such a socio-religious landscape encourages Islamic educational institutions in this province to equip their students with strong argumentation and critical thinking skills as provisions for preserving identity and engaging with diverse thoughts. Nevertheless, Lanti et al., (2019) revealed that the Muslims in West Java demonstrate an ambivalent attitude toward the emergence of new Islamic da'wah movements, many of which are influenced by transnational Islamic forces. On the one hand, they describe themselves as being open to new ideas, as reflected in the Sundanese philosophy of life *"someah, hade ka semah"* (friendly, kind to guest). However, in the context of Islam, this openness applies only as long as these new ideas do not contradict the conservative values they uphold. This attitude creates a unique characteristic regarding how critical thinking is implemented in Islamic education in the province.

1.2 Research Questions and Objectives

Based on the explanation above, it can be concluded that teachers' perception constitutes a significant factor in determining the success of critical thinking instruction in religious education at the elementary level. How teachers foster students' critical thinking skill depends on how they perceive this competency. With this in mind, this study examines teachers' perceptions and practices in teaching critical thinking through the following research questions:

1. How do teachers in NU and PERSIS primary schools perceive critical thinking in religious education?
2. How do teachers in NU and PERSIS primary schools foster critical thinking among students in religious education?
3. What factors hinder the implementation of critical thinking instruction in religious education in NU and PERSIS primary schools?

In line with the formulated research, this study aims to:

1. Identify the perceptions of teachers in NU and PERSIS primary schools regarding critical thinking in religious education
2. Examine the instructional strategies used by teachers in NU and PERSIS primary schools to promote students' critical thinking in religious education
3. Explore the inhibiting factors faced by teachers in NU and PERSIS primary school in implementing critical thinking instruction in religious education

1.3 Research Significance

This study provides empirical insights into how Islamic primary school teachers in West Java province, Indonesia, interpret, implement, and face challenges in fostering students' critical thinking skills within religious education subjects. This study is important because, although critical thinking has long been a major focus of national and global educational development, evaluations of how it is implemented in religious education classrooms at the primary level remain very limited, especially regarding how teachers' perception of critical thinking are influenced by the Islamic institutional affiliations under which they operate (in this case, NU and PERSIS). Thus, the findings of this study are expected to contribute to enriching perspectives on the discourse of critical thinking in religious education.

The study also has implications for the development of teaching strategies, curriculum design, teacher training programs, and Islamic education policies at the national and global levels. The findings can serve as a framework for developing a better Islamic education system in which critical thinking skills can be developed optimally while at the same time maintaining noble Islamic values. Through appropriate guidance and educational transformation, Islamic education can work as a religious education that promotes intellectual inquiry and social relevance. This transformation has the potential to become a strategic asset in advancing moderate, democratic, and pluralistic Islamic education in Indonesia, enabling it to serve as a model for Islamic education globally. With the vision of *Islam rahmatan lil'alamin,* Islamic education in Indonesia can become a model that successfully reconciles Islamic values with modernity and progress (Allès & Seeth, 2021).

CHAPTER II

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

This chapter presents a comprehensive theoretical and empirical review to serve as the scientific foundation of this study. The discussion is divided into two main sections, namely the literature review and theoretical framework. The literature review focuses on the concept of critical thinking and its position within Islamic religious education, the implications of the *ta'dib* and *tarbiyyah* paradigms on teachers' perceptions and practices of critical thinking, considering human development in teaching critical thinking, opportunities for teaching critical thinking in primary education, and previous studies on critical thinking instruction in Islamic primary schools in Indonesia. The subsequent section elaborates on the theory of critical thinking proposed by Robert Hugh Ennis, which functions as a theoretical framework of this study.

2.1 Literature Review

The literature review is essential for understanding the urgency and positioning of this study on critical thinking in Islamic primary schools within the context of existing research (Luft *et al.*, 2022). In addition, as stated by Maxwell (2012, as cited in Luft *et al.*, 2022), this section also implicitly demonstrates the contribution of the study to the ongoing academic discourse in the field.

2.1.1 The concept of critical thinking and its position in Islamic education

2.1.1.1 Definition of Critical Thinking

The origins concept of critical thinking is often attributed to Immanuel Kant or Socrates (Santos-Meneses, 2020). As for Ennis (2013), he argues that critical thinking was first introduced by John Dewey in the 20th century as development of the initial term he used, namely reflective thinking. Dewey defined critical thinking as the active, persistent, and careful consideration of an assumed belief or knowledge, by looking at supporting evidence and possible subsequent conclusions (Lombardi et al., 2022). In other words, according to Dewey, a critical thinker will not take everything for granted, but instead re-examines it, weigh the evidence, and think far ahead before making a decision. Meanwhile, Russel (1960, ac cited in Halpern, 2003) defined critical thinking as a learnable skill formed through a combination of attitudes, factual knowledge, and thinking skills used to evaluate something based on predetermined standards. In line with

this opinion, Ennis (1993) also defines critical thinking as a set of dispositions and skills that must be deliberately and systematically taught, trained, and integrated into the curriculum. Facione (1990) defines critical thinking through a set of criteria for critical thinkers, namely someone who has curiosity, open-minded, flexible, fair-minded, and well-informed, enabling them to understand various perspectives.

To date, consensus on the specific definition of critical thinking remains difficult to achieve due to its transversal nature, as it involves the coordination of various skills (cognitive, metacognitive, and dispositional) and is applied across disciplines and contexts (Ahern et al. 2019; Dumitru et al. 2018; Pasquinelli et al. 2021, as cited in Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023). However, based on an analysis of these definitions, it can be concluded that critical thinking is a contextual and pedagogical process rather than a fixed set of universal skills. In addition, researchers also found two keywords frequently used by scholars in defining critical thinking, namely "skills" and "taught". Therefore, by adopting expert definition and adapting it to the context of this study, critical thinking is understood as a planned instructional practice carried out by teachers to facilitate and develop students' abilities to question religious content, present reasons for claims, remain open to alternative perspectives, and provide justification for a religious beliefs or practices within the context of Islamic religious education in the classroom.

2.1.1.2 The Position of Critical Thinking in Learning

In the development of modern curricula, critical thinking functions not merely as additional material, but as a foundation and primary educational goal. According to Bloom's Taxonomy, a hierarchical classification system used to identify and order students' cognitive skills, cognitive abilities are divided into six levels: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. This taxonomy states that critical thinking skills are at the level of higher-order thinking skills (HOTS), which are achieved when students reach the levels of analyzing, evaluating, and creating (Anderson et al., 2001). Meanwhile, traditional religious education practices that are dominated by memorization-based approaches and lack cognitive depth often result in students understanding religious texts, concepts, and values superficially and failing to integrate them into real life (Demir, 2025). This condition causes religious education frequently be considered lead students to lower-order thinking skills (LOTS) level. Therefore, it is necessary to develop religious education learning that emphasize more on cognitive

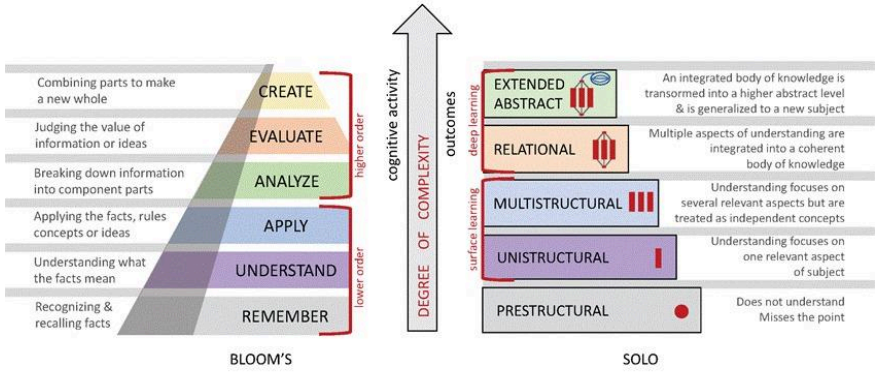
depth, encourage mental activity, deep reflection, comparison, synthesis, interpretation, and the integration of materials into real-life situations.

In addition to Bloom's taxonomy, there is also the SOLO Taxonomy (Structure of Observed Learning Outcome Taxonomy), a hierarchical model used to evaluate the quality of student learning outcomes based on observable aspects. This taxonomy divides the level of student understanding into five levels, divided into two main phases, namely the surface learning phase which includes prestructural, uninstrctural, and multi-structural understanding and the deep learning phase which includes relational and extended abstract understanding. Within the SOLO Taxonomy, students are considered to have reached the level of critical thinking when they demonstrate relational and extended abstract understanding (Biggs & Collis, 2014).

At the relational stage, students are expected to be able to connect various concepts into a coherent unit, for example by connecting Qur'anic verses to social life contexts, where religion is not understood as a separate concept, but as interconnected meanings. As for the extended abstract stage, students are expected to be able to transfer values into new contexts, such as comparing the concept of tolerance in Islam with practices in plural societies or adopting the Prophet Muhammad's ethics of communication when interacting on social media. Fundamentally, religious education has demanded the integration of *'ilmu, iman, and 'amal* (which reflects the relational stage) as well as the transfer of values into real life context (the extended abstract stage). However, in practice, religious education often prioritizes memorization and fragmented explanations causing students' abilities to remain at the unistructural or multistructural levels according to the SOLO taxonomy. A more detailed explanation of Bloom's and SOLO Taxonomies can be seen in figure 1.

Figure 2.1

Hierarchies of Bloom's and SOLO Taxonomies



Note. This figure shows the critical thinking position within the higher order thinking levels of Bloom's Taxonomy and at the deep learning levels of SOLO Taxonomy. From Bloom's & SOLO Taxonomy Hierarchies, by J. Brand, 2022. (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bloom%27s_%26_SOLO_Taxonomy_Hierarchies_%C2%A9_2022_by_Jessica_Brand_is_licensed_under_CC_BY_4.0.png). CC BY 4.0.

Although the emphasis on critical thinking has been promoted through educational and curricular reforms in many countries, religious education often remains peripheral in the discourse. This condition has strong implications for the lack of conformity between existing critical thinking framework with the complex and nuanced demands of religious education. Moreover, the marginalization of religious education in broader educational research contributes to the stagnation of religious pedagogy and the lack of innovative instructional models (Reza et al., 2024). Therefore, this study seeks to analyze more deeply the impact of this policy gaps in practice by digging up information directly from the main sources, namely teachers and religious learning practices in Islamic schools. The specific selection at the elementary school level that has distinctive cognitive development characteristics, along with the selection of three institutions with different religious ideological backgrounds, is expected to capture the complexity of the dynamics involved in implementing of critical thinking instruction and thus contribute to comprehensive research discovery.

2.1.1.3 Debates on critical thinking in religious education

Apart from the lack of intervention in the development of religious education curricula, obstacles to emphasizing critical thinking also come from the internal environments within religious educational institutions. In learning oriented toward the development of critical thinking, students are required to be accustomed to questioning, reasoning, evaluating evidence, and providing justification for a belief or action (Kagaba, 2025). On the other hand, religious education is still positioned as a normative and authoritative instructional process towards the transmission of absolute, unchanging, and transcendent truths and values (Abdullah, 2014; Umam, 2021). Therefore, the student-centered inquiry-based learning models are often considered as conflicting with doctrinal or cultural authority, thus facing a lot of resistance within religious institutions. This belief makes it difficult to balance critical thinking approaches and respect for tradition in the context of religious education. And in such conditions, teachers are often in a dilemma between choosing pedagogical innovations or meeting institutional demands, which

frequently results in choosing a safe approach despite limiting students' agency and critical involvement (Reza et al., 2025).

This conceptual tension raises a fundamental question: how can critical thinking that emphasizes reflective inquiry and evaluation be reconciled with religious education that is associated with the transmission of values and doctrines? In response to these challenges, the present study proposes an educational model that integrates inquiry-based strategies with the objectives of religious education. This study contributes to academic discussions concerning this subject matter by examining religious education in the context of modern discussions regarding critical pedagogy and by challenging the idea that critical thinking and religious education do not go hand in hand. The main objective of this study is to propose a novel model of religious education as an inquiry process.

2.1.2. *Ta'dib* vs *tarbiyyah*: Implications for teachers' perceptions and practices of critical thinking in religious education

Ta'dib and *tarbiyyah* constitute one of the main topics in contemporary Islamic educational discourse, especially in relation to the teaching of critical thinking (Supriyono *et al.,* 2025). These two Islamic educational philosophies are not only different in semantic discussions but also exhibit substantial gaps in their views of students as human beings, the nature of knowledge, the aims of education, and even teaching practices (Al-Attas, 1980; Sahin, 2013).

Al-Attas (1980) views *al-ta'dib* as the most appropriate term to define education in Islam. According to him, the term comes from the root word *addaba-yuaddibu*, which means educate, correct morals, punish, and discipline. This opinion is also echoed by Rosidin (2003) who defines *ta'dib* as the process of instilling, regulating, and directing human nature to noble morals with the aim of safeguarding students from flawed and misleading thoughts and deeds. Al-Attas (1980) assessed that the use of the term *Tarbiyyah* in defining Islamic education is inappropriate, as it tends to focus primarily on physical and material growth that it is far from the actual aims of education and has a significant risk of secularization. This understanding of *ta'dib* forms a teacher-led instructional model centered on instillation method (Supriyono et al., 2025). In the concept of critical pedagogy, this approach is referred to as the *'banking system'* where students function as repositories that passively receive deposits of knowledge from teachers (Freire, 2.000).

In contrast, Sahin (2013) argues that the term *Tarbiyyah* with its critical-dialogical method is more appropriately used to define Islamic education. He emphasized that in *Tarbiyyah*, education is not intended to mold students, but rather to facilitate the growth of their inherent potentials. Therefore, Sahin (2013) criticized *Ta'dib* approach which according to him has similarities with indoctrination and teacher-centred models that creates one-way communication and limits or even eliminates space for dialogue. In addition, he also argues that the aim of the *ta'dib,* which is to create good human beings, is often misconstrued as an excessive focus on instilling specific and rigid attributes that may endanger students' autonomy and self-development. This view is also in accordance with the characteristics of *tarbiyyah in* several classical Islamic sources, namely as a process of developing and guiding the body, intellect, and soul to prepare students to become mature and independent members of society *(Ath-Thabari)*, as an educational method that is easily accepted and applied in daily life *(Fathu'l Bari),* as well as an instructional approach that is enjoyable and engaging *(Al-Maraghi)* (Rosidin, 2003).

In summary, the differences in the educational approaches *of ta'dib* and *tarbiyyah* can be seen in the following table.

Table 2.1

Comparison of Ta'dib and Tarbiyyah Educational Approaches

Dimensions	Islamic Education Paradigm	
	Ta'dib	Tarbiyah
Instructional Approach	Instilling	Critical dialogue
Method	Teacher-centred	Student-centred
Objective	*Insan adabiy* (Human with good morals)	Human development; Flourishing

Note. From "Critical Islamic Educational Leadership: Investigating How Islamic Pedagogic Models Shape Leadership" by Supriyono, B. Sumintono, & L.N. Hakim, 2025, British Journal of Religious Education (https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2025.2542225). Copyright 2025 by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Ta'dib and *tarbiyyah* have meanings that are closely related to the Latin concepts of education, namely *educare* and *educere*. The term *educare* means "to train or shape," while *educere* means "to draw out." *Educare* views education as an effort to preserve and transmit knowledge with the goal of shaping children according to the image or model of their parents. In contrast, *educere* supports a student-centered approach, seeing education as preparation for a new generation to face future changes and create solutions to unknown problems. One side emphasizes memorization and shaping good workers, while

the other demands the ability to question, think, and create (Craft, 1984, as cited in Bass & Good, 2004).

The difference between the educational paradigms of *ta'dib* and *tarbiyyah* within Islamic education has significant effect on how teachers view critical thinking, either as a legitimate approach to learning or a threat to religious authorities. These perceptions, shape their instructional practices in the classroom. However, *ta'dib* and *tarbiyyah* should not be viewed as always incompatible. Rather, they are flexible and complementary approaches that can be practiced simultaneously to maximize students' intellectual, moral, and sipirtual development (Sya'adah et al., 2025). The integration of these two paradigms is considered the most important foundation for forming *insan kamil*, an individual who possesses broad knowledge, strong faith, and good moral character (Azzam et al., 2025).

The complexities of the paradigms of Islamic education also manifest themselves in the educational traditions of NU and PERSIS. Even though the educational traditions of NU are labeled as traditionalist, they aim at forming a moral character of the students through developing values of *tasamuh* (tolerance), *tawazun* (balance), *tawassut* (moderation), and *ta'addul* (justice) in a way that needs to be reflective, dialogical and contextual (Lembaga Pendidikan Ma'arif NU, 2024). The *Bahtsul masa'il*, which is a discussion of social and religious issues based on the *kitab kuning* (Islamic classical texts), promotes skills of critical and evaluative thinking and constitutes an essential feature of NU pesantren (Ansori, 2023). Furthermore, the application of *ta'dib* and *tarbiyyah* can be seen in PERSIS education, even though it is very scripturally oriented with respect to the Qur'an and Hadith, but at the same time promotes a culture of argumentation based on evidences that requires great analytical ability (Federspiel, 2001). More recently, PERSIS has explicitly identified critical thinking as one of the key competencies expected of its graduates (Persatuan Islam, 2024).

The problem of conceptualization of critical thinking in terms of Islamic primary teachers in Indonesia should not be considered homogeneously. Moreover, the educational theory of Islam of Indonesia should not be considered in terms of dichotomy between *ta'dib* and *tarbiyyah.* Therefore, even though most of previous studies focused their attention on general cognitive aspects of the problem of critical thinking, the current study will attempt to consider other important aspects of this problem as well.

2.1.3 Considering human development in teaching critical thinking

From the perspective of Islamic human development (often associated with the ethical and intellectual teachings of Ali bin Abi Thalib), education is structured into three main stages with each stage lasting seven years, namely ages 0-7 years as the phase of play, 8-13 years as the phase of dialogue, and 14 years onwards as the phase of community engagement. Success in one phase is believed to affect success in subsequent phases. According to this theory, dialogue (especially collaborative dialogue) is the most appropriate learning model for children in the middle childhood phase (8-13 years) as it facilitates students' ability to reason in Islamic manner and to triangulate their thoughts with Islamic principles. This method helps students get answers to the 'why' question that can strengthen their Islamic principles and practices (Memon et al., 2024). Ahmed's research (2014, 2019, as cited in Memon et al., 2024) found how the application of this method in *halaqah* (a traditional form of religious learning by group study) contributes positively to learning, identity formation, and character development of young Muslim learners.

Likewise, in cognitive development theory, Jean Piaget states that children aged 7-11 are in the concrete operational stage, during which they become more logical in thinking about concrete matters. At this stage, children begin to understand the concepts of classification, seriation, transivity, and reversibility (Marinda, 2020). Meanwhile, according to Lipman (1984) who is known as the pioneer of philosophy for children, he mentioned that children are natural philosophers who are already able to think as the thinking process should be. Therefore, he emphasized the importance of educational institutions in supporting this capacity by facilitating the development of children's analytical and reflective thinking potential from an early age.

Developing critical thinking from an early age contributes to the formation of *habits of mind* or long-term thinking disposition for children (Katz, 1993). This aligns with John Dewey's view in the book *How We Think* that reflective thinking is an active and continuous activity and thus can be said as an intellectual habit that needs to be cultivated through systematic learning process (Dewey, 1933). And in the context of 21st-century education, Costa and Kallick (2010) explain the need to shift curricula to improve critical thinking skills by moving students' orientation from knowing the correct answers to knowing how to behave when the answer is not immediately visible, from transmitting meaning to constructing meaning, and from external evaluation to self-assessment.

In this regard, Islamic education should adjust by shifting instructional orientation from originally focusing on content to focusing on process with the aim of fostering students' thinking habits. If students at the elementary level are accustomed to learning that emphasizes memorization with minimal space for analysis and justification, they risk maintaining reproductive learning patterns to the next level of education. Conversely, if critical thinking has been nurtured since primary school, it has the potential to build students' tendencies to continually question, evaluate, and look for valid evidence before accepting claims or performing religious actions.

In addition, Momen (2024) also highlights the importance of implementing the essence of Islamic education as holistic education to realize *al-insan al-salih;* individuals who are knowledgeable, as well as morally and socially responsible. He emphasized that Islamic education does not merely encourages academic achievement but also demands the development of other dimensions such as moral, physical, intellectual, social, and spiritual. Through holistic instruction, students are expected to not only learn and understand religious concepts cognitively, but also able to practice the values of empathy, justice, and integrity which are the core of Islamic teachings in their everyday lives. Similarly, Sahin (2013) argue that Islamic education that recognizes and respects human nature not only understands education as an academic activity, but also as a holistic and continuous character development process aimed at fostering self-awareness, religious maturity, and encourage the development of critical thinking skills oriented at strengthening divine and humanitarian values. Islamic education should not neglect human nature by only acknowledging one of students' potentials or imposing practices that are not in accordance with their fundamental structure (Ahdar et al., 2020, as cited in Momen, 2024).

Religious education at the elementary level occupies a highly crucial position, as it functions not only as a cognitive subject, but also as an element that shapes students' faith, morals and identity (Niskaromah et al., 2025). Therefore, it is necessary to have a relevant educational strategy, those that align with childrens' developmental stages and contextual needs, so that students can transform optimally and sustainably (Memon et al., 2024).

2.1.4 Opportunities for teaching critical thinking in primary education

Ennis' (1971) study of first- to third-grade students from various elementary schools in New York found that most children at this age were able to answer suppositional questions related to the principle of contraposition designed to measure basic logical ability. Conceptually, the findings challenge Jean Piaget's claim regarding stages of cognitive development, particularly his assertion that children are capable of abstract and complex thinking only upon reaching the formal operational stage, which begins at approximately 11-12 years of age. Ennis' study demonstrates that children's logical thinking abilities may emerge earlier than the phase proposed by Piaget, especially when they are provided with structured and appropriate instructional methods.

Thus, the study indicates the need for a paradigm shift in teaching critical thinking to children, from focusing on whether children are capable of critical thinking to how appropriate pedagogical instruction can be designed to enable the development of such abilities. These findings open a new area for discussion by pointed out that religious instruction at the primary school level remains predominantly knowledge based. However, primary education also presents a valuable opportunity to foster students' critical thinking skills when appropriate pedagogical approaches are employed.

In addition, Ennis (1987) argues that primary schools provide an ideal context for the development of critical thinking skills. This is because at this stage, teachers typically handle multiple subjects simultaneously, allowing critical thinking instruction to be easily integrated across all subjects. Additionally, since students are taught by the same teacher over an extended period, critical thinking instruction can be implemented consistently, continuously, and through diverse learning activities. Therefore, within the context of Islamic primary schools, teachers should not only develop critical thinking in general subjects but also in religious subjects in order to achieve a holistic education. In this way, students can develop reflective and contextualized religious understanding.

Nevertheless, such age-related and structural potential does not guarantee the successful teaching of critical thinking at the primary level. As suggested by Ennis (1971), Lombardi et al., (2022) also states that the effectiveness of critical thinking instruction is largely determined by how teachers design and evaluate the learning of this competency. Therefore, analysis of critical thinking instruction cannot be stopped to the domain of age or educational level alone. Particularly in the context of Islamic education, where critical thinking remains a contested issue, further exploration is needed to understand of how teachers perceive and integrate critical thinking into classroom practices.

2.1.5 Previous studies on critical thinking instruction in Islamic primary schools in Indonesia: finding gap

In the Indonesian context, various studies have identified a substantial gap between the concepts and goals of Islamic education and its implementation in religious educational institutions for children. Ferdiana (2025) regrets the approach to religious education for early childhood students which remains dominated by memorization and habituation of ritual practices without ensuring that children understand the meanings and values behind these activities. She called for a crucial shift in religious education toward more dialogical, reflective, and student-centered approaches to enhance children's critical awareness. Similarly, various studies have identified the lack of critical thinking in Islamic religious education in the primary school level. Anisa et al., (2025) revealed that Islamic education in primary schools is overly oriented toward cognitive enrichment, accompanied by insufficient teachers' readiness and limited instructional media. Meanwhile, Rohmiati (2025) highlighted inadequate infrastructure and teachers' limited competence in technological development, resulting in stagnant learning methods.

However, although these studies indicate that Islamic religious education for children in Indonesia remains teacher-centered and doctrinal, such findings do not fully represent the diversity of Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia. It should be noted that Islamic schools affiliated with NU and PERSIS, possess distinct educational characteristics, as each organization is shaped by its own ideological foundations, although both representing modern Islamic educational movements in Indonesia. Their approach to teaching differs not only in the extent to which they employ transmissive instruction but also in how they integrate Islamic traditions and the need to cultivate critical engagement with contemporary realities. Therefore, it is essential to adopt a differentiated approach to examining Islamic education in Indonesia by taking into account the ideological, historical, and pedagogical characteristics of each organization.

Previous studies offer various approaches to enhancing the critical thinking skills of students in Islamic elementary schools. The studies of Binsa and Putri (2024), Juhji et al. (2024), Hasna et al. (2024), Susanti and Munir (2022) and Alhamuddin and Bukhori (2016) examine the effectiveness of specific teaching methods in improving students' critical thinking skills. However, the limitation of these studies lies in their focus on general subjects, indicating a gap in research on religious subjects. Belina and Usamah (2024) and Rasyidi (2024) do examined critical thinking in religious education, however, similar to previous studies, they do not explore teachers' perceptions or the institutional

ideological backgrounds that significantly influence the implementation of critical thinking instruction in Islamic schools. In addition, most of these studies employ quantitative methods, which are less capable of capturing the complexity of implementation processes, research contexts, and classroom dynamics, resulting in limited explanations of how critical thinking practices are carried out in Islamic educational institutions.

Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by exploring critical thinking instruction through a multi-case study approach across two different educational institutions, namely Islamic primary schools affiliated with NU and PERSIS. This approach allows the researcher to examine the phenomenon of critical thinking across contexts, providing in-depth explanation through comparative analysis that highlights similarities and differences in teaching practices among the two institutions. This study examined critical thinking approach comprehensively, including identifying teachers' perceptions of critical thinking, its implementation in religious education, and the challenges that influenced it. The findings of this study contribute to enriching the discourse on critical thinking in the context of Islamic education and serve as a reference for the development of curriculum and teaching methods in Islamic primary education in Indonesia and beyond.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

Robert Hugh Ennis' theory of critical thinking serves as the primary theoretical framework of this study. It provides the conceptual foundation for formulating the research questions, guides the direction and focus of the study, and informs the analysis and interpretation of the data (Luft et al., 2022). Based on a solid critical thinking framework, this research is expected to produce scholarly contribution that are theoretically and methodologically sound.

2.2.1. Ennis' Theory of Critical Thinking

There are several indicators that make Ennis' critical thinking framework relevant to this study. First, Ennis (1987) highlights that critical thinking is a combination of dispositions and abilities, rather than merely a standalone cognitive skill. The emphasis on balance between dispositions and abilities is in accordance with the principles of Islamic education, which generally aim not only to enhance intellectual capacity but also to develop students' moral character. In addition, Ennis provides a comprehensive critical thinking framework within educational context such as teaching approaches and

assessment models that makes critical thinking as a skill that can be directly observed and investigated through teacher and student interactions in the classroom. A further explanation of Ennis' critical thinking theory is presented below.

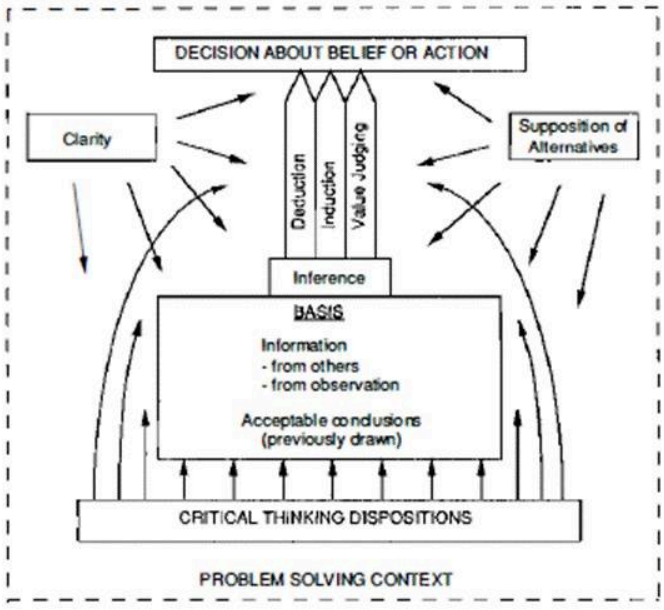
2.2.1.1 The Streamlined Conception of Critical Thinking

In contrast to Facione (1990), Paul & Elder (2006, as cited in Alsaleh, 2020), and Lipman (2003) who emphasized critical thinking as a cognitive ability, Ennis (2011) defines critical thinking as "... reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do" (p. 5). For Ennis, critical thinking is not merely cognitive skills, but a reflective thinking process oriented toward action, enabling individuals rationally to decide what to believe and do. This definition represents a development of John Dewey's (1993) concept of "reflective thinking", which defined as "... active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (p. 9).

Ennis illustrated his theory into a sketch (see figure 2.2). In this illustration, he describes that a person's beliefs or actions emerges when they encounter a stimulus or problem, which then leads them to reason to make a rational conclusion or decision (Ennis, 1991). In other sources, he more specifically states that an individual's tendency to think critically will not arise in vacuum but is influenced by the impulse of the environment that requires it (Ennis, 1996; 2011). Furthermore, research by Santos-Meneses (2020) found that an individual's critical thinking is shaped by their cultural and sociopolitical environment. Therefore, in the context of Islamic education, students' critical thinking disposition can be formed by the classroom climate as well as broader educational elements, such as the Islamic organizations affiliated with their schools. By examining the phenomenon of critical thinking in Islamic primary schools with different institutional backgrounds (NU and PERSIS), this study aims to explore how differences in ideology and educational traditions among these three Islamic organizations shape the culture of religious learning and students' critical thinking within their educational environment.

Figure 2.2

A Streamlined Conception of Ennis's Critical Thinking Theory.



Note. From "Critical Thinking: A Streamlined Conception," by R. H. Ennis, 2011, *Inquiry: Critical Thinking Across the Disciplines*, *26*(2), p. 7 (https://education.illinois.edu/docs/default-source/faculty-documents/robert-ennis/ennisstreamlinedconception_002.pdf).

In addition, the sketch also explains that in the decision-making process, a critical thinker has two main characteristics, namely ensuring "Clarity" and "Supposition of Alternatives" which means that they master the situation at hand and remain open to various possibilities. Through these tendencies, Ennis (1991) argues that a critical thinker can produce decisions that are justifiable and worthy of dissemination.

This concept further strengthens the relevance of Ennis' theory to this study. In the context of religious education, critical thinking is often considered a sensitive topic and is frequently misunderstood as criticism of religious authority or scepticism toward religious teachings (Jarmer, 2024). However, in Ennis' framework, critical thinking was developed to examine the reasons and basis of beliefs or actions to ensure their validity. Therefore, when applied to Islamic education, this concept of critical thinking is useful in shaping students into a generation of *tafaqquh fid-dien*, who not only memorized but also develop a deep understanding of religious teachings and are able to apply their values in everyday life (Rizki & Aripin, 2025).

2.2.1.2 Taxonomy of Critical Thinking

Similar to Facione (2013), Ennis (1987) conceptualizes critical thinking within a taxonomy consisting of a set of dispositions and abilities that contribute to each other in developing students' critical thinking (McLean, 2005). According to the Delphi report, which reflects the consensus of the American Philosophical Association's on critical

thinking, combining both skill and disposition dimensions is one of the key indicators of a sound critical thinking concept (Facione, 1990). Ennis (1996) defines disposition as attitudes that a critical thinker must possess, as well as being the foundation for them to do critical thinking in both academic and social context. Through these dispositions, he highlights the role of critical thinking as an ethical and responsible intellectual action in deciding beliefs or actions (Ennis, 1996; 1987; Facione, 1990). These dispositions include;

1. Truth-seeking: A concern for forming accurate beliefs and making sound decisions based on appropriate justification. This disposition includes being open-minded to various alternatives, basing beliefs on evidence, being well-informed, and respecting others' perspectives.
2. Intellectual honesty: Conveying arguments honestly, clearly, and precisely. This disposition includes conveying statements clearly and accurately, staying relevant to the topic, complementing claims with justification, providing comprehensive consideration of a context, and being reflective about one's own beliefs.
3. Intellectual empathy: Valuing the dignity and worth of every individual. This disposition includes a willingness to listen and try to understand others' viewpoints or reasoning, avoiding belittling or intimidation, and considering the impact of their arguments and decisions on others' well-being.

The second taxonomy consists of a set of skills that a critical thinker must possess which he calls *abilities* (Ennis, 1996; 2011). Ennis (2011) categorizes critical thinking skills into five major groups with several indicators;

1. Basic clarification;
    a. Focusing on the core issue under discussion
    b. Identifying the structure of arguments and analyzing their relationships
    c. Not taking information for granted; posing questions or statements to clarify arguments
2. Bases for a decision;
    a. Considering the credibility of sources
    b. Evaluating the validity and accuracy of observational reports
    c. Engage prior validated knowledge
3. Inference;
    a. Drawing conclusions logically and ensuring their consistency with the premise (deduction)

b. Drawing conclusions from available data (induction)
c. Considering ethical and value-based aspects in making and assessing a decision

4. Advanced clarification;
   a. Using clear and unambiguous terms
   b. Able to identify implicit statements or facts
   c. Suppositional thinking: evaluating arguments objectively even when they conflict with personal beliefs
   d. Integrating dispositions and abilities in the decision-making process

e. Auxiliary abilities;
   a. Thinking systematically by following all stages of the problem-solving process, understanding and regulating one's own thinking, and using a controlled critical thinking guide (e.g., checklists)
   b. Sensitive to others' feelings and abilities
   c. Communicating arguments effectively; clearly, recognizing fallacies, providing appropriate responses to others' statements

2.2.2 Pedagogy of critical thinking

Critical thinking is not an innate skill but must be taught through a systematic and well-planned educational process in order to develop optimally within individuals (Ennis, 1987; Gelder, 2005; Perkins & Solomon, 1989; Halpern, 1999, as cited in Alsaleh, 2020). For this reason, scholars, including Ennis, have formulated comprehensive frameworks for teaching critical thinking in educational institutions, which can serve as guidelines for integrating critical thinking into the curriculum and implementing it effectively in classroom practices.

2.2.2.1 Approaches to teaching critical thinking

Ennis (1989) divides critical thinking instruction into four approaches; the general, infusion, immersion, and mixed approach. These approaches are categorized based on the extent to which critical thinking principles are explicitly taught within subjects (Bensley & Spero, 2014). The four approaches are described as follows.

1. General Approach: Critical thinking is taught as a separate subject, distinct from other school subjects. In this approach, critical thinking principles such as disposition and abilities are taught explicitly with the aim of developing students' critical thinking skills (Ennis, 1989; Bensley & Spero, 2014).

2. Infusion approach: Similar to the general approach, the principles are also taught explicitly. However, in this approach, critical thinking instruction is integrated into other subjects, where students are encouraged to think reflectively and deeply in specific topics (Bensley & Spero, 2014; Saeger, 2014).
3. Immersion approach: Students are taught to think critically through activities within specific subjects without being explicitly informed about the rules or principles of critical thinking they use (Bensley & Spero, 2014). According to Ennis (1989), through this approach, students may not fully understand what critical thinking is and therefore may struggle to apply it into their daily lives.
4. Mixed approach: This approach is considered a combination of the general approach and either the infusion or immersion approach (Ennis, 1989; Saeger, 2014). In this approach, critical thinking dispositions and abilities are taught explicitly in certain parts of a subject (Bensley & Spero, 2014).

Various studies concluded that students who receive critical thinking instruction interventions demonstrate higher critical thinking ability scores compared to control groups that do not recieve (Hitchcock, 2019). Among the various approaches, Abrami *et al.,* (2015, as cited in Hitchcock, 2019), through their meta-analysis, found that explicitly teaching the rules and principles of critical thinking is the most effective method for significantly improving students' critical thinking skills.

2.2.2.2 Teaching Methods

In addition to Ennis's instructional approaches, various studies specifically identify several teaching methods that can be used to foster students' critical thinking skills, including;

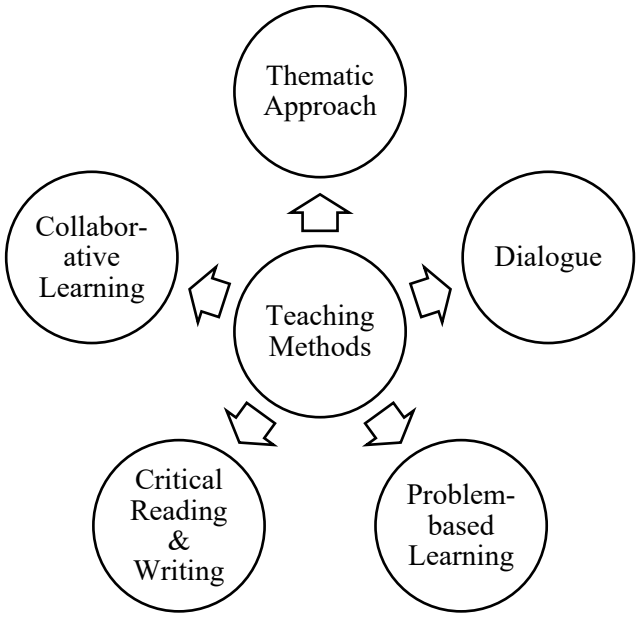
1. Thematic: integrating various subjects into one major theme that is relevant to the real lives of students. In the context of religious education, this approach can be done by integrating Islamic principles with general knowledge so that students not only understand concepts separately, but they are able to relate them into a coherent whole (Sulhan, 2025).
2. Dialogue: often referred to as the Socratic model, this approach requires students to actively engage in questioning, discussions, or debate within the classroom. In critical dialogue, discussions typically involve collectively examining a problem, either in groups or by the whole class, orally or in writing, and either face-to-face or

through online platforms (Abrami et al., 2015; Taylor, 2002 as cited in Alsaleh, 2020).

3. Problem-based Learning: involves students as active subjects or problem solvers in addressing real-world issues within their environment. This approach has strong relevance to Islamic principles such as *ijtihad,* deliberation, and righteous action, as it encourages students to think analytically, collaborate, and make decisions that lead to beneficial outcomes (Arifin, 2020, as cited in Sulhan, 2025; Pitchers & Soden, 2000 as cited in Alsaleh, 2020).
4. Critical Reading and Writing: Although considered a traditional method, reading and writing are regarded as highly effective strategies for developing students' critical thinking skills. Reading can improve students' critical thinking when conducted analytically, i.e., students are encouraged to identify a claim, evaluate evidence, detect bias, and assess the validity of an argument within a text. As for writing, it promotes critical thinking when carried out in an argumentative and analytical manner. Through this method, students are trained to formulate claims, provide evidence-based reasoning, consider alternative perspectives, and draw logical conclusions (Ennis, 1993; Alsaleh, 2020).
5. Collaborative Learning: Students with similar levels of ability are grouped together to work collaboratively toward a shared goal. This approach enables students to develop understanding, integrate knowledge and experience, receive peer feedback, stimulate thinking, and gain diverse perspectives (Gokhale, 1995).

Figure 2.3

Critical Thinking Teaching Methods



Although there have been many studies describing various teaching methods that can be used to enhance students' critical thinking skills, their implementation in the field still faces many challenges (Zondo, 2026; Aqeel et al., 2025). A thematic literature review study on the implementation of critical thinking activities in education published from 2019 to 2024 found three main challenges in teaching critical thinking to students, namely inadequate teacher training, insufficient resources, and resistance to moving away from traditional teaching methods (Daulika et al., 2025).

In addition to instructional approach, Ennis (1993) also provides an assessment framework to evaluate students' critical thinking abilities which he classified into three groups; a). performance-based assessment (e.g. open-ended questions, problem-based tasks, argument evaluation, etc.), b). contextualized assessment (e.g. assessing how students make decisions or solve problems in real life situations), and c). multiple instruments (e.g. essay writing assignments, behavioral observation, evaluating students' responses during discussions, in-depth interviews, portfolios, etc.). According to Ennis, there is no perfect assessment approach, so teachers are encouraged to use multiple instruments to ensure more reliable assessments.

A systematic and comprehensive nature of Ennis's framework in the educational domain is the primary reason why this concept is adopted as the theoretical framework of this study. The components of critical thinking instruction described above serve as a guide for the researcher in understanding how teachers in Islamic primary schools perceive and implement critical thinking in classroom practice, without negating the possibility of emerging findings from the field.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODS

A detailed explanation of the methodology used in this study is presented in this chapter. The discussion begins with the selection of interpretivism as the paradigm, a qualitative approach, and a multiple-case study as the research design. It is then followed by a discussion of the research setting and subjects, data collection techniques, data analysis techniques, as well as various trustworthiness indicators used to ensure the quality and credibility of this study. Each component chosen is based on and supported by various relevant literature sources. Through this section, it is expected that the research process can be understood logically and that the results can be methodologically justified.

3.1. Research Methodological Framework

3.1.1. Interpretivist Paradigm

According to Hudson and Ozanne (1998), within the interpretivist paradigm, truth (reality) is not understood as something singular and objective, but rather as the result of dynamic and varied collective understandings that are strongly influenced by the backgrounds, experiences, and contexts of research participants. In simple terms, according to this paradigm, knowledge is subjective and contextual, and its formation is strongly influenced by how individuals interpret it based on their own experiences. Another characteristic of this paradigm is explained by Marisi Tambun et al. (2024), namely its ability to provide deeper analysis of aspects that cannot be optimally explained through numbers or purely empirical research.

Thus, this paradigm is suitable to be adopted in this study because, as explained in Chapter Two, Critical Thinking is a concept that is not fixed or universal, but can be understood and practiced differently depending on the experiences, contexts, cultures, and even the socio-political environments of the individuals who use it (Robert H. Ennis, 1996, 2011; Santos-Meneses, 2020). Therefore, this paradigm is relevant to serve as both a guide and an analytical lens for understanding the diversity of perceptions and the implementation of critical thinking among teachers from different educational institutional backgrounds.

3.1.2. Qualitative Approach

There are several key characteristics of qualitative research that served as considerations for selecting this approach in this study. These include the aim of identifying the understanding of individuals or groups regarding social or human issues (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), data analysis using inductive methods while still allowing the possibility of employing a hybrid model (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and the use of open-ended questions and responses to generate rich data in the form of words (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This study aims to explore how teachers perceive Critical Thinking in the context of religious education in elementary schools, a topic that has rarely been studied. Referring to Leavey (2017), this approach is referred to as an exploratory approach, which functions to bridge knowledge gaps in topics that are still under-researched by presenting different perspectives and thus generating new and up-to-date insights. In addition, this study also employs a hybrid data analysis technique in which the Ennis framework of critical thinking is used as a deductive code, while the researcher remains open to themes that emerge inductively from the data. Furthermore, the questions used in this study are explanatory in nature, as each research question begins with the words "how" and "what," which facilitate participants in explaining their views openly in the form of narratives rather than numbers (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

3.1.3. Multiple - Case Study Design

This study employs a multiple-case study, which is a research design in which an issue is examined across several different locations, or conversely, various issues are investigated within a single location (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In line with this definition, this study adopts a multiple case study design because it examines the issue of critical thinking in two schools with different contexts, namely primary schools affiliated with NU and PERSIS. These two organizations have different religious ideologies and educational orientations (Al-Ansi et al., 2023; Hasyim, 2019). Therefore, according to Creswell and Poth (2018), such conditions enable researchers to generate diverse perspectives on the issue being studied.

NU is known as a traditionalist and syncretic Islamic organization, with its *manhaj* (approach to Islamic thought and practice) known as "Islam Nusantara" (archipelagic Islam), which represents an alternative way of practicing religion by using local cultural approaches to counter the influence of rigid and radical groups (van Bruinessen 1994, as cited in Hasyim, 2013; Nubowo, 2023). It is this ideology that ultimately shapes the

orientations and pedagogical traditions of the educational institutions under their auspices. NU education focuses on strengthening the values of Aswaja *(ahlus sunnah wal jama'ah),* with an emphasis on developing students' *adab* and moral character in accordance with the values of *wasatiyyah*, with the aim of forming moderate and tolerant learners (Lembaga Pendidikan Ma'arif NU, 2024).

Meanwhile, PERSIS is recognized for its modernist movement emphasizing *tajdid* (renewal) and the purification of Islam. The organization aims to encourage Muslims to return comprehensively to the pure teachings of the Qur'an and sunnah by employing a rational approach. PERSIS education tends to have a textual-normative orientation. This is because they believe that the truth of reason is relative, whereas the Qur'an is absolute; therefore, rationalization is used in order to properly understand the teachings of the Qur'an and hadith (Anas et al., 2019).

The involvement of multiple locations in this study is based on Yin's (2016) explanation of "theoretical replication" in the multiple case studies discussion. According to him, literal replication functions to obtain similar findings in comparable cases with the aim of strengthening the issue being studied. In contrast, in theoretical replication, researchers deliberately select different cases based on certain considerations to produce different findings. In the context of this study, primary schools affiliated with NU and PERSIS were selected because they have different ideological orientations, epistemological perspectives, and pedagogical practices. NU educational institutions tend to use a traditional-cultural approach, while PERSIS education emphasizes a scripturalist-textual approach. Therefore, these two institutions were selected to explore insights into how religious ideology influences teachers' perceptions and practices of critical thinking instruction in Islamic primary schools, as well as to investigate the possible similarities and differences that arise from it.

3.1.4. Researcher Positionality

As discussed in the previous section, the interpretivist paradigm views individuals' backgrounds and experiences as significant factors that shape how they interpret reality (Hudson & Ozanne, 1998). Furthermore, Foote and Bartell (2011, as cited in Holmes, 2020) argue that a researcher's background may influence the data collection process, the relationship between the researcher and participants, and the interpretation of research findings. Therefore, it is important for researchers to disclose their positionality in a study.

In this study, the researcher occupied an insider position in one of the research sites, namely the PERSIS elementary school. This was because the researcher had previously worked as a teacher at the school for two and a half years before conducting this study. This experience provided the researcher with a deeper understanding of the school's learning culture and Islamic education curriculum. However, the researcher assumed an outsider position in relation to the NU elementary school, having had no prior experience with its educational traditions or learning culture.

To mitigate potential risks arising from this imbalance, including interpretive bias in the form of over-rapport with the PERSIS elementary school and under-interpretation of the NU elementary school, the researcher developed equivalent interview questions for both groups of participants, conducted member checking, and regularly discussed the data interpretations with research supervisors who had no affiliation with either institution as part of the peer debriefing process (Ahmed, 2024).

3.1.5. Researcher Reflexivity

Reflexivity is a process of *continuous self-critique and self-appraisal* that encourages researchers to consciously examine how their experiences, assumptions, and positionality may influence every stage of qualitative research (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). This process is not intended to eliminate researcher subjectivity, rather, it aims to acknowledge, evaluate, and transparently manage the influence of the researcher's positionality throughout the research process.

Being an insider at the PERSIS school not only facilitated communication with participants and provided greater access to relevant information but also enabled the researcher to interpret teachers' perceptions and instructional practices more comprehensively by relating them to the school's culture, the organization's ideology, and other relevant contextual factors. In contrast, as an outsider at NU school, the researcher encountered greater challenges in establishing close communication with teachers, resulting in more limited access to contextual information. To develop a comprehensive understanding of the teachers' perspectives and instructional practices, as well as their relationship with NU values, the researcher needed to ask more clarifying questions, explore insights about *Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah (Aswaja)* values, and continually verify the meanings underlying the instructional practices observed in the classroom. Through this process, the researcher came to realise that several instructional

practices which initially appeared to be ordinary classroom activities were, in fact, manifestations of the organizational ideology underpinning the school.

Being aware of these differences in positionality also prompted the researcher to engage in continuous reflexive practice throughout the processes of data analysis and interpretation. The researcher consistently questioned whether the interpretations being developed genuinely emerged from the empirical data or were influenced by the researcher's position as either an insider or outsider within the research settings. To minimise potential interpretive bias, the researcher repeatedly revisited the interview transcripts, observation notes, and other supporting documents, as well as conducting regular discussions with the research supervisor. These activities served as a form of critical reflexive dialogue through which the researcher's assumptions were continuously examined, ensuring that the interpretations remained grounded in the empirical evidence rather than the researcher's prior assumptions.

3.2. Research setting and subjects

3.2.1. Selection of the place

By referring to the concept of theoretical replication proposed by Yin (2016), this study focuses on examining critical thinking instruction in two primary schools with different Islamic ideological backgrounds, namely Islamic primary schools affiliated with NU and PERSIS located in West Java Province, Indonesia. In addition to being the province with the highest number of primary schools in Indonesia (Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Jawa Barat, 2026), West Java was selected as the research location because it has a strong Islamic educational ecosystem, as it serves as a center for the movements of various Islamic organizations that consider education as one of their main areas of development. Among these Islamic organizations, PERSIS remains one of the earliest-established organization and continues to operate primarily in West Java, as well as NU, which began its activities in this province in 1926 (Sujati & Thohir, 2025; Federspiel, 2001).

The Ministry of Religious Affairs (2024) also highlights the central role of West Java in the implementation of Islamic education in Indonesia, as the province is recorded as having the largest number of Islamic educational institutions in the country, including 12,841 *pesantren*, 33,199 *madrasah diniyah*, and approximately 25,340 Qur'anic educational institutions. Out of the large number of pesantren, nine thousand of them are claimed to be affiliated with NU, while 756 institutions are owned by PERSIS.

Specifically at the primary level, there are currently 12 primary schools officially under the auspices of LP Ma'arif NU and 82 primary schools under PERSIS in West Java (Lembaga Pendidikan Ma'arif NU PBNU, n.d.; NU Online Jawa Barat, 2023; Pimpinan Wilayah PERSIS Jawa Barat, 2025).

Based on the foregoing discussion, it can be concluded that West Java constitutes a site of strong interaction among NU and PERSIS schools within a dynamic socio-educational context, making it an ideal setting for a comparative study of critical thinking instruction across different strands of Islamic educational ideology.

In order to be able to justify the appropriateness of the research sites based on the aims of the research, the two institutions selected had been chosen through purposive sampling. According to Patton (1990), this technique is appropriate for obtaining richer information. The criteria for selecting the research sites include: a) being officially registered with the Ministry of Religious Affairs or the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education; b) being directly under the auspices and management of the NU organization and the PERSIS organization; c) implementing religious education that refers to the national education curriculum, namely the Deep Learning curriculum, as well as the organizational curricula, namely the *Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah An-Nahdliyyah* Curriculum developed by the NU Ma'arif Education Institution for NU school and the PERSIS Curriculum developed by the *Tarbiyyah* Division for PERSIS school; d) having been established for at least five years; e) implementing critical thinking learning; and f) being willing to be involved and participate in the research in accordance with qualitative research considerations and ethical standards.

Based on these criteria, the following two institutions were selected as the research sites for this study.

3.2.1.1 NU Primary School

Although the NU educational system is often associated with traditional and community-based pesantren, this madrasah presents a more modern impression. Located in a rural area of West Java Province, Indonesia, the institution holds an A accreditation status and has the largest student enrolment among other Madrasah Ibtidaiyah in the district. In addition, the school employs 20 teachers, of whom 18 hold bachelor's degrees, one holds a master's degree, and one is currently pursuing a master's degree. In relation to welfare, apart from getting salary from the school, teachers get additional monthly allowances from the government as they have been certified as professional teachers.

According to the NU classification of education institutions, this madrasah fall into Category A; this means that it was established, managed and run by the NU organization itself through BP3MNU (Badan Pelaksana Penyelenggara Pendidikan Ma'arif NU), which works in direct coordination with the Ma'arif NU Education Institute. Likewise, in relation to teaching, apart from following the national curriculum, the madrasah also follows the curriculum of *Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah An-Nahdiyah (Aswaja)* developed by the Ma'arif NU Education Institute. The primary aim of this Aswaja curriculum can be identified in the vision of the school: "Cultivating piety, good character, academic excellence, and environmental awareness through Pancasila and Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah." In order to achieve the vision of the school, five mission statements and five educational goals have been formulated which include religion, character building, intellectual growth, environmental awareness, civic orientation, and methodology of teaching.

In addition to prioritizing the development of religiosity and character, the school also implicitly places considerable emphasis on enhancing students' critical thinking skills and improving teaching quality. This is reflected in several mission statements, namely: "To implement an educational process that produces graduates who excel in both academic and non-academic fields" and "To implement innovative and inspiring learning processes through various instructional approaches." Furthermore, the balanced orientation toward students' religious and intellectual development is evident in one of the school educational objectives: "To produce graduates who are competitive in both faith and piety (imtaq) and science and technology (iptek), and who are accepted into their subsequent schools."

3.2.1.2 PERSIS Primary School

Similar to the NU primary school, this PERSIS primary school is also a *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah* located in a rural area of West Java, Indonesia. The madrasah is part of a PERSIS pesantren foundation that oversees several levels of formal education, ranging from kindergarten to senior high school, as well as non-formal educational programs. According to the principal, this madrasah, which holds a "B" accreditation status, also has the largest student enrollment compared to other *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah* in the subdistrict. The school employs 23 teachers, of whom two hold master's degrees, fourteen hold bachelor's degrees, four are currently pursuing bachelor's degrees, and three are high school graduates. Among these teachers, only one has obtained professional teacher

certification and receives a government allowance, while the rest are still employed as honorary teachers.

One of PERSIS's educational objectives, namely to cultivate a generation that is *tafaqquh fiddin* with a critical-thinking graduate profile, is adopted literally as the school's overarching vision: "Striving to cultivate a generation that is *tafaqquh fiddin*, intelligent, skilled, and of noble character." The term *tafaqquh fiddin* (a person who possesses a deep understanding of religion) implicitly reflects an encouragement toward critical thinking in religious matters, as a *faqih* is understood not only as someone who has mastered religious knowledge in depth but also as someone who is capable of addressing problems within their social environment. Furthermore, the emphasis on critical thinking within the school's vision is reflected in the words "intelligent and skilled," which are further reinforced in one of the school's mission statements: "To develop students who are knowledgeable and competent in the fields of science and technology." This mission serves as a counterbalance to the dominant focus on the development of students' religiosity and character within the school.

3.2.2. Selection of the participants

This study involves multiple participants as data sources, consisting of teachers who serve as the primary informants due to their direct experience with the issue being studied, as well as students and the heads of the education divisions of the Islamic organizations as supporting informants, whose perspectives are used to enrich and confirm the main findings. Each participant was also selected using purposive sampling. The following provides a detailed explanation of the participant selection.

Primary informants: Six teachers were selected as the primary informants, comprising two male teachers and four female teachers. The selection was based on several criteria: 1). serving as homeroom teachers or teaching religious education in grade 3-6; 2). having at least one year of teaching experience at the respective institution; and 3). preferably being affiliated with the religious organization under which the school operated.

Supporting informants: Consist of two groups of participants: primary school students and the heads of the education divisions at the West Java provincial level from each religious organization overseeing the two schools. The student participants consist of eight individuals, with four students from each school. They were selected based on the following criteria: 1). Being enrolled in grades 3–6; 2). participating in religious

education classes taught by the interviewed teachers; 3). confident and capable of communicating and expressing their opinions, as recommended by their teachers; and 4). having obtained parental or guardian consent to participate in the study. Based on these criteria, at the NU primary school, interviews were conducted with fifth grade students comprising two male students and two female students. At the PERSIS primary school, interviews were conducted with one male student from third grade and three female students from the sixth grade. The heads of the education divisions included the Head of *Lembaga Pendidikan* Ma'arif (the NU Ma'arif Educational Institution) for the NU primary school and the Head of the Tarbiyyah Division of PERSIS for the PERSIS primary school.

The overview of the participants involved in this study can be seen in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1

Research Participants

Informants	Number of Informants	
	NU School	PERSIS School
Teachers	3	3
Students	4	4
Leaders of the organizations	1	1
Total		16

3.3. Technical Data Collection

One of the ways to enhance the credibility and validity of research findings is through the process of data triangulation (Meydan & Akkaş, 2024). In this study, data triangulation is implemented by using three data collection methods: semi-structured interviews, observation, and document analysis. The following section provides a more detailed explanation of these three methods.

3.3.1. Semi-structured interview

DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) define a semi-structured interview as an open dialogue process conducted by the researcher with participants to obtain data. In this method, the researcher usually prepares a set of structured questions but remains open to follow-up questions to deepen the findings or explore new insights (Megaldi & Berler, 2020, as cited in Ruslin et al., 2021). In the context of this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six teachers, eight students, and two heads of the education divisions from the religious organizations overseeing the schools.

Each semi-structured interview was conducted once per participant, with a duration of 30–60 minutes for teachers and the heads of the education divisions, and 15–30 minutes for students. Interviews were conducted individually, either online or offline according to a mutually agreed schedule. In addition, to ensure security of the interview process as well as ease in data analysis, the conversations were fully recorded using an audio recorder, and important points were documented through notetaking. The Interviews were conducted after obtaining consent from the participants and, in the case of students, from their parents or guardians.

To ensure the safety and comfort of students while participating in the interview process, the researcher implemented several additional protocols, including conducting interviews in a group format, with one group for each school, simplifying the language used to match children's level of understanding, validating the interview questions with the supervisor and elementary school teachers to ensure that no questions had the potential to make children feel pressured or uncomfortable, informing students that they were allowed not to answer certain questions and could decide to stop at any time, allowing them to be accompanied by the teacher, and conducting the interviews within a short duration to prevent student fatigue.

All interview questions were designed as open-ended, referring to the literature and carefully structured to address all research questions. The questions for teachers consisted of 12 items, generally covering their perceptions of critical thinking in religious education, strategies they use to promote critical thinking in the classroom, and the opportunities and challenges they face in implementing critical thinking instruction. Questions for interviewing teachers have been modified based on previous works of Eslami (2016) and Parlindungan (2019). The entire list of teacher interview questions is provided in Appendix 1.

The student interview consisted of nine questions designed to explore the participants' experiences in religious education, their participation in critical thinking activities, their perceptions of the learning process and their expectations regarding religious education. The questions were adapted from the work of Parlindungan (2019). The full list of student interview questions is provided in Appendix 2. In addition, the interviews for the heads of the education divisions consisted of 12 questions adapted from the Foundation for Critical Thinking (n.d.) and Fullan's theory of educational change (2007). In general, these questions addressed the organization's perception of critical thinking, the organization's role in promoting critical thinking instruction in its schools,

and obstacles to cultivating critical thinking within its educational environment. Appendix 3 depicts the full set of the interview questionnaire for the heads of educational division. Due to the exploratory nature of semi-structured interviews (Ruslin et al., 2021), the researcher was able to ask follow-up questions to further explore issues related to the study.

3.3.2. Observation

Following the teacher interviews, the next stage of the data collection process involved classroom observations. In observing religious education practices in the two primary schools, the researcher employed non-participant observation, a technique in which the researcher observes the setting without participating in the activity (Ciesielska et al., 2018). This stage was conducted with the aim of confirming the teachers' perceptions shared during the interviews and investigating the actual practice of critical thinking instruction in religious education classes.

The observation process was carried out over four weeks, with two weeks allocated for each school. The duration of each session followed the length of the lessons in each class, approximately 35–45 minutes. The observed activities included religious education lessons, whether from the Ministry of Religious Affairs or the respective religious organizations, in grades 3-6. Classroom observation focused on monitoring the components of teaching contained within Ennis's critical thinking framework, including approaches to teaching critical thinking, teaching methods and assessment. However, the researcher also remained open to the possibility of pedagogical aspects emerging outside Ennis's theoretical framework during the lessons. To ensure the effectiveness and consistency of this stage, the researcher adopted the observation instrument developed by Parlindungan (2019). The complete observation instrument can be found in Appendix 4.

3.3.3. Document Analysis

All types of documents, whether text-based or visual, in print or digital form, can serve as data sources in qualitative research as long as they are relevant to the research needs (Morgan, 2022). In this study, document analysis was conducted on the national religious curriculum, the curricula of religious organizations, school vision and mission statements, teaching modules, and student worksheets. The national and organizational curricula were analyzed to identify policy support for critical thinking. The school vision and mission statements were analyzed to determine the values underlying religious education practices in the schools and to identify whether there is an orientation toward

critical thinking. Student worksheets were analyzed to assess the extent to which religious education at the two schools has facilitated students' critical thinking activities.

The document analysis process in this study was conducted systematically, starting with selecting documents relevant to the research questions, repeated reading of the documents, thematic coding, and ending with the interpretation of document content in relation to the research questions. Overall, these steps were used to identify the extent to which the concept of critical thinking is oriented and constructed within Islamic elementary school documents. In addition, consistent with Bowen's (2009) explanation, this stage also aimed to examine the alignment between critical thinking instruction in official policies or institutional representations and its actual practice in the classroom.

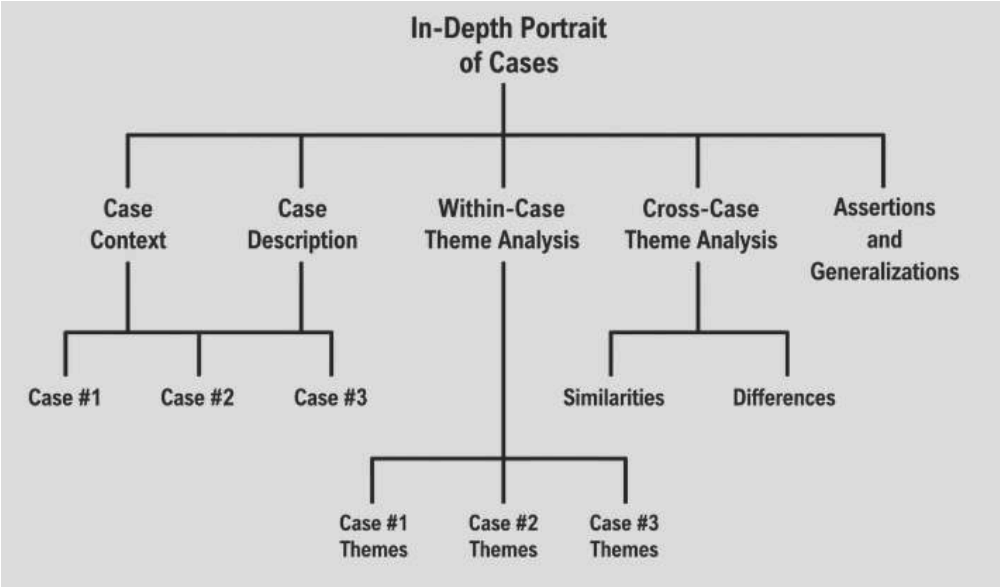
Documents analysis constitutes an essential component of the data triangulation process. It enables the researcher to examine documents produced by institutions or individuals, including archival records, thereby providing naturally occurring that complement and corroborate the findings obtained through interviews and other data collection methods (Chand, 2025). Document analysis also enhances the validity and credibility of qualitative research (Bowen, 2009). Through the integration of multiple data collection methods, qualitative research provides a comprehensive understanding of complex educational and social phenomena.

3.4. Data Analysis

The data collected through interviews, observation, and document analysis were analyzed using the multiple-case study comparative analysis approach proposed by Creswell and Poth (2018). The analysis was conducted in two stages: within-case analysis and cross-case analysis. While within-case analysis involved examining each case individually within its own context to identify patterns and develop and themes. Cross-case analysis was then conducted to compare and synthesize themes across cases. A complete overview of the analysis flow and the application of the theoretical replication principle in this study can be seen in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1

Diagram of Multiple-Case Study Coding Process



Note. From *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (4th ed., p. 292), by J. W. Creswell and C. N. Poth, 2018, Sage. Copyright 2018 by SAGE Publications, Inc.

3.4.1 Within-Case Analysis

To gain a comprehensive understanding of critical thinking instruction in each case, the data collected through all data collection processes were analyzed using a thematic approach. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), this approach allows researchers to identify, examine, and report patterns within the data. The thematic approach was conducted deductively, also referred to as a-priori, meaning that the data were categorized and interpreted based on the codes derived from the theoretical framework used (Bingham, 2023). In the context of this study, Ennis's critical thinking framework (1989, 1991, 1993, 1996, 2011) served as the theoretical lens, with its components used as the themes for analysis, including dispositions, abilities, teaching approaches, teaching methods, and assessment models.

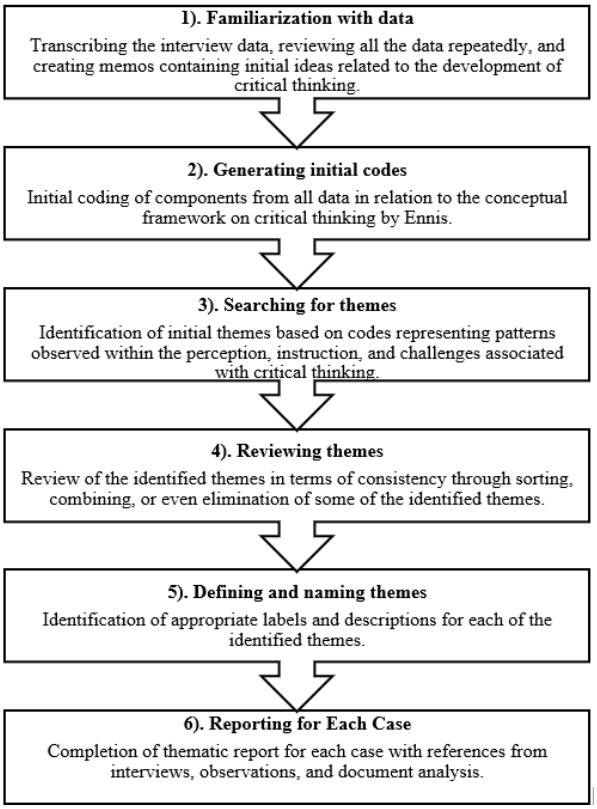
In deductive thematic analysis, although the data are categorized based on pre-existing codes from a theory, this method also allows researchers the opportunity to identify new codes or findings while reviewing the data (Bingham, 2023; Fife & Gossner, 2024). Therefore, in the context of this study, Ennis's theoretical framework is not applied rigidly; rather, it serves as an analytical tool that can be tested, supplemented, or modified based on empirical data findings.

Braun and Clarke outline six stages of thematic analysis: 1) familiarization with data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) writing the report (Ahmed et al., 2025). The following section

provides an explanation of the implementation of these thematic analysis stages in this study.

Figure 3.2

Six Stages of Deductive Thematic Analysis Based on Braun and Clarke



The data analysis process was conducted using Quirkos 3.1.0. This software facilitated an iterative and systematic coding process, allowing the researcher to organize, merge, and refine codes while generating simple visualizations of the coding structure throughout the analysis. In Quirkos, the inconsistent use of colors for identical codes made the coding reports more difficult to read. Furthermore, combining too many themes into a single cluster reduced the readability of code labels displayed on the canvas. To deal with these issues, the researcher manually reorganized the coding reports and revisited the original data files to verify and refine the coding structure, making this stage considerably more time-consuming. As a supplementary analytical aid, the researcher also used ChatGPT -5.5. to compare and cross-check potentially relevant themes that emerged from the data. However, all analytical decisions and interpretations remained the sole responsibility of the researcher. Additionally, to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the researcher regularly consulted the research supervisors throughout the data interpretation process.

3.4.2 Cross-Case Analysis

Following the completion of the within-case analysis, the researcher proceeded to the cross-case analysis, which involved examining similarities and differences across all cases (Miles et al., 2014). In this study, the patterns focused on themes related to teachers' views regarding critical thinking in religious education, the instructional strategies they employed to foster critical thinking, and the challenges and opportunities associated with its implementation in their respective institutions. In accordance with Yin's suggestion (2014, as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018) that tabular displays facilitate cross-case analysis in multi-case studies, this study employed Word tables adopted from the case-ordered effects matrix (Miles et al., 2014). The cross-case synthesis table is presented in Appendix 5.

An overview of the data collection and analysis techniques used in this study is presented in the following table.

Table 3.2

Data Collection and Analysis Techniques

No.	Research Questions	Required Data	Data Sources	Data Collection Techniques	Data Analysis Methods
1.	How do teachers in NU and PERSIS primary school perceive critical thinking?	1. Teachers' Perceptions of Critical Thinking in Religious Education at the Primary School Level 2. Islamic Organizations' Perceptions of Critical Thinking in Religious Education	1. Teachers 2. Heads of the Education Department of Each Islamic Organization 3. Islamic Organizational Curriculum Documents	1. Teacher Interviews 2. Interviews with the Head of the Education Department of Each Islamic Organization 3. Curriculum Document Analysis	Within-Case and Cross-Case Analysis Analyzed using Ennis's critical thinking taxonomy indicators
2.	How do teachers in NU and PERSIS primary School promote critical thinking in their teaching activities?	1. Teachers' Critical Thinking Instructional Strategies 2. Students' Experiences of Critical Thinking Instruction 3. Pedagogical Guidelines for Critical Thinking from Each Islamic Organization	1. Teachers 2. Students 3. Heads of the Education Department of NU and PERSIS 4. National Curriculum Documents and Islamic Organizational Curriculum Documents	1. Classroom Observation 2. Interviews with the Head of the Education Department of NU and PERSIS 3. Document Analysis	Within-Case and Cross-Case Analysis Analyzed using Ennis's teaching approaches and assessment models indicators

3.	What factors hinder the implement ation of critical thinking instruction in religious education at NU and PERSIS schools?	1. Information on the Factors Hindering Critical Thinking Instruction	1. Teachers 2. Head of the Education Department of the Islamic Organization 3. National Curriculum Documents and Islamic Organizational Curriculum Documents	1. Interviews 2. Document Analysis	Within-Case and Cross-Case Analysis Teacher competence, insufficient resources, and resistance to moving away from traditional teaching methods

3.5. Trustworthiness

For a qualitative study to be considered as having strong integrity and worthy of consideration by researchers and readers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017), there are several indicators of trustworthiness must be ensured, including credibility, authenticity, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Ahmed, 2024). The following section explains how these indicators are addressed in this study.

3.5.1. Credibility

The trustworthiness of the results of the qualitative research on the part of readers is largely based on the credibility of those results – the congruence between the findings and reality. As Creswell and Poth (2018) note, apart from data triangulation, credibility in qualitative research is achieved through building long-term relationships and engaging with the site. To achieve this, the researcher invested a considerable amount of time in this study, including more than two months to establish communication with the participants and one and a half months for field observation. In terms of data triangulation, as explained in the previous section, this study employs multiple data collection methods, namely semi-structured interviews, field observations, and document analysis. Furthermore, triangulation was also carried out by involving multilayered participants, including teachers who were provide in-depth information regarding their beliefs and experiences related to critical thinking, as well as students and educational leaders from each religious organization, representing the environment and culture that influence critical thinking practices in the classroom.

3.5.2. Transferability

To ensure transferability, this study provides comprehensive information regarding the research problem, its setting and characteristics, participant selection, and the research procedures, all supported by relevant literature. The thick description presented enables readers to assess the extent to which the findings of this study may be transferred to other broader contexts (Ahmed, 2024).

3.5.3. Dependability

According to Ahmed (2024), presenting detailed information about the methodology along with audit trail is essential to establish dependability or stability of findings across times and contexts. Such transparency also allows readers to systematically examine and evaluate all stages of the research process, thereby enhancing the transparency and credibility of both the process and the findings. Therefore, to ensure dependability, this study presents comprehensive documentation of all research stages from the beginning to the end, which includes the selection of methodology and its justification as explained in this chapter, as well as documentation of data collection process, interview transcripts, field notes, coding and other data analysis procedures, which are presented in the Appendix.

3.5.4. Confirmability

To ensure the objectivity of the findings, Ahmed (2024) emphasizes the importance of establishing confirmability through peer debriefing, member checking, and writing a reflective journal throughout the research process. To minimize bias, the researcher ensures that all research procedures were conducted under the guidance and approval of the research supervisor who is an expert in the relevant field. In addition, participants were asked to verify and revalidate the research findings, and the researcher maintained a journal documenting key field findings, as well as personal assumptions and reflections throughout the research process.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Several procedures were implemented to protect the rights, dignity, and well-being of teachers, students, and educational leaders of religious organizations as participants in this study. These procedures are categorized into informed consent, confidentiality and privacy, and a data management plan.

3.6.1. Informed Consent

All data collection procedures in this study were conducted only after participants voluntarily agreed to take part by signing an informed consent form provided by the researcher. As stated by Creswell and Creswell (2018), the informed consent includes information about the purpose and procedures of the study, as well as participants' right to withdraw at any time. As for students, informed consent was signed by their parents to indicate permission for their children's involvement in the study. Furthermore, to ensure that children could participate and respond consciously during the research process, and in reference to Flewitt (2005), the researcher also implemented informed assent by using simplified language appropriate for them.

3.6.2. Confidentiality and Privacy

To prevent potential negative consequences of the research for teachers, students, schools, and religious organizations involved, all data of this study are presented anonymously or pseudonyms as suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018). In addition, following Sumiak (2018), participants' comments are presented with careful consideration to ensure their identities cannot be recognized by the public.

3.6.3. Data Management Plan

Arifin (2018) highlighted the importance of maintaining data security, requiring specific procedures during data collection, storage, and disposal. In this study, there are two types of data produced, namely digital data and hard-copy files. To ensure confidentiality and security, digital data are stored in encrypted folders protected by password known only by the researcher. Hard-copy data are stored in a locked cabinet accessible only to the researcher. All data will be permanently destroyed once they are no longer required for academic verification purposes, within a maximum period of five years after the completion of the study.

CHAPTER IV
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter includes the findings and discussions regarding critical thinking instruction in religious education subjects in NU and PERSIS primary schools in West Java, Indonesia. The data was gathered using in-depth interviews of teachers, education division leaders of the two mentioned Islamic organizations, and students. To ensure triangulation, the researcher also conducted observations during the subjects Qur'an-Hadith, Aqidah-Akhlaq, Fiqh, and habituation program, as well as an analysis of the related documents in both institutions. The findings are discussed thematically according to research questions, which is; 1). NU and PERSIS primary school teachers' perspectives towards critical thinking in religious education, 2). Teachers' instructional practices in teaching critical thinking skills in religious education, and 3). Obstacles faced by teachers in teaching critical thinking in religious education subjects.

The discussion part consists of critical examination of empirical findings in relation to the theoretical framework and the literature to find out the underlying reasons of the patterns emerged, similarities and differences of the two institutions, and the implications of the findings to critical thinking pedagogies in Islamic religious education. The purpose of such arrangement is to ensure a clear and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

The following section presents the demographic data (see Table 4.1) of the teachers who served as the core participants in this study. All teacher names are pseudonyms.

Table 4.1

Teacher Demographic Information

Category	NU Primary School			PERSIS Primary School		
Teacher Name	Putra	Hana	Rina	Budi	Silvi	Dewi
Sex	M	F	F	M	F	F
Educational Background	Pursuing a Master's degree	Master's degree	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree
Teaching Experience (years)	12	11	6	7	5	4
Employment Status	Certified Teacher	Certified Teacher	Certified Teacher	Non-permanent Teacher	Non-permanent Teacher	Non-permanent Teacher

Teaching Role	Fiqh Teacher	Qur'an Hadis Teacher	Aqidah Teacher	Grade 6 Homeroom teacher	Grade 6 Homeroom teacher	Grade 6 Homeroom teacher
Organization Involvement	Member	Sympathizer	Sympathizer	Member	Member	Sympathizer

Note. All Names are Pseudonyms. Non-permanent teachers (Indonesian: *guru honorer*) are teachers employed outside the civil service system.

4.1 Findings

4.1.1 Teachers' Perceptions of Critical Thinking in Religious Education

4.1.1.1 NU Primary School Teachers' Perceptions

Teachers in the NU primary school held diverse views regarding the concept of critical thinking in religious education at the primary level. Nevertheless, their perceptions can generally be categorized into the following themes:

1. Higher-order thinking skills: active and productive reasoning
2. *Ilmu amaliyah*: knowledge actualized into action and moral conduct
3. Critical thinking as children's innate disposition (*fitrah*): guided thinking
4. Sanad-anchored criticality
5. Preserving tradition while remaining open to change

The following section provides a detailed explanation of these themes.

4.1.1.1.1 Higher-Order Thinking Skills: Active and Productive Reasoning

NU primary school teachers consistently defined critical thinking as a higher-order thinking ability in which students tend not to accept knowledge passively but instead engage in active and productive reasoning processes. This conclusion is based on the responses of all participants when asked about their definition of critical thinking and the characteristics of a critical thinker. Spontaneously, the teachers described critical thinking using expressions such as thinking deeply, asking questions persistently, and continuously seeking information.

> Critical thinking means that children think deeply. When there is information, they do not yet know or material they do not yet understand, they will continue asking about it. So, children do not simply remain silent; they ask questions and keep asking questions to the teacher. (Mrs. Rina, Aqidah Akhlaq Teacher, interview, May 13, 2026)

> In my opinion, critical thinking is higher-order thinking in which children continuously explore and seek information to expand their knowledge. (Mrs. Hana, Qur'an Hadith Teacher, interview, May 13, 2026)

Furthermore, another teacher stated that critical thinking occurs when students move beyond merely asking “what” and begin asking “why” a particular lesson is taught to them.

> Critical thinking is when students comment on what they are learning. “Sir, why do we have to perform *tahajjud* prayer? Sir, why does *tahajjud* have to be at night? Sir, why must it be done this way or that way?” So they do not simply accept what the teacher says; they also think about why it is being taught to them. (Mr. Putra, Fiqh Teacher, interview, May 17, 2026)

After providing this definition, the teacher further emphasized that while students should be willing to receive information from their teachers, they should also be encouraged to think more critically by asking why the material is being taught. Especially in the context of religion, he argued that this habit of asking "why" is highly crucial so that students understand the reasons behind every act of worship they perform and can verify the validity of its sources. Another teacher shared a similar understanding regarding the importance of this reasoning habit, emphasizing that is enables students to develop a deep understanding of religion and thereby avoid misguided teachings.

> Religion is the norm, yes, our rules of life, if children do not think critically or have good thoughts, they are afraid of carrying something that is not good. That's why in religion, yes, we have to think critically. (Mrs. Hana, Qur'an Hadith Teacher, interview, May 13, 2026)

Therefore, Mr. Putra, a teacher and vice principal, emphasized the importance of creating an open atmosphere in religious education classes so that students do not feel afraid to ask questions and express comments. He provided an example of how he always tries to appreciate every student who is willing to ask questions or share comments in class, regardless of whether the student says is right or wrong. According to him, this approach is necessary given that today's students have different characteristics from students in the past; they cannot be pressured, and teachers must adapt their teaching methods to the conditions of contemporary students.

Nevertheless, although all teachers agreed on the importance of critical thinking in religion, they appeared to hold different perceptions regarding the extent to which children can think critically in this domain. Mr. Putra, who is not only a teacher but also serves as an active board member in several NU organizations, he argued that children cannot think critically about *ilahiyyah* (divine matters). If they are to do, they must first be equipped with a solid foundation of tawhid. In this way, he believes that students will be able to exercise their critical thinking appropriately rather than engage in indiscriminate questioning that may undermine their faith in God.

> We cannot be critical without being guided by its fence *(tawhid)*. That is why Imam Al-Ghazali limited critical inquiry from entering divine matters. Once it enteres that domain, it becomes prohibited. (Mr. Putra, Fiqh Teacher, Interview, May 17, 2026)

In contrast with Mr. Putra, Mrs. Rahma and Mrs. Hana, who are NU sympathizers (supporting the ideology without being a formal member), allow students to think critically about any issue, including divine matters, as long as the questions are intended to deepen students' understanding and expand their knowledge.

> Critical thinking is allowed, there are no limits, as long as you question things that are useful, about knowledge, not negative things. (Ms. Rina, Aqidah Akhlak teacher, interview, May 13, 2026)
>
> In fact, we must be able to facilitate every child's question in my opinion. But yes, as long as it causes benefits. (Ms. Hana, Qur'an Hadith Teacher, interview, May 13, 2026)

This differing understandings regarding the boundaries of critical thinking in religion indicate that even within a single institution, the religious principles of the Islamic organizations that oversees the schools are not always internalized uniformly among teachers. In this case, the teacher who was actively involved in the organizational structure demonstrated a more rigid understanding of the organization's values, while teachers who were not structurally involved exhibited a more flexible interpretation.

4.1.1.1.2 *Ilmu Amaliyah* (Thought Actualized Through Action and Moral Conduct)

For teachers at the NU school, critical thinking should not stop at the cognitive level but should translate into daily actions and help in building the moral character of the students. According to them, this is the ultimate goal of critical thinking in religious education at their institution: to develop students with good moral. As Mrs. Hana described:

> Critical thinking is that your thinking can be applied into action or moral conduct. Thinking should make a person reflect upon how they should conduct themselves based on what they have thought about. (Ms. Hana, Qur'an Hadith Teacher, interview, May 13, 2026)

Mrs. Hana elaborated that critical thinking being complete when students are not only capable of thinking and communicating their ideas but also understand and implement the implications of those ideas to their daily actions. Furthermore, she clearly stated that ideally, critical thinking should end up in good moral character. That is, it should not remain at the level of thought but should manifest in students' actions.

This notion seems to be deeply entrenched in the organizational values of NU schools where the act, or what they refer to as *amaliyah*, is considered to be the ultimate aim of education in primary schools. As stated by the Head of the NU Education Division;

> The objective of religious education in NU primary schools is to give understanding and information about the Aswaja values. However, the main focus is the practice of amaliyah. Nowadays, there is an increasing emphasis on the experience learning and field work. Therefore, within NU, amaliyah takes the highest priority. (Mrs. Rahma, Head of the NU Education Division, interview, May 24, 2026)

The phrase, "However, the main focus is the practice of *amaliyah*," implies that in NU education, the practice of *amaliyah* holds a higher position compared to just understanding. According to Mrs. Rahma, in addition to responding to contemporary educational demands that encourage project and experiential learning, NU educators hold the belief that *amaliyah* is the ultimate aim of critical thinking, whereas the critical thinking itself serves merely as the path that leads to such practice. She further added that the *amaliyah* carried out in NU schools involves activities rooted in community traditions, such as *tawassul* (praying for teachers), congregational prayer in accordance with the Shafi'i school of thought, *qasidah*, *shalawat*, visiting the graves of saints, and other similar practices.

Furthermore, Mrs. Rahma said that *akhlaq* (moral character) constitutes the main result of critical thinking. She even emphasized that *akhlaq*, especially respect and proper conduct toward teachers, is the ultimate manifestation of critical thinking.

> In light of the realities we observe today, the critical thinking that we seek to cultivate in our children is not sufficiently reflected merely through knowledge, grades, or achievements. If a student has poor character toward their teacher, then their religion is lost and their knowledge is lost. This is one of the critical values that we seek to develop in our NU schools, namely khidmah toward teachers. (Mrs. Rahma, Head of the NU Education Division, interview, May 24, 2026)

The status of *Khidmah* or proper conduct and devotion toward teachers—as an indicator that ranks even higher than knowledge itself was also strongly emphasized by Mr. Putra. He repeatedly stressed the importance of respect toward teachers in the pursuit of religious knowledge in general, including within their institution. Among his statements were the following:

> Blessing (barakah) lies in khidmah. No matter how intelligent a student may be, if they do not maintain khidmah toward their teacher, their knowledge will not be blessed. (Mr. Putra, Fiqh Teacher, interview, May 19, 2026)

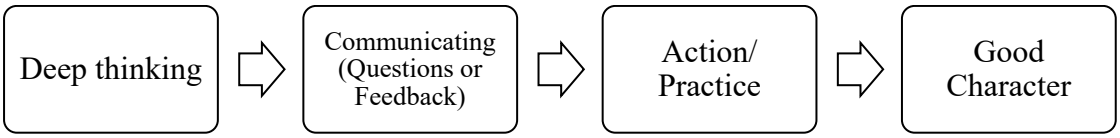
> There are students whose knowledge may be limited, but when their teacher is pleased with them, their knowledge becomes blessed; and the opposite is also true. (Mr. Putra, Fiqh Teacher, interview, April 25, 2026)

Based on the teachers' statements regarding the relationship between critical thinking and moral character, it can be concluded that within their educational context, the quality of knowledge is not evaluated solely in terms of its depth, but also by the extent to which that knowledge motivates individuals to engage in daily practice and cultivate good moral character, particularly toward teachers.

In summary, the ideal cycle of critical thinking according to the perspectives of NU teachers can be illustrated in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1.

The Critical Thinking Cycle from the Perspective of NU Teachers



4.1.1.1.3 Critical Thinking as Children's Innate Disposition (*Fitrah*): Guided Thinking

The teachers viewed critical thinking as part of children's *fitrah*, that is, a natural potential bestowed by God upon every child from birth. Therefore, they believed that teachers should not deny the existence of critical thinking within children but rather acknowledge, facilitate, and guide it.

> Critical thinking is part of a child's fitrah. If it is a child's fitrah, then they will naturally think and ask questions. (Mr. Putra, Fiqh Teacher, interview, May 19, 2026)

The teachers believed that educators should facilitate students' critical questions. They argued that when a teacher ignores or dismisses a child's curiosity, they are, in essence, neglecting one of their fundamental responsibilities as an educator. This perspective was expressed by Mrs. Hana as follows:

> If a child thinks at a higher level, perhaps that is an advantage because their way of thinking differs from others. We may consider it unusual for children to ask such questions, but it may simply be a special ability that the child possesses, and therefore we should respond to it. (Mrs. Hana, Qur'an Hadith Teacher, interview, May 13, 2026)

Mrs. Hana also emphasized the importance of developing children's critical thinking. Nevertheless, she further explained that the teaching process should be adjusted to children's developmental stages.

> In my opinion, critical thinking should indeed be implemented, but gradually. The critical thinking of first-grade students will certainly differ from that of second-, third-, fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade students, and the material should also differ. It is obviously not at the same level as adult thinking because they are still children. (Mrs. Hana, Qur'an Hadith Teacher, interview, May 13, 2026)

However, although all teachers agreed on the importance of facilitating children's critical thinking abilities, they consistently emphasized that facilitating does not mean allowing children's thinking to develop without direction. Teachers are expected to guide students' thinking by providing a strong foundation so that their critical thinking develops in the right direction. Mr. Putra illustrated the importance of establishing a foundation in Fiqh for students:

> For example, earlier I explained the concept of *niyyah* (intention). The verbal articulation of intention is recommended *(sunnah),* but the essence of intention lies in the heart. Therefore, when children grow older and encounter other explanations, they will not depart from that foundation. Primary school is a very important stage because it provides the foundation that enables them to think critically later on. They will not be naïve or wander blindly in every direction. (Mr. Putra, Fiqh Teacher, interview, May 19, 2026)

Mr. Putra further illustrated the significant difference between individuals who think critically with a strong foundation and those who do not. According to him, a solid theological foundation serves as a worldview that guide children in exercising critical thinking while keeping their reasoning within the corridor of sound Islamic creed *(Aqidah).* Consequently, their critical thinking skills are directed toward constructive purpose, such as deepening their understanding of religion, solving problems, or seeking wisdom. In contrast, without a solid foundation, children may question things that could potentially weaken their faith.

> In lessons for young children, they are often taught the science of tawhid, such as the concepts of wujud, qidam, and baqa', that Allah exists, is eternal in the past, and remains forever. These concepts become a foundation for children so that when they grow older and become more critical, they already possess a basis for their thinking. Their critical thinking will not go astray. Critical thinking that is grounded in a foundation is obviously different from critical thinking that is empty. (Mr. Putra, Fiqh Teacher, interview, May 19, 2026)

The teachers' views are also consistent with the statement made by the Head of the NU Education Division regarding primary school as a stage for shaping children's understanding and ideology:

> The primary school phase is indeed a formative stage, including the formation of understanding and ideology. Since it is the foundational stage, the foundation must be strong. If it is not strong at this level, students will struggle to deal with the various ideas and perspectives they encounter at higher levels of education. (Mrs. Rahma, Head of the NU Education Division, interview, May 24, 2026)

One important thing that needs to be clarified is that this primary step is not based only on the use of memorization and indoctrination. The cultivation of seeds of critical thinking is an important part of this stage as well. This can be observed in Mr. Putra's explanation that information is given to children based on both *dalil aqli* (rational evidence) and *dalil naqli* (scriptural evidence).

> At this stage, children are still considered empty vessels, so what we do is give them some information. Actually, the awareness of God is already exists in their minds. What we do is give them the information that they are created by God, that God exists, along with giving them the scriptural evidence from the Qur'an as well as the logical evidence.. There are two kinds of proofs here:There are rational proofs *(dalil aqli)* and scriptural proofs *(dalil naqli).* (Mr. Putra, Fiqh Teacher, interview, May 19, 2026)

4.1.1.1.4 Sanad-Anchored Criticality

Mr. Putra frequently stated that *taqlid* (adherence) to great scholars such as Imam Al-Ghazali and Imam Al-Shafi'i does not signify intellectual weakness. Rather, it reflects an awareness that one's own scholarly capacity may not yet be sufficient to challenge or correct the opinions of individuals whose expertise is far greater.

> Criticism is permissible, but it must also follow the principles of critical thinking. If the person we are criticizing possesses knowledge that is far greater than ours, then it is better to follow them. For example, why do NU followers adhere to Imam Al-Shafi'i? Just compare our knowledge with that of Imam Al-Shafi'i. Someone may become a doctor or professor merely by studying one chapter of Imam Al-Ghazali's work. Let alone the entirety of Imam Al-Ghazali's knowledge. (Mr. Putra, Fiqh Teacher, interview, May 19, 2026)

This perception was also institutionally confirmed by the Head of the NU Education Division as part of the importance of maintaining a clear scholarly lineage (*sanad*):

> In NU schools, religious knowledge must be learned directly from its sources. That is why many NU schools teach the *Safinah* text directly for Fiqh and the *Dijan* text for theology (*aqidah*). We uphold knowledge that is connected to a clear scholarly lineage. There is a prophetic tradition stating, *"al-isnadu minad din"* (the chain of transmission is part of religion). This is the form of critical thinking that we cultivate in primary school students. (Mrs. Rahma, Head of the NU Education Division, interview, May 24, 2026)

Ensuring a clear *sanad* reflects the caution exercised by NU educators in verifying the validity of religious claims and serves as one manifestation of critical thinking. However, their statement illustrates a different standard of critical thinking when a claim comes from a figure they respect in the NU intellectual tradition, one of whom is Imam Al-Ghazali. This can be seen in the way Mr. Putra defended Al-Ghazali against those who argue that many of the hadiths contained in *Ihya Ulumuddin*, authored by Imam Al-Ghazali are *dho'if* (weak). Mr. Putra rejected this opinion not because he had obtained valid information regarding the authenticity of the hadith, but rather because of his belief in Imam Al-Ghazali's authority.

> Many people say that Imam Al Ghazali's book contains many dha'if hadith because they are not found in the *Kutubus Sittah,* the six canonical collections. We believe that Imam Gazali was able to trace hadith independently, without relying on Bukhari and Muslim, because in his time he was a very learned scholar. When he is criticized by people today, who do not know about him, we still believe that he was capable of tracing sources just like Imam Bukhari and Imam Muslim, examining the chains of transmission one by one. Just because the hadits is not found in the books of Bukhari and Muslim, it does not mean that the hadith is incorrect. (Mr. Putra, Fiqh Teacher, Interview, May 19, 2026)

This indicates that, within NU perspective, critical thinking toward religious claims is also selective. In other words, they are open to criticism at a certain level, but not toward some scholars whose authority they consider to be firmly established within NU intellectual tradition.

4.1.1.1.5 Preserving Tradition While Remaining Open to Change

Mr. Putra, who is not only a teacher but also a preacher and an active participant in various NU organizations, stated that one of the principal guidelines upheld in both preaching and educating students is the maxim *al-muhafazhatu 'ala al-qadim al-shalih wa al-akhdzu bi al-jadid al-ashlah* (preserving good traditions while adopting better new practices). The principle of *al-muhafazhatu 'ala al-qadim al-shalih* indicates that NU's methodology of religious propagation and education is not concerned with challenging or even eroding the traditions that have long been present in society; as is often assumed with purificatory movements. Instead, it aims to consolidate the current traditions and practices by establishing further religious grounds for them and incorporating them into the Islamic framework and rituals.

> We learn customs that are already practiced in the community, like grave visitation (ziarah), prayer, tahlil, charity and more in NU. If these practices were prohibited outright, then people would reject us. Hence, we take steps slowly. *Kudu bisa logor dina liang jarum!* (a Sundanese proverb meaning that

> one has to be able to adjust in difficult situation to be accepted). (Mr. Putra, Fiqh Teacher, Interview, May 19, 2026)
>
> Actually, NU is much more dynamic as we are not limited to textual interpretation. If we were too bound up in the text we would become static, whereas Fiqh is continually developing. So we use reasoning, but ofcourse within established rules. (Mr. Putra, Fiqh Teacher, Interview, May 19, 2026)

In terms of the second part of the principle, *wal akhdzu bil jadidil aslah* (the adoption of good new practices), the teachers explained that they demonstrate it by being responsive and accomodative of new developments. They illustrated this in their approach to promoting a contemporary culture in their school.

> NU is often associated with santri and traditional pesantren. But according to the training provided by Ma'arif, we are taught that although we are working in NU schools, we should not overly present ourselves as traditional santri. We should dress properly and neatly, clothes and headscarves should be attractive, and the image of professional educators should be projected. No signs of being untidy or lethargic. We need to be enthusiastic, on time and provide good service. (Mrs. Hana, Qur'an Hadith Teacher, interview, May 13, 2026)
>
> We are also encouraged to develop two-way communication with students, not make rushed judgments or arbitrarily punish them. When things happen, we should first consult their opinion. (Ms. Rina, Aqidah Akhlaq Teacher, interview, May 13, 2026)

Besides the teachers' accounts, the researcher also witnessed a 'modern ambience' during the field visits to the school. Although the school is located in a rural area and the buildings are relatively modest in sized, the environment were very clean, well-ordered and well-maintained. All members of the school community worked together to keep the school clean and to check on each other, with a well-planned daily programme. A strong culture of punctuality was also enforced, especially among teachers. The school gave a financial incentive of IDR 10,000 to each teacher who arrived on time (before 7:00 a.m.). In addition, the school actively competed and emerged victorious in many religious, academic, artistic and sporting competitions.

Figure 4.2

Modern Culture in the NU Primary School



(a)



(b)



(c)

Note. (a) Competition Achievement Awards, (b). Cleanliness Award from the Regent, (c). A culture of discipline for teachers (*Meaning: If you arrive at 07:01, you are already late)*

The principle of *al-muhafazhatu 'ala al-qadim al-shalih wa al-akhdzu bi al-jadid al-ashlah* has been not just a slogan but also put into practice in the day-to-day activities of the school, based on the teachers' accounts and the researcher's direct observation. This principle guides teachers to take a selective, evaluative and reflective approach to deciding what is most beneficial *(ashlah)* to preserve or adopt.

4.1.1.2 PERSIS Primary School Teachers' Perceptions

The PERSIS primary school teachers also had a range of views on critical thinking. Their perspectives can be grouped into the following themes:

1. *Ilmu Maslahah* (Goodness-oriented thinking)
2. *Ghaibiyyah* (Unseen Matters) as a Boundary of Critical Thinking
3. *Ittiba'* as a concrete manifestation of critical thinking in both physical and digital spaces
4. Memorization as the foundation of critical thinking
5. Critical thinking in primary education: conscious habituation

The following section provides a detailed explanation of these themes.

4.1.1.2.1 *Ilmu Maslahah* (Goodness-oriented thinking)

In general, PERSIS primary school teachers shared similarities with NU teachers in defining critical thinking as a higher-order cognitive ability characterized by students'

capacity for independent thinking and their tendency to continuously ask questions and express personal views regarding the material being taught. This perspective was expressed by Mrs. Dewi and Mrs. Silvi as follows:

> Critical thinking is thinking beyond the immediate content and not being confined by the text. Students have their own thoughts and opinions, which they combine into a reasoned response. (Mrs. Dewi, Homeroom Teacher, interview, May 21, 2026)

> It is when children are able to ask questions beyond the immediate context, such as, "Why is it like this, Ma'am?" or "Why does the text have to be like this?" (Mrs. Dewi, Homeroom Teacher, interview, May 21, 2026)

> It is when children are willing to express their opinions or share what they understand. (Mrs. Silvi, Homeroom Teacher, interview, May 18, 2026)

However, within the context of Islamic education, critical thinking was never perceived by these teachers as a value-neutral competency. Rather, it was closely connected to the principles and objectives of Islamic education itself. This can be seen in the way Mr. Budi defined critical thinking not as a skeptical attitude toward religion, but as a form of thinking oriented toward promoting benefit (*jalb al-masalih*) and preventing harm (*dar al-mafasid*).

> Critical thinking is when a person thinks, but not merely for the sake of thinking. Instead, they focus their minds on good and beneficial things. What is the point of thinking if not for a beneficial? In another sense, if reason is not employed, if it is present but not used for the common good, then reason is condemned as evidenced by the words of the Qur'án, *afala ta'qilun, afala ta'qilun* ("Will you not reason?"). (Mr. Budi, Homeroom Teacher, interview, May 19, 2026)

For Mr. Budi, the critical thinking is not just being able to have a good logic or strong argumentation. He felt that critical thinking had to meet a certain criterion: should be directed toward good, and the avoidance of harm. The institutional support is given by Tarbiyyah Division of PERSIS, responsible for managing and supervising activities in the educational field in PERSIS. The Head of the PERSIS Tarbiyyah Division explained:

> The purpose of critical thinking is to prevent the abuse of religion which can be politicization or commercialization of religion by some people. Generally, this type of exploitation is based on the manipulation of religious consciousness. (Mr. Dani, Head of the Tarbiyyah Division, interview, April 11, 2026)

In this way, he expressed that critical thinking is required in religion so that religion is not manipulated for specific interests but functions as a blessing for all creation *(rahmatan lil 'alamin).* He also highlighted this point by referring to the frequent cases

of sexual abuse that occurs in some pesantren. He said that it was due to the lack of critical thinking that led to such incidents among members of society in interpreting concepts such as *karamah, wali,* or *kyai*. Thus, the analysis of this kind reveals that the critical thinking in religious issues from the informant of PERSIS point of view is not only to ensure the security of the religion itself but also to secure the human well-being.

4.1.1.2.2 *Ghaibiyyah* (Unseen Matters) as a Boundary of Critical Thinking

The perception of critical thinking as a tool for socio-religious protection, not as a tool for religious skepticism, has consequences for the limits imposed on critical thinking in PERSIS educational environment. Mrs. Silvi, who is not only a teacher but also an active leader in the PERSIS young women's organization at the district level, said that she was worried about teaching critical thinking about *aqidah* to primary school students.

> As for religion, I am somewhat worried with regard to creed *(aqidah).* Yes, critical thinking is important, but just maybe to help students advance in their project or gain further insight into the material. But regarding matters of creed, I do not believe that we should explore them too deeply yet. (Mrs. Silvi, Homeroom Teacher, interview, May 18, 2026)

The concern of Mrs Silvi is supported by the the Head of the Tarbiyyah Division, who argued that there is little value in thinking about something unless it can be perceived through the human senses. From this standpoint, those issues that lie beyond human sensory experience are classified within the domain of *ghaibiyyah* (the unseen), and therefore cannot be fully accessed through empirical observation or human reasoning alone. Rather, knowledge of such issues is primarily obtained through divine revelation. Muslims, therefore, are expected to believe in the existence of *ghaibiyah*, including Allah, angels, jinn, heaven, or hell, and to accept knowledge about them through revelation (the Qur'an and Hadith). He explained that this limitation stems from the fact that human beings have inherent limitations in understanding such matters.

Another perspective was offered by Mrs Dewi, who comes from a PERSIS family but is not part of the organization's leadership. She argued that children's critical thinking should not be restricted, as all answers can ultimately be found in the Qur'an and hadits.

> Questioning the truth, for example when a child asks, "Ma'am, where is Allah?"—that is perfectly acceptable. What matters is how we answer and respond to the question. Therefore, such questions are completely welcome. I am open to any question. (Mrs. Dewi, Homeroom Teacher, interview, May 18, 2026)

The difference of opinion regarding the boundaries of critical thinking between teachers who are actively involved in the organization's leadership structure and those who are not was also evident in the PERSIS school, just as it had previously appeared among teachers in the NU school. This finding strengthens the assumption that organizational ideological values are deeply embedded and transmitted within educational institutions through teachers who actively serve in structural leadership positions. Teachers who function primarily as sympathizers, by contrast, tend to adopt a more flexible stance toward the implementation of organizational principles within the educational institutions under their supervision.

4.1.1.2.3 *Ittiba'* as a Concrete Manifestation of Critical Thinking

4.1.1.2.3.1 The Concept of Ittiba'

This emerged as the strongest theme because it was consistently reflected in the organization's and school's vision, as well as in its implementation by teachers in the classroom. Teachers at the PERSIS primary school understood critical thinking not as questioning something in order to arrive at any possible conclusion, but rather as a process of reasoning directed toward a predetermined conclusion: returning to the Qur'an and Sunnah through the practice of *ittiba'*.

> In PERSIS, critical thinking is encouraged, but its primary purpose is to guide people back to the Qur'an and Hadith. (Mrs. Dewi, Homeroom Teacher, interview, May 21, 2026)

> We explain the evidence behind it because not everything can always be approached through reason alone. There are times when we must submit to revelation. Why is that? We explain the reasons in a way that allows them to understand and accept it rationally. (Mr. Budi, Homeroom Teacher, interview, May 19, 2026)

The representative from the Tarbiyyah Division explained the meaning of *ittiba'* as one of the central religious principles of the organization and distinguished it from the tradition of *taqlid*:

> Taqlid simply means following without question. Ittiba', on the other hand, means practicing something while asking, "min aina akhodztahu?" ("Where did you obtain this from?" or "What is the source of this practice?"). Therefore, the question "why," which is one of the characteristics of critical thinking, has already become a fundamental element of the PERSIS curriculum. (Mr. Dani, Tarbiyyah Division, interview, April 11, 2026)

4.1.1.2.3.2 Digital Ittiba': A Practice of Digital Literacy in Islamic Education

In response to the phenomenon of digital disruption, where almost all children now possess smartphones and social media accounts, teachers at the PERSIS primary school have adapted by transforming the tradition of *ittiba'* into a form of digital religious literacy for their students. Efforts to strengthen students' critical thinking in digital media use are carried out by encouraging them to use technology more wisely. This approach was illustrated by Mrs. Silvi, who assigned religious education homework that required students to use ChatGPT.

> Even though homework is no longer strongly encouraged, I still occasionally assign religious education homework to the students. Fifth graders spend a lot of time on their phones. I want to redirect their perspective so that phones are not used merely for gaming but can serve broader purposes. That is why I assigned homework introducing them to ChatGPT. Later, we discussed the results in class. (Mrs. Silvi, Homeroom Teacher, interview, May 18, 2026)

During one classroom observation, the researcher also observed the integration of the *ittiba'* tradition into social media use. In a sixth-grade Fiqh lesson on "Found Property in Islam," Mr. Budi asked students to discuss the Islamic ruling regarding treasure hunting, a topic that had become popular in social media content. Likewise, in a Qur'an-Hadith lesson, Mrs. Dewi explained the importance of returning to evidence from the Qur'an and Hadith in response to a viral social media claim suggesting that consuming pork was permissible for medical treatment.

Furthermore, the researcher found that several teachers at the PERSIS primary school maintained dedicated social media accounts to share educational content, including Islamic learning materials, with wider audiences. This finding suggests that within the context of the digital ecosystem, these teachers not only guided students to critically evaluate information encountered on social media through the principles of *ittiba'*, but also actively contributed as producers of educational content on religious education.

Teachers' commitment to guiding students to practice *ittiba'* in their use of social media was identified as a strategy that emerged from their own intentions and influenced by the religious culture of PERSIS environment, not explicitly given by the curricula or structure. This indicates that the habit of checking the validity of the information and ensuring the continuity of their chains of transmission is ingrained among teachers within PERSIS educational institutions. Consequently, when digital literacy has recently been promoted on a large scale, many of its core practices had, in fact, already been implemented in these madrasahs long before the term "digital literacy" appeared in the

national curriculum. Therefore, what PERSIS educational institutions require in responding to the digital era is not the integration of digital literacy itself, but rather greater awareness among teachers that what they are already doing constitutes a form of digital literacy, along with policy-level refinement and reinforcement to ensure more systematic implementation and optimal outcomes.

4.1.1.2.4 Memorization as the Foundation of Critical Thinking

The PERSIS vision of "Returning to the Qur'an and Sunnah" has led to the establishment of Qur'an memorization (*tahfidz al-Qur'an*) and Hadith memorization (*tahfidz al-hadith*) programs as both formal subjects and flagship programs within the school. The memorization target for graduating students is three *juz* of the Qur'an and sixty selected hadith. According to the teachers, some students even exceed the targets established by the school.

However, when the researcher observed Qur'an memorization activities at the school, it was found that students were instructed to memorize Qur'anic verses without necessarily understanding their meanings or contents. Each day they learned new passages and repeatedly reviewed them during *muraja'ah* (memorization revision) sessions, which were conducted twice daily. To confirm this observation, the researcher conducted interviews with four students.

Researcher : What surah are you memorizing at the moment?

Salma : Surah Al-Ma'arij, Ma'am.

Researcher : Wow, that's impressive! you've memorized quite a lot! Do you know the meaning of the verses you are memorizing, or what Surah Al-Ma'arij is about?

All Students : *(silence; some shook their heads).*

Researcher : Oh, that's okay. So, in the Qur'an memorization class, the meaning and content of the verses are not usually explained?

Raisa : Not in *tahfidz* class, Ma'am. In Mr Budi's lessons (the other religious education subjects), however, he frequently interprets the meaning of the verses and what they relate to.

From what was observed in the class and the students' interviews, it was clear that the memorization of the Qur'an *(tahfidz)* program was more of a rote memorization approach and limited opportunities for critical reasoning. On the surface, this seems to be in contradiction to the PERSIS educational vision of developing a generation who is

tafaqquh fid-din (possessing a deep understanding of religion) and who has critical thinking as one of its competencies as a graduate of the institution.

One teacher responded to this issue by stating that the focus on memorisation is related to children's developmental stages:

> Learning is by the process of *tadarruj* (gradual stages). The process of human thinking evolves with time and in the same way, works in the field of religion. The thinking power in children, particularly at the *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah* level, is not yet in a position to develop into advanced critical thinking or higher order thinking skills. They are not yet capable of engaging with such concepts in depth, although the seeds of critical thinking are already present, such as gathering information from various sources. (Mr. Budi, Homeroom Teacher, interview, May 19, 2026)

Furthermore, the Head of the PERSIS Tarbiyyah Division explained that the strengthening of Qur'anic memorization at the primary education level serves as a foundation for thinking, a means of preserving religion, and an act of worship toward Allah.

> Memorization is actually a source of strength; it is both a foundation and a tool for thinking. The fundamental principles of religion do not change. Religion has been delivered by Allah in a complete form—the Qur'an, the Hadith, the creed, and the moral teachings are all fixed. Because religion does not change, the tradition of memorization emerged in Islam. It is not a low-level tradition at all. One of the things that must be preserved in religion is its source. What must be protected is the unchanging nature of religion itself. Therefore, from the time of the Prophet until today, religious education has always begun with memorization. Critical thinking certainly has its place, but it does not eliminate memorization. Among our forms of respect toward Allah and the Qur'an is reciting the Qur'an. The purpose of memorizing the Qur'an is to make it easier for children to retain and recite it. By reciting the Qur'an, we engage in remembrance (dhikr) of Allah. Thus, not every Qur'an lesson is solely intended to teach its content. (Mr. Dani, Tarbiyyah Division, interview, April 11, 2026)

He further explained that understanding the memorized Qur'anic passages is developed gradually and thematically:

> As for understanding the Qur'an, we approach it thematically through other subjects such as Fiqh, Tawhid, and Akhlaq. Later, when students reach higher educational levels, what they have memorized will become a source of evidence and reference. They will learn where it comes from, what its basis is, and so on. Therefore, this process cannot be completed within a single stage; it must continue until the *mu'allimin* level (senior high school). *(*Mr. Dani, Tarbiyyah Division, interview, April 11, 2026)

The argument presented by the Tarbiyyah Division, that memorization is a means to preserve the authenticity of religion, offers a rational explanation for the existence of memorization traditions in the Islamic educational institutions. Furthermore,

memorization is not seen as the opposite of critical thinking, from the perspective of learning taxonomies such as Bloom's Taxonomy and the SOLO Taxonomy. Instead, it is a first step in the process of critical thinking, and both serve as complementary processes. Memorization provides the knowledge base for critical thinking, while critical thinking provides meaning and interpretation to memorized knowledge.

However, when examined from the perspective of implementation, some aspects require further evaluation to ensure the vision of producing a *tafaqquh* generation and graduates who think critically is not merely a wish but genuinely realized. These include the need for structured coordination between the content and teachers of Qur'an memorization classes and those of thematic religious subjects, as well as a more balanced emphasis between the quantity of verses memorized and the extent to which their meanings are explored in thematic lessons. These concerns arise from the fact that none of the interviewed students were able to explain the meaning or content of the verses they were memorizing, a finding that was also supported by classroom observations. Furthermore, the critical thinking development programs promoted by the Tarbiyyah Division, such as debates and scientific writing activities, are only implemented at higher educational levels. This approach may be less effective because not all primary school students will necessarily continue their education within the same institutional network.

4.1.1.2.5 Critical Thinking in Primary Education: Conscious Habituation

Drawing upon religious sources, teachers at the PERSIS primary school emphasized the importance of aligning religious education with children's developmental stages. According to them, the most appropriate method for teaching religion at the primary level is through habituation.

Mr. Budi was the strongest advocate of this approach:

> For children at the Madrasah Ibtidaiyah or primary school level, what I understand from the Prophet's example is that education begins with habituation. Children are accustomed to performing certain practices even before they fully understand them. Only later, in the upper grades, do consequences and disciplinary measures begin to be introduced. (Mr. Budi, Homeroom Teacher, interview, May 19, 2026)

Not merely an assumption, this approach has in fact become a long-standing practice among teachers at the primary school. Mrs. Dewi, for example, not only described various habituation programs implemented by the school, such as *duha* prayer, congregational *dhuhr* prayer, Qur'an memorization review (*muraja'ah*), and charity

(*shadaqah*), but also explained how she applies the habituation approach within her religious education classes.

> Everything has to be connected to daily life, Ma'am. Right now, I am teaching Akhlaq in my class. For example, when a teacher enters the classroom, students are trained to respond in a particular manner. Likewise, when they want to borrow something from a friend or leave the classroom, they are accustomed to asking for permission. This is not authoritarian, Ma'am. Rather, this is how I teach religion. (Mrs. Dewi, Homeroom Teacher, interview, May 21, 2026)

The teachers believed that students would understand religious teachings more effectively through habituation because such practices allow them to observe, experience, construct meaning, and evaluate the activities themselves.

> When these practices are implemented, children can witness the results firsthand. For example, students who regularly give charity may develop different character traits from those who do not. They eventually come to realize, "Oh, I see." The learning characteristics of young children are such that they understand best when they directly see, hear, or experience something themselves. (Mr. Budi, Homeroom Teacher, interview, May 19, 2026)

Teachers at the PERSIS primary school, while stressing the need for 'habituation' in their religious education, cannot be easily labelled as indoctrination. If indoctrination is to teach someone the beliefs without giving them any reasons and forbid him from asking questions, then these teachers are doing exactly the contrary. They proactively promote and encourage students to pose questions and give their opinions.

> We are always open and encourage our students to asking questions or giving opinions whether at the beginning, during, or at the end of the lesson. If no one asks a question, we assign tasks that require them to answer questions, allowing us to assess their understanding. In fact, several questions in fifth grade specifically ask for students' own opinions. (Mrs. Silvi, Homeroom Teacher, interview, May 18, 2026)

At the same time, taking students' developmental stages into account, teachers establish certain boundaries regarding the types of questions students may explore. These questions are generally limited to foundational issues and do not extend into complex matters of *aqidah*. Some teachers also postpone answering particular questions if they believe the students are not yet developmentally ready to understand them.

> To the best of my knowledge, critical thinking is important at the primary school level, but it should be introduced at the stage of familiarization rather than deep understanding. At a minimum, children should learn to recognize what is right and what is wrong. They should know why something good ought to be practiced and why something wrong should be avoided. Therefore, the stages are introduction, explanation, and most importantly, providing examples and guiding students through positive habits. (Mr. Budi, Homeroom Teacher, interview, May 19, 2026)

> In Fiqh class, students sometimes ask questions such as, “What is semen?” We explain it in a simple way and then say, “You will understand it yourself later.” This is what my own teacher taught me when I was in primary school. Once I reached adulthood, I eventually understood it on my own. God willing, the students will experience the same process. (Mr. Budi, Homeroom Teacher, interview, May 19, 2026)

> Critical thinking must be exercised in the appropriate context. In school, for example, it should remain within the scope of the lesson being taught. As for other matters, such as issues of *aqidah*, students should not be encouraged to go too far into them. (Mrs. Silvi, Homeroom Teacher, interview, May 18, 2026)

From the explanations provided by Mr. Budi and Mrs. Silvi, it can be seen that critical thinking in religious education at the PERSIS primary school is not intended to cultivate skepticism toward religion. Rather, it is given a role in reinforcing existing religious norms and teachings. More specifically, the critical thinking method that is encouraged by these teachers is always a prerequisite to ensure that habituation programmes are not performed mechanically, without understanding, but rather consciously and meaningfully. The main aim of their Islamic education is to develop students' character (through habituation and exemplary conduct) and critical thinking is a facilitating tool to support this process.

4.1.1.2.6 Summary of Teachers’ Perceptions of Critical Thinking in Religious Education Across the Two Institutions

The findings from the teachers' perspectives in the two schools showed that there are significant similarities and differences in their understanding of critical thinking in the context of religious education. The similarities and differences seem to be carried out by the ideology of the Islamic organizations the schools belong to.

In both schools, teachers stated that critical thinking is not only acceptable but also encouraged in religious education. This belief is based on the ideas and values of the organisations that they believe, as well as by other sources of knowledge accessed by individual teachers. Both institutions also collectively shared the opinion that the teaching of critical thinking should be tailored to children's developmental stage and that the major purpose of teaching critical thinking is to nurture children's habits of thinking and questioning that would result in positive character development. Likewise, both groups of teachers established boundaries for critical thinking. Among NU teachers, critical inquiry in matters of *ilahiyah* (divine attributes and theological matters) was considered permissible only when supported by a strong foundation of faith. Among PERSIS

teachers, critical thinking was restricted in matters of *ghaibiyah* (unseen realities). Furthermore, both groups regarded *adab* (proper conduct) as a fundamental prerequisite for legitimate critical thinking. Nevertheless, differences emerged in the degree to which organizational values were embraced and implemented, particularly between teachers who held structural positions within the organizations and those who did not.

The most striking differences were found in the organizationally defined forms of critical thinking, which were subsequently internalized in teachers' perceptions. Within NU, critical thinking is expressed through the contextualization of religious teachings within local traditions and an accommodative attitude toward change, as reflected in the principle of *al-muhafazhatu 'ala al-qadim al-shalih wa al-akhdzu bi al-jadid al-ashlah*. It is also reflected in a strong commitment to the tradition of *sanad*, whereby knowledge is derived from authorities recognized within established scholarly lineages, and criticism is exercised with consideration for one's own scholarly capacity relative to that of others. Critical thinking is considered legitimate in matters of *furu'iyyah* (secondary or subsidiary religious rulings), more restricted in matters of *amaliyah* (religious practices and traditions), and prohibited in matters of *ilahiyah* (divine attributes), unless preceded by the establishment of a strong theological foundation.

In contrast, within PERSIS, the primary manifestation of critical thinking is *ittiba'*, namely the practice of verifying the validity of religious teachings by examining the authenticity of their evidential basis. This is evident in the following questions: What is the evidence? Is it authentic or not? The ultimate standard of critical thinking that results from PERSIS is a more flexible attitude towards the acts of worship, a more severe attitude towards matters of *muamalah* (social and transactional affairs), and a rejection of critical enquiry into matters of the unseen *(ghaibiyah).*

The teachers and educational leaders from both organizations shared these principles not only in their thinking but also in the policies and plans they had published for their curricula. According to the NU Aswaja curriculum guidelines, the emphasis of graduate competency standards is the development of *fikrah* (intellectual orientation) and *amaliyah*, while critical thinking is gradually introduced during the educational process. On the other hand, the PERSIS curriculum clearly lists critical thinking among the graduate competence standards to achieve the aim of producing a generation that is *tafaqquh fid-din*. The PERSIS curriculum is structured to ensure mastery of primary religious sources namely the Qur'an and Hadith, through a series of core and supporting subjects that are taught continuously from Grades 1 through 6 at the primary school level.

4.1.2 Practices of Teaching Critical Thinking in Religious Education at NU and PERSIS Primary Schools

This section addresses the second research question: *How do teachers in NU and PERSIS primary schools promote students' critical thinking in religious education?* To answer this question, the researcher employed several data collection methods, including interviews, classroom observations, curriculum document analysis, and analysis of students' assignments. For the observations, the researcher observed three religious education subjects; Qur'an-Hadith, Aqidah-Akhlaq, and Fiqh across grades 3 to 6, as well as the habituation programs implemented in each school.

A summary of the critical thinking practices in religious education at the NU and PERSIS primary schools is presented in the following table.

Table 4.2

Critical Thinking Instructional Practices in Islamic Education

Infusion	NU School			PERSIS School		
	Rina	Hana	Putra	Budi	Dewi	Silvi
Pedagogical Approaches						
Dialogical/open questioning	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Case-based/problem-based approach	✓			✓	✓	✓
Real-world/contextual approach	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Dalil/scripture-anchored reasoning		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pluralistic (*khilafiyyah*-aware) approach	✓		✓		✓	✓
Instructional Methods						
Storytelling/analogy	✓			✓	✓	
Drill & repetition (*talaqqi/muraja'ah*)		✓		✓		✓
Visual aid and technology integration	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Teacher modelling	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lecture/explanation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Concept Simplification	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Quiz					✓	✓
Case Analysis	✓			✓	✓	✓
Independent study			✓	✓	✓	✓
Assessment Methods						
Oral comprehension check		✓		✓	✓	✓
LKPD/worksheet	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Practical/demonstration assessment	✓	✓	✓	✓		

Student Engagement and Participation						
Class discussion	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Group discussion/collaboration	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Peer feedback		✓			✓	
Presentation of group work	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Game/role-play engagement		✓			✓	
Reward System	✓	✓			✓	

Note: The data presented in the table were derived from classroom observations and in-depth interviews with teachers. A check mark (✓) indicates that the practice was either observed during classroom instruction and/or mentioned by the teacher during the interview session.

4.1.2.1 Infusion Approach

Based on information gathered through interviews, classroom observations, and curriculum document analysis, it was found that teachers in both NU and PERSIS primary schools did not teach critical thinking as a standalone subject. Instead, critical thinking was integrated into other subjects and learning activities through an infusion approach. Within the infusion approach, the researcher identified several instructional indicators employed by the teachers, which can be categorized into pedagogical approaches, instructional methods, assessment methods, and student engagement and participation. A detailed explanation of each of these indicators is presented in the following sections.

4.1.2.2 Critical Thinking Instructional Methods in *Fiqh, Aqidah-Akhlaq*, *Qur'an-Hadith*, and Habituation Programs

4.1.2.2.1 *Fiqh*

Interactive lecturing was the most frequently employed instructional method in *Fiqh* classes at both the NU and PERSIS primary schools. Teachers at both schools believed that a lecture-based approach combined with dialogue was one of the most effective methods for fostering students' critical thinking in *Fiqh* education. As explained by Mr. Putra, this approach was chosen because of the nature of *Fiqh* itself, which encompasses numerous *ikhtilaf* (differences of opinion) among Islamic scholars. Consequently, students need to become accustomed to examining issues from multiple perspectives. In addition, *Fiqh* instruction is often grounded in classical cases that serve as the basis for legal rulings. Hence, dialogue is necessary as a connection to bridge the classical cases with modern issues, so that the students can grasp the relevance of the cases in present-day context.

Mr. Putra, the teacher of *Fiqh* at the NU primary school, described the sequence of learning activities which uses an interactive lecture approach:

> I start with a reflection about the last lesson and then I pose some questions like what, why, or have you ever seen or heard something related to the topic. Then, I hear their answer(s). Next, then we move on to the lesson, which has an introduction, main content and closing segment. There is often a further reflection activity in the end. (Mr. Putra, Fiqh Teacher, Interview, May 19, 2026)

Consistent with his statement, classroom observations also revealed how Mr. Putra taught the topic of "*Tahajjud* Prayer" through interactive discussion method. He posed a series of open-ended questions to stimulate discussions, asking students whether they had ever performed *tahajjud prayer,* how they feel, why they performed it, when the appropriate time to perform it was, and how to be able to perform it consistently. These exploratory questions encouraged students to think independently and formulate their own answers. Students also actively participated by asking questions, such as what is meant by the last third of the night, when the best time to perform *tahajjud* is within that period, and whether it is permissible to perform *tahajjud* prayers for someone who staying awake all night. Through this discussion-based method, students were encourage not merely to recall religious knowledge but are also to relate it to their personal experiences (inference), justify their religious practices (reason), and reflect on strategies for applying them consistently in daily life (conclusion).

Following the discussion, students were also guided to practice the movement of *tahajjud* prayer, memorize the *niyyah* (prayer intention) and its meaning in the local language (Sundanese). According to Mr. Putra, this instructional method was effective in enhancing students' understanding of the lesson because it enabled them not only to understand the theory but also to learn how to perform it correctly as well as understanding the meaning behind its recitation, albeit not yet comprehensively. An overview of the discussion and demonstrations activities in Mr. Putra's classroom is presented in the following figure.

Figure 4.3

Fiqh learning at the NU primary school



(a) (b)

Note. a). Students enthusiastically sharing their experiences of performing the *tahajjud* prayers during the classroom discussion; b). demonstration and guided practice of *the tahajjud* prayer.

The researcher also noted some other critical thinking strategies used in his *fiqh* lessons in the class, including explaining unfamiliar terminology and introducing students to the diversity of Islamic worship practices while emphasizing religious rulings that align with the NU perspective, as presented in Table 4.2. In addition, another interesting aspect to note was Mr. Putra's response to students who admitted that they had never performed the *tahajjud* prayer and occasionally still missed some of the obligatory prayers. Rather than responding with threats or instilling fear of sin and hell, as has been widely reported in previous literature, he instead explained that Allah is the Most Compassionate and the Most Merciful. Therefore, students were encouraged to draw closer to Him by performing prayer in order to attain His love. This approach reflects Mr. Putra's efforts to foster students' intrinsic motivation and awareness of religious practices, rather than demanding obedience based on fear.

As for the sequence of interactive lecture activities conducted by Mr. Budi, the Fiqh teacher at the PERSIS primary school, it is outlined as follows.

> I mostly use lectures. First, students write down the key points, and then I explain each point directly. If the topic is suitable, I divide them into groups to discuss issues that need discussion. Afterward, they present their ideas, and I clarify or correct anything that I consider inaccurate based on my understanding. That is how it goes. (Mr. Budi, Fiqh Teacher, Interview, May 19, 2026)

Mr. Budi's description was consistent with what the researcher observed in his classroom. After introducing the concept of *luqathah* (lost property) and its legal status in Islam, he connected the topic to students' everyday experiences by asking whether they had ever found an item and how they had responded. He then employed a problem-based

learning approach by asking students to discuss the legal status of objects found in rivers as well as evaluating the legitimacy of treasure hunting, a phenomenon that has recently gained popularity among content creators on social media. The following excerpt illustrates the classroom discussion conversation on this phenomenon.

Mr. Budi : You have probably seen those treasure-hunting content on the internet, haven't you?

Student : Yes, sir.

Mr. Budi : So, in your opinion, is it permissible to search for treasure like that and immediately sell it?

Raisa : No, sir.

Mr. Budi : Why not, Raisa?

Raisa : Because we have to wait for the rightful owner first. We shouldn't immediately turn it into content or sell it.

Mr. Budi : That's right. As mentioned in the hadith, '*arrifhā sanatan,* announce it for one year first. Only after that, if no one comes forward to claim it, may it be used.

In addition, one particularly noteworthy practice observed during the lesson occurred when Mr. Budi forgot the conversion value of a *dirham* (a classical Islamic-era currency unit) into Indonesian rupiah. He openly said that he doesn't know the exact amount of *dirham,* and he asked permission to find out later and provide it for them. This behaviour indicated awareness of caution in the acceptance and dissemination of information. By making that marker, he demonstrated the *intellectual honesty*, one of the important dispositions that are associated with critical thinking.

However, although the scope of critical thinking instructional strategies used by Mr. Budi was wider than he stated, classroom observations revealed that students were not active in discussions. Only a few students actively responded to teacher's questions. Furthermore, during the lesson the researcher noticed that none of the students asked any questions. When asked about this issue, Mr. Budi accepted the situation. He said that his style of teaching had some impact on students becoming less inquisitive in Grade 6, compared to Grade 4.

> It seemed like a foray into this class, maybe because I'm a pretty strict teacher. I acknowledge students' good efforts, and I correct their errors immediately, either publicly or privately as needed. This makes that students tend to think of my mood before giving me questions. They will ask question if they're really curious. However, in this class, few students pose questions. (Mr. Budi, Fiqh Teacher, Interview, May 19, 2026)

The idea of a teacher's persona and its impact on pupils' willingness to ask questions is expressed here. Mr. Budi also explained that more boys tended to ask questions compare to girls who tended to be quieter with only one or two of them who participated actively. Interestingly, Mrs Silvi also noted this, saying that her female students were more mature, more reserved and quieter than their male students. The researcher's classroom observations supported this assumption as most students in the PERSIS primary school, particularly in the grades 5 and 6 were quiet students with only one or two students speaking regularly. One female student offered an explanation, that possibly they felt they knew the answers and so didn't bother to ask questions. One of the students of Mr. Budi's *Fiqh* class said:

> We're older now, I don't ask questions much anymore, we know things. We would ask questions as young children like where is Allah? and so on. (Sindi, PERSIS Primary School Student, Interview, May 19, 2026)

However, the researcher found differences in the pattern of *Fiqh* instruction between NU and PERSIS primary schools that may help explain for the relative passiveness observed in the latter classroom. The *Fiqh* lesson that was observed in Mr. Putra's Grade 4 class at NU primary school seemed much more interactive. Many students actively participated by answering and asking questions. In terms of instructional approach, the *Fiqh* teacher at the NU school tended to employ a more humanistic and open style, whereas the PERSIS teacher appeared to adopt a more textual and structured approach.

> First, I greet the students and ask how they are doing because that is the best way to teach children, it should not be too rigid. Sometimes students want to share personal stories, and that is fine; I simply listen. Occasionally a student tells me that they do not have money, so I give them some lunch money. When I take attendance, I call students by their full names because it usually makes them feel appreciated. Only after that do we begin the lesson. (Mr. Putra, Fiqh Teacher, Interview, May 19, 2026)

> Students should not simply accept what I say. They also need to think about why it is being taught to them. That is why I do not reject whatever students say, as long as it remains within the context of learning. I always reply by saying, “Excellent,” or “Good,” so that they do not become afraid to speak. Children today are different from previous generations. They cannot be forced. (Mr. Putra, Fiqh Teacher, Interview, May 19, 2026)

In contrast to the *Fiqh* teacher at the PERSIS primary school, who had a relatively strict style in managing the classroom, Mr. Putra had a friendly attitude and tried to make the classroom safe for students to voice their opinions. However, due to limited number

of classroom observations conducted, this finding cannot be generalized to all *Fiqh* teachers in schools affiliated with either NU or PERSIS organization. Nevertheless, to minimize potential researcher bias, the statement provided by the PERSIS Tarbiyyah Division regarding the differing tendencies of the two organizations in matters of *muamalah* (social interaction) and worship may serve to reinforce this finding.

> The difference lies in the emphasis placed on religious practice. PERSIS tends to prefer a stricter approach, particularly in matters of *muamalah*. In NU, the stricter emphasis is generally found in matters of worship, while *muamalah* tends to be approached more flexibly. (PERSIS Tarbiyyah Division, Interview, June 13, 2026)

Overall, both classrooms demonstrated the use of interactive lecturing through open-ended questioning and case-study discussions. However, beyond differences in student participation, a notable distinction also emerged in the treatment of plurality. Mr. Putra explicitly taught and accommodated differences of opinion in *Fiqh*, such as the number of *tarawih* prayer units, the practice of reciting *niyyah* (intentions) aloud (*jahar/talafudz*), and the practice of *qunut*, as normal and legitimate forms of diversity (*ta'arrud*). In contrast, Mr. Budi guided students toward verifying authentic religious evidence through structured discussions. Both approaches encouraged critical thinking, yet their orientations were different: NU tended to more tolerant of a diversity of acceptable answers, whereas PERSIS was more inclined to lead students toward a single authoritative conclusion.

4.1.2.2.2 *Aqidah-Akhlaq*

One of the key educational principles applied by Mrs. Rina, a teacher at the NU primary school, and Mrs. Silvi, a teacher at the PERSIS primary school, in their Aqidah-Akhlaq classes was the implementation of the Love-Based Curriculum *(Kurikulum Berbasis Cinta)*, an initiative introduced by the Ministry of Religious Affairs which emphasizes fostering students' awareness. According to Mrs. Rina, raising students' awareness of the subject matter helps improve their focus and deepen their understanding.

> In the Love-Based Curriculum, the first thing we must do is build students' awareness and interest. We need to help them understand what they are learning and why it is beneficial. (Mrs. Rina, Aqidah-Akhlaq Teacher, Interview, May 13, 2026)

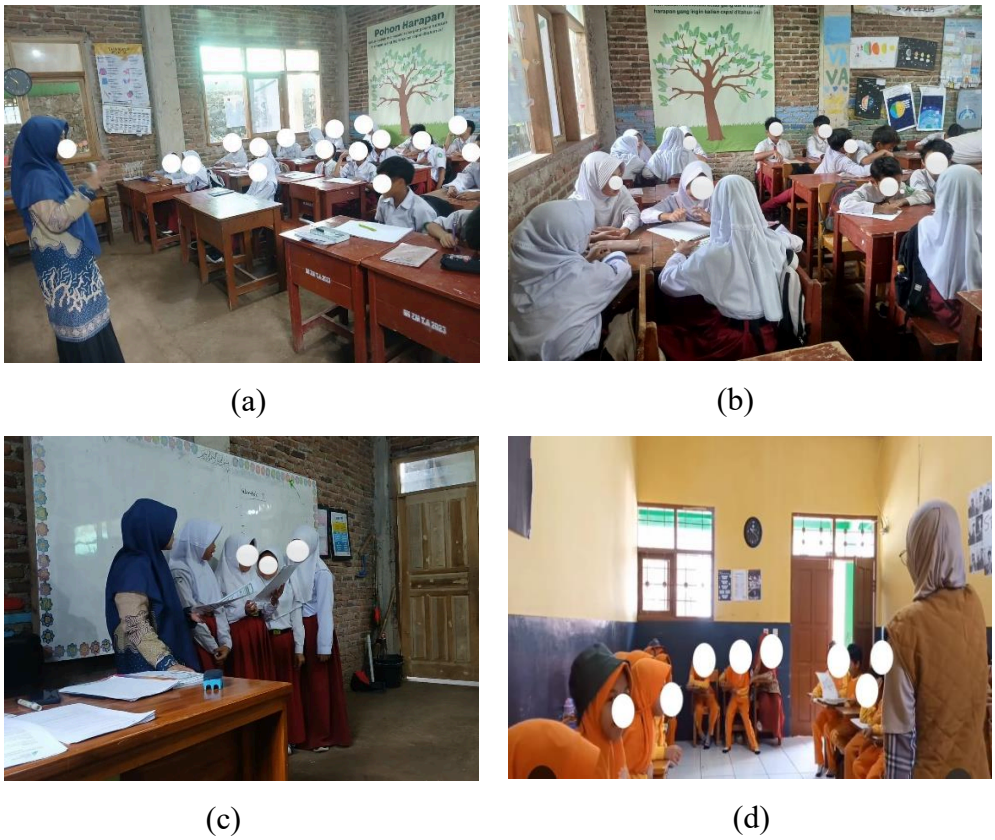
Her perspective was further supported by Mrs. Silvi, who argued that critical thinking in religious education at the primary school level is essentially intended to deepen students' understanding of the material rather than encourage extensive exploration of theological matters.

> If you ask whether it is important, then yes, it is important. But it is important mainly for improving students' learning and helping them understand the material better. In matters of *aqidah*, however, children should not delve too deeply into them yet. (Mrs. Silvi, Aqidah-Akhlaq Teacher, Interview, May 21, 2026)

To put this principle into practice, both teachers employed instructional strategies to foster students' critical thinking. While Mrs. Rina used interactive classroom discussions, collaborative group work, and student presentations, Mrs. Silvi primarly employed interactive classroom discussions. An overview of their classroom practices are presented in figure 4.

Figure 4.4

Aqidah-Akhlaq learning activities at the NU and PERSIS primary schools



(a) (b)

(c) (d)

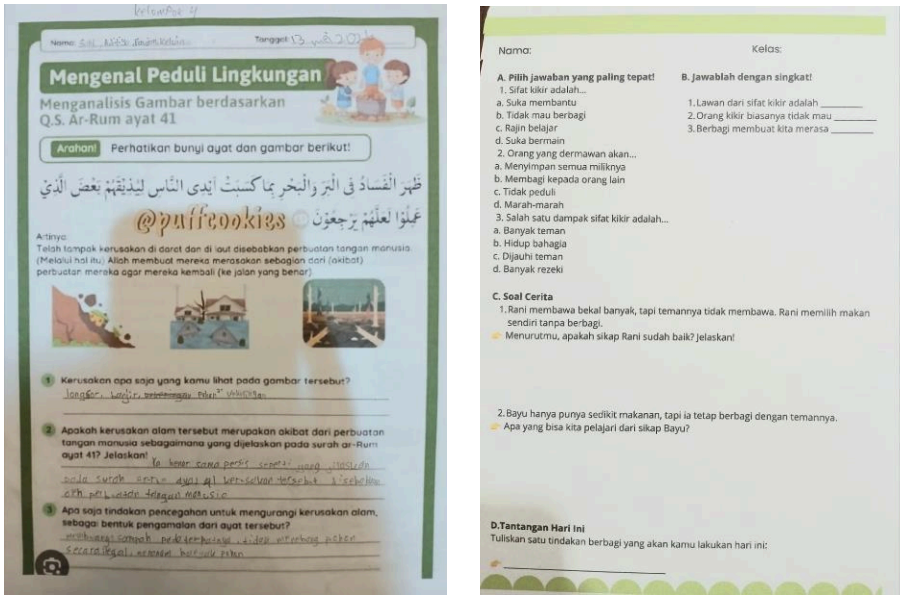
Note. (a-c) activities at the NU primary school: a) Interactive classroom discussion; b) Collaborative group work; c) Student presentation. d) Interactive classroom discussion at the PERSIS primary school.

To teach the topic *"Ethics Toward Animals and Plants,"* Mrs. Rina employed a Problem-Based Learning approach. Through this method, she sought to cultivate students' critical thinking by engaging them in discussions about the relationship between Qur'anic verses concerning corruption on earth and the flooding disaster that had recently occurred in Aceh (November 2025). After the discussion, she asked the students to work

collaboratively on an open-ended Student Worksheet (LKPD-*Lembar Kerja Peserta Didik*) which required them to analyze the relationship between religious texts and real-life situations, identify the causes of environmental pollution, propose solution to the problem, and present their answers to the class. The same instructional medium was also used by Mrs. Silvi when assigning tasks on the topic *"Miserliness and Generosity."* The following figure presents examples of the worksheets used by both teachers.

Figure 4.5

Student Worksheets (LKPD) Used in NU and PERSIS Primary Schools



(a) (b)

Note. a). Student worksheet used in NU primary school; b). Student worksheet used in PERSIS primary school

A closer look reveals that the student worksheets used in Aqidah instruction in both schools have similar strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, both involve open-ended questions that not only demand students to answer by recalling but also provide justification behind their answers. On the other hand, these questions do not actually provide genuinely open space for students to engage in critical reasoning because the expected answers are already implied within the framing of the questions themselves. Example of Question No. 2 in the NU worksheet:

"Is the environmental damage a consequence of human actions as explained in Surah Ar-Rum verse 41?"

The space allowed for justifying the response in this question is quite restricted; there is arguably no room for students to answer "No" as the interpretive frame is actually provided for them at the start of the question. This type of questions indicates that the

value being developed in religious education is not the ability to reason independently but to reinforce established values. A similar pattern is illustrated in the PERSIS primary school worksheet that explains the story of Rani who does not want to share, and Bayu who keeps on sharing although he has little resources. Any interpretation of the question within the black and white frame of the question is the right answer, making meaningful deliberation unnecessary. So, the instruction "explain" in such questions is not really design for an open thinking but rather to articulate a conclusion that has already given.

While the worksheet questions have been framed in accordance with the cognitive development of the primary school students, it is also indicative of the critical thinking perspectives of NU and PERSIS, according to which critical thinking is not meant for allowing unfettered thinking about religion; rather, it is a kind of thinking that cannot be completely separated from the Qur'an or other religious authorities.

4.1.2.2.3 *Qur'an Hadith*

The learning activities were observed in NU primary school was Mrs. Hana's class on the topic of *"Idgham* and *Iqlab."* In this class, a seemingly simple topic was taught through game-based learning that required students to engage in reasoning activities. Mrs. Hana started off the lesson with an energiser and a prompting question: *"Does anyone know what is meant by Idgham or Iqlab?"* She then used a real-world analogy to explain the concept of *idgham* which means "to merge" by illustrating how yellow and blue ink blend together to produce green ink. Such visual analogies are useful for primary school children, as they are able to help bring abstract concepts to more concrete. After that, she explained the concept of *idgham,* providing students with the foundational knowledge they needed before engaging in reasoning activities. The following excerpt illustrates how Mrs. Hana ensured that her students first recalled the relevant *tajwid* rules as a foundational step, before proceeding with the reasoning activities described in the next paragraph.

Mrs. Hana : What is the recitation rule for the phrase *Mataa'al lakum*?

Raka : *Idgham Bilaghunnah*.

Mrs. Hana : Why is it *Idgham Bilaghunnah*?

Raka : Because there is a *tanwin* followed by a *tasydid*.

The reiteration of these questions, 'what - then why' was further emphasized in group activities. Students were requested to identify the *hijaiyah* letter cards according to *Idgham bilagunnah, Idgham bigunnah,* and *Iqlab*. Later, three groups gave presentations

in front of the class by classifying examples of Qur'anic recitation rules, and these groups were assessed directly by the other groups through peer feedback. One example of peer feedback occurred when a student commented on a classmate's work, who had classified the phrase *mirrabbihim* under the *Iqlab* category. The student responded; *"That is incorrect. It is not Iqlab because the letter ro comes after nun. In Iqlab, the nun must be followed directly by the letter ba".* Students were also required to compare three recitation rules to identify their differences independently. This sequence of activities (identifying, classification, comparison, evaluation) showed that basic levels of critical thinking skills could be developed in the material, which was technical and rule-based, not only in topics with moral or philosophical values. An overview of the reasoning activities in the Qur'an-Hadith lesson at the NU primary school is presented in Figure 6.

Figure 4.6

Qur'an Hadits learning activities at the NU primary school



(a) (b)

(c) (d)

Note. (a) Identifying Hijaiyah letter cards by tajwid rules; (b) Classifying Qur'anic text cards by tajwid rules*;* (b) Student presentation; (c) Peer feedback.

A significant thing the teacher said, was why *tajwid* must be studied with seriousness and not just memorisation. The teacher explained that studying *tajwid* is a form of reverence, love, and proper etiquette towards the Qur'an. In other words, *tajwid* became learning of love for the sacred text, which may seem superficial, but was in fact a process of affective meaning which was given to the material which is very highly technical. In addition, the lesson concluded with a reflection activity in which students completed a worksheet describing how they felt after successfully reciting the Qur'an with the correct *tajwid*. They were also asked to make a written pledge to the Qur'an, committing themselves to continually improve their recitation. These learning activities reflect the teacher's perception of critical thinking in religious education, as discussed in section 4.1.2.1.2, which emphasizes that critical thinking extends beyond cognitive abilities and should be translated into daily actions and the development of good character.

At the PERSIS primary school, the observed Qur'an-Hadith lesson was conducted in Mrs. Dewi's class. During the lesson, Mrs. Dewi used a very dialogical and analytical approach in teaching the content on Q.S. Al-Kafirun and the value of tolerance. She fostered student engagement by posing open-ended questions, engaging in class discussions, and having students reflect on the concepts. Follow-up questions like 'why' and 'how' were consistently used to ensure students gave reasons for their answers; more open-ended questions than multiple choice ones were used. Notably, the religious tolerance issue was linked not just with religious texts but also with the value of the nation, such as Pancasila. A shift from the religious sphere towards the civic sphere is an expansion of the frame of reference and shows that the critical thinking developed in this context was not limited to the issues of *fiqh* and *aqidah* but also encompassed other aspects of citizenship.

This observation, however, also indicated a significant limitation that is germane to the discussion of ideology in the previous section. The teacher gave a clear explanation to the students about the boundaries of tolerance in Islam, including the prohibition against offering greetings for the religious celebrations of other faiths or participating in a friends' birthday celebration. This pattern reflects the characterisitic of "critical yet bounded" thinking pattern that was consistently observed in other PERSIS classrooms. Students were given space to think openly and dialogically; however, the substantive conclusions remained directed toward a particular religious position.

In the lesson on “loving fellow Muslims”, Mrs. Dewi shifted to an experiential learning approach. Students were invited to learn outside in the schoolyard, bringing gifts from home to exchange with one another, participating in group games while holding hands, and guiding one another to retrieve gifts while blindfolded. At the end of the lesson, Mrs. Dewi posed a question that required students to engage in reflection.

> So why should we love one another? (Mrs. Dewi, Qur’an Hadith Teacher, Observation, May 21, 2026)

Mrs. Dewi explained that the activity was intended as an enactment of a hadith that the students had previously memorized.

> “So actually, this is a form of practicing the hadith that the children memorized last week, ma’am, about loving one’s fellow Muslim as one love oneself. That is why we organized this activity, so the children would understand its meaning.” (Mrs. Dewi, Qur’an Hadith Teacher, Interview, May 21, 2026)

Compared with the lesson on “tolerance,” this class appeared to provide less space for critical dialogue. However, when viewed within the context of a lesson on loving fellow Muslims, a topic that is affective and relational in nature, the teacher’s approach may be considered appropriate and relevant. Through this approach, students were able to understand religious values through direct experience. They were still encouraged to reason during the closing session of the lesson, ensuring that an element of reflection remained present. The Qur'an-Hadith learning activities at the PERSIS primary school are presented in Figure 7.

Figure 4.7

Qur’an-Hadits learning activities at the PERSIS primary school



(a) (b)

Note. a) The teacher facilitating a discussion on students' views about befriending non-Muslims*;* b) Teaching the hadith on loving fellow Muslims through an experiential learning approach.

4.1.2.2.3 Habituation Programs

Habituation programs for students are provided by both institutions. At the NU school, the programs comprise the memorization exercise, ritual worship activities, *marawis* (traditional Islamic percussion music), and scouting. The memorization program focuses on *Juz 30* of Al-Qur'an and *Asma'ul Husna* (the 99 names of Allah). Memorization are done in groups once a week. Meanwhile the worship habituation program includes the performance of *Dhuha* prayer each Friday morning and *Dhuhr* prayer each school day. Mr. Putra explained that the purpose of these programs is to provide a foundation for students' critical thinking:

> Yes, it is important for students to know what Allah's attributes are like, so that when they become more critical, it serves as a kind of safeguard. Their critical thinking will not go astray. (Mr. Putra, Fiqh Teacher, Interview, May 19, 2026).

Beyond classroom instruction, scouting is also one of the regular programs organized by NU educational institutions. It is considered as an effective platform for instilling *Aswaja* values in a more contextual and enjoyable manner. Accordingly, the program not only focusing on the development of scouting skill but also as a medium for habituating distinctive NU religious practices, strengthening the values of *wasatiyyah* (moderation), fostering nationalism, and promoting cultural acculturation, yang merupakan bentuk pengimpelemntasian dari sikap critical thinking dalam beragama dalam tradisi NU. The following is a detailed explanation of scouting program and its relationship to *Aswaja* values according to the head of LP Ma'arif NU.

> Aswaja values must become an integral part of Ma'arif scout activities. For example, during camps, students are accustomed to performing *wirid* after congregational prayers, reciting the Quran, and praying subuh with *qunut.* In this activity, we also invite NU figures who have been successful to inspire students by showing that NU members can also become successful entrepreneurs. This is intended to teach the value of *tawasuth* (maintaining a balance between human effort and prayer) and tolerance, for example, in conducting business with non-Muslims. We also organize parades involving participants from various regions to introduce students to the diversity and local culture to foster love for the homeland. That's reflects our commitment to the principle, *'Hubbul wathan minal iman,'* loving the homeland is part of faith. In addition, the program includes *marawis*, songs whose lyrics are replaced with the values of *aswaja, shalawat*, or the names of the Prophets. It is to teach cultural acculturation. In short, the concept of scouting in our institution is to learn *aswaja* in a joyful way. (Mrs. Rahma, Head of the NU Education Division, interview, May 24, 2026)

The series of religious activities embedded within the scouting program reflects the consistency of the conception of critical thinking cultivated in the NU educational

tradition. Rather than being developed through open debate or by encouraging students to question religious authority, critical thinking is nurtured to the habituation of tawasuth (moderation*), tasamuh* (tolerance), cultural preservation, and hubbul wathan (love for the homeland) (hubbul wathan) as an expression of faith. Thus, the scouting program serves as an extension of this pedagogical approach beyond the classroom, reinforcing the same values through experiential learning rather than through formal religious instruction.

An overview of the habituation program in the basic curriculum of NU can be seen in the following figures.

Figure 4.8

Habituation Programs at the NU Primary School



(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)

Note. a). Congregational Dhuhr prayer, b). Marawis training, c). Scouting activities, d). Asmaul Husna memorization

While at the PERSIS primary school, the memorization and worship habituation programs are implemented even more rigorously. Students are required to memorize one new Qur'anic verse every day and review several previously memorized chapters. In addition, they are habituated to perform *Dhuha* prayer, congregational *Dhuhr* prayer, and *shadaqah* (voluntary charity) on a daily basis. Regarding this practice, Mr. Budi described it as a developmental stage that students must go through during elementary education:

> At the elementary school age, children should at least be introduced to things, taught, and given examples. Therefore, habituation activities need to be carried out frequently. It is different from the junior and senior high school levels, where students are at a more advanced stage of critical thinking. For elementary students, the minimum expectation is that they become familiar with concepts, receive explanations, and most importantly, are given examples and guided in developing good habits. That is more or less the idea. (Mr. Budi, Homeroom Teacher, Interview, May 19, 2026).

Figure 4.9

Habituation Programs at the PERSIS Primary School



(a) (b)

(c) (d)

Note. a). Congregational Dhuhr prayer, b). Reviewing or memorizing Qur'anic verses before class, c). Daily *sadaqah* (voluntary charity), d). Dhuha prayer

Based on the researcher's observations, memorization activities in both schools still relied primarily on a rote memorization approach. Teachers would first recite the material, and students would then repeat it multiple times. No explicit sessions were observed in which students were encouraged to reason about or understand the meanings of what they were memorizing or practicing through worship activities. Nevertheless, the Head of the Tarbiyyah Division explained that understanding of the Qur'an is developed thematically and progressively:

> As for understanding the Qur'an, we approach it thematically through other subjects such as fiqh, tawhid, and akhlaq. When students reach higher educational levels, what they have memorized becomes a source of textual evidence (*dalil*). They learn where it comes from, what it refers to, and so on. Therefore, it cannot be achieved in just one educational stage; it must continue progressively until the *Mu'allimin* level (senior secondary education). (Mr. Dani, Head of the Tarbiyyah Division, Interview, April 11, 2026).

4.1.2.2.4 Summary of the Teaching Practices of NU and PERSIS Primary School Teachers in Fostering Critical Thinking in Religious Education

The findings of the classroom teaching practices show that the teaching practices undertaken by the teacher in NU and PERSIS primary schools to develop critical thinking skills generally follow common pedagogical practices in the national educational system such as Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS), Merdeka Curriculum and/or Love-Based Curriculum. For *Fiqh* lessons, the classes were conducted in an interactive lecture style in both NU and PERSIS primary schools which used several critical thinking teaching techniques including questioning, evaluation and reflection. Dialogue and experiential learning were the main methods used in *Qur'an-Hadith* lessons, whereas problem-based learning was the primary approach used in *Aqidah-Akhlaq* lessons.

However, the ideology of the organization also has a substantial impact in shaping teachers' perceptions, which in turn influence their practices in classroom. In this regard, organizational ideology does not function as a technique for improving students' critical thinking skills in religious education. Instead, it involves the substance of these methods, determining the scope in which student can think critically, the attributes they need to have to avoid being misled in thinking, the authorities they can use to validate a conclusion, and the direction of critical thinking itself, either challenging or reinforcing religious beliefs.

Other findings from this study that need to be noted include the fact that neither teachers from the NU school nor those from the PERSIS school view memorization and habituation as conflicting with critical thinking. Rather, the two are seen by the two groups as a means by which students build their base of knowledge in order to use for their critical thinking processes. Habituation, on the other hand, is viewed as the means by which students learn to cultivate their character in order to think responsibly and critically. From these programs of memorization and habituation, teachers in both NU and PERSIS primary schools do not see critical thinking as a separate process from what has been learned.

The results obtained from this study may have wider implications for studies on critical thinking in religious education. According to the findings, an assessment of whether critical thinking has been successfully implemented based on how the teachers teach may actually overlook one of the most fundamental aspects of the process, namely ideology, which determines the limits, points of reference, and orientation of critical thinking.

4.1.3 Challenges in Implementing Critical Thinking Instruction in NU and PERSIS Primary Schools

This part will discuss Research Question 3: *What challenges that teachers in NU and PERSIS primary schools experience in implementing critical thinking instruction in Islamic education?* The data are drawn from interviews with teachers and heads of education divisions from both Islamic organizations. To facilitate cross-case analysis, the emerging patterns are grouped into four main categories: student-related factors, teacher-related factors, school and curriculum factors, and parent and community factors.

A summary of the challenges faced by teachers in NU and PERSIS elementary schools in teaching critical thinking is presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4.3

Challenges in Implementing Critical Thinking Instruction in NU and PERSIS Primary Schools

Category of Challenges	NU Teachers	PERSIS Teachers
Student	- Gadget distractions and declining motivation - Differences in students' abilities	
Teacher	- Teacher readiness - Internal Motivation	- Limited teacher competence; - Teachers' emotional conditions - Requires greater preparation
School		- Inadequate training Facilities
Parents and Community	- Home environment; Parental attention	- Students' psychological conditions

4.1.3.1 Challenges in NU Primary School

4.1.3.1.1 Student-Related Challenges: Gadgets and Cognitive Capacity

Two of the three teachers from the NU elementary school frequently identified gadgets as the primary challenge in teaching critical thinking to students. Mrs. Rina explained this explicitly:

> The challenge nowadays is smartphones, gadgets. It is difficult once children become familiar with gadgets, from Grade 1 through Grade 6. (Mrs. Rina, Aqidah Akhlak Teacher, Interview, May 13, 2026)

A similar view was expressed by Mrs. Hana. Furthermore, she argued that students' use of gadgets has also led to a decline in their motivation and learning quality.

> Our challenges are actually heavily influenced by smartphones. Those media disrupt children's learning. Once children are attached to their phones, they become lazy and perform less well in learning. Many children still cannot use smartphones as learning tools; instead, they spend their time playing games or scrolling through TikTok, hehe. (Mrs. Hana, Qur'an Hadith Teacher, Interview, May 13, 2026)

As teachers who are directly present in the classroom and observe children's development firsthand, teachers in NU elementary schools recognize the influence of smartphones on students' motivation and learning quality. Although they acknowledge that smartphones can provide certain benefits, they argue that their negative impact on children's learning motivation is substantial. This has been especially important in light on the ban on assigning homework to students, which has led to students having minimal, or even no time at all to study at home. Instead, they spend much of their time on leisure activities such as playing games or indulging in social media. According to these teachers, it is this situation that leads to poor development of students' cognitive skills.

Interestingly, the head of education at NU expressed a different opinion, stating that a lack of awareness regarding the use of digital technology as a medium for educational development among NU educational institutions, including teachers, was one of the major challenges. She admitted that digital disruption has made it challenging for children to disengage from their gadgets and has negatively impacted their motivation to learn. Therefore, she believes that developing religious education within digital spaces is one effective way to sustain children's enthusiasm for learning.

> At present, literacy resources in elementary schools, especially for the Aswaja curriculum, are still very limited. Most reading materials are intended for adults rather than children. Learning materials should be packaged in more engaging ways. We need interesting books, or nowadays even AI. Stories about the founders of NU, such as how they taught at dawn, then took their students to farm or sell rice in the morning and later studied with them again in the afternoon or evening, those stories are fascinating. If they were visualized, they would be extraordinary. Such examples from our teachers are truly noble. This

> is also one of our challenges. If we do not present them in that way, children will not be interested." (Mrs. Rahma, LP Ma'arif NU, Interview, May 24, 2026)

In addition, she encouraged teachers to make greater use of social media as a source of instructional inspiration so that they could further develop their teaching methods.

> I think that nowadays media are very open for finding inspiration on how to implement Wasatiyyah values through activities that are appealing to children." (Mrs. Rahma, LP Ma'arif NU, Interview, May 24, 2026)

The perspective of the head of education at Ma'arif NU points to a concrete strategy that can be adopted not only by teachers in NU elementary schools but also by religious education teachers more broadly. As it is hard to restrict the use of smartphone completely, expanding learning into digital spaces might enable children to learn effectively. Such efforts will also ensure that religion is present in students' everyday lives, including their lives in digital space, rather than just being limited to discussions in class.

One other important problem that teachers in NU elementary schools have identified is the difference in students' cognitive ability. They emphasized that each child possesses different cognitive capacities, and consequently, their levels of critical thinking will also vary.

> Children have different levels of ability. Sometimes there are children who are very critical, like one student (mentions student's name) who often asks spontaneous questions. We explain, and then he asks another question. You can see that this child has strong thinking skills. That may be one example of critical thinking. If someone thinks at a higher level, perhaps it is an advantage because their mind works differently from others." (Mrs. Rina, Aqidah Akhlak Teacher, Interview, May 13, 2026)

In this statement, Mrs. Rina appears to regard critical thinking as a gift or advantage bestowed by God upon certain individuals. What is noteworthy, however, is that this belief does not lead teachers to view critical thinking as a fixed trait that cannot be developed. Mrs. Hana explicitly stated that teachers should strive to ensure that every child is able to think critically.

> Children certainly have different levels of ability. But that is our challenge, how we can encourage them to become more motivated to think. (Mrs. Hana, Qur'an Hadith Teacher, Interview, May 13, 2026)

4.1.3.1.2 Teacher-Related Challenges: Readiness and Pedagogical Capacity

This study found that the primary challenge in implementing critical thinking instruction in NU elementary schools lies in the teachers' own readiness and competence. Teachers explained that the success of critical thinking instruction is not determined solely by student-related factors but also by teachers' preparedness to design and implement learning experiences that enable children to engage in deeper thinking.

Several teachers stated that implementing critical thinking instruction requires greater preparation and planning than conventional forms of teaching. This was expressed by Mrs. Hana as follows:

> In my experience, the challenge of getting children to think critically is indeed quite demanding. We need to have appropriate teaching methods that fit the lesson. And if we want students to be enthusiastic about learning, then we also need to be enthusiastic in our teaching. (Mrs. Hana, Qur'an Hadith Teacher, Interview, May 13, 2026)

This assertation indicates that teachers perceive teaching critical thinking as an activity that requires a high level of teaching competence, as it needs the ability to choose suitable instructional methods, design questions that stimulate students to think more deeply, and manage students to stay engaged throughout the learning process. This is particularly crucial for primary school students who tend to have short attention spans and be very active. Consequently, Mrs. Rina also emphasized that the challenge of critical thinking instruction lies not only with students but, more importantly, with teachers' own preparedness.

> There has to be alignment between the teacher and the students, so the first question is whether we ourselves are ready to teach. (Mrs. Rina, Aqidah Akhlak Teacher, Interview, May 13, 2026)

Furthermore, teachers emphasized that the quality of critical thinking instruction is strongly influenced by teachers' own motivation and professionalism. Several teachers acknowledged that under certain conditions, for example, when they feel unmotivated, they do not prepare lessons optimally.

> One challenge is that during the last teaching periods of the day, we are sometimes less focused, and sometimes it is simply because we feel lazy. When we are feeling lazy, we do not have the motivation, we do not open our laptops, we do not prepare teaching materials before class, and we are not creative. Those are obstacles that come from within ourselves. (Mrs. Hana, Qur'an Hadith Teacher, Interview, May 13, 2026)

The statement underlines the need to be technically competent in implementing critical thinking instruction and to consistently apply critical thinking principles in the classroom. From the findings suggest that teachers perceive the teaching of critical

thinking as a practice that demands a higher level of readiness and capability than teaching oriented to knowledge transmission. This is because teachers must continually adjust, innovate, and persevere in maintaining the quality of learning.

4.1.3.1.3 Family-Related Challenges: Parental Support and Value Alignment

The obstacles identified by NU primary shool teachers in teaching critical thinking in religious education do not end in the classroom but are also closely linked with their families' involvement and support at home. They explained that students' cognitive ability were not the only factors impacting students' active engagement in the learning process in the classroom; instead by their emotional factors, parental attention, and the alignment between the school values and those reinforced by parents in the home environment. Based on this, they concluded that developing children's critical thinking skills is not solely the responsibility of schools but also involves cooperation with families.

Mrs Rina highlighted the considerable influence of home environment on the readiness of the students to think critically during religious education sessions in the classroom.

> A very well-organized home life and a happy disposition will surely lead to enthusiasm in school. But once they are feeling unhappy or having any kind of trouble, their participation in the learning process decreases considerably once they come to school. They become withdrawn and gloomy (Mrs. Rina, Aqidah Akhlak Teacher, Interview, May 13, 2026).

Teaching critical thinking involves active participation of the student in the learning activities, either in dialogue or in projects. They should be self-assured and have the confidence to speak openly. Thus, when students come to class feeling withdrawn or emotionally upset, their ability and willingness to actively engage in learning is severely diminished. From the teacher's point of view, it can be understood that teachers face a more complex challenge as they are required to not only consider how to teach students to think critically but also how to support student who arrive with various psychological issues shaped by their home environment.

Apart from the students' emotional condition, parental attention also affects the students' thinking abilities. As explained below:

> With attentive parents you can clearly see the difference in class when compared to one where the pupil is less attentive in the household. (Mrs. Rina, Aqidah Akhlak Teacher, Interview, May 13, 2026)

The teacher makes this statement to indicate that there is a correlation between parent attention and student's willingness to be active in learning activities in the classroom. She said that students who recieve attention and learning assistance from their parents demonstrate higher learning motivation than those who receive less support. What needs to be pointed out from Mrs. Rina's statement is the fact that the critical thinking skills of the students are not developed in a socially neutral environment but rather is strongly influenced by the guidance of parents.

Furthermore, the head of LP Ma'arif NU emphasized the crucial role of parents in combating the issues of the digital world faced by students today. She said that students are currently flooded with information, a lot of which includes misinformation and inappropriate content. Therefore, it becomes the responsibility of the schools as well as the parents to filter what the children are read, watch and listen. She added that students spend much more time at home with their families than at school, making it essential for parents to carry on the guidance that has been established within the school.

> The question here is how the students will be supported by their families, particularly their parents, in order to ensure there is synergy in filtering what the children read, listen to and how the most important guidance they receive at school can be maintained at home. Today, many parents work, so who will ensure that children pray, what they read, and so on? That's a tough one as well. (Mrs. Rahma, LP Ma'arif NU, Interview, May 13, 2026)

In other words, the problem is not that of too much information, but the lack of synergy between parents and the schools in helping children use the information in a critical way. In this connection, the ability to think critically on the part of the students will never be possible in a socially neutral setting, but only through effective cooperation among students, teachers, and the parents as was described by the head of LP Ma'arif as a "three-way partnership."

> Education is a partnership of parents, children and teachers. They all have to play their part. (Mrs. Rahma, LP Ma'arif NU, Interview, May 13, 2026)

4.1.3.2 Challenges in PERSIS Primary School

4.1.3.2.1 Student-Related Challenges

Just like teachers in NU elementary schools, teachers in PERSIS elementary schools stressed the effect of the students' psychological condition from their home environment that affects their willingness to participate actively in the learning process. The following statements explain what Mrs. Dewi said about the matter:

> Classroom situation can become an impediment; it is very conditional. We are not always aware of the children's mental health. They might have been told off by their parents at home and have come to school tired and unmotivated. Therefore, as teachers, we need to adjust. Although the lesson plan is written in one manner, what actually occurs in the classroom may differ. (Mrs. Dewi, Classroom Teacher, Interview, May 27, 2026)

The psychological conditions of students is definitely a factor that affects the effectiveness of teaching critical thinking skills in the calssroom. However, an issue that needs further consideration is what teachers do once they recognize this reality. No evidence was found for any initiatives in both school to tackle this challenge based on the teacher responses. Students' psychological conditions were considered as obstacles, but there were no planned measures that seemed to have been taken to anticipate the issue. In other words, teachers recognized the psychological conditions of students but did not actively respond to them.

These findings indicate that teachers tend to regard students' psychological conditions as external factors that lie beyond the scope of their instructional intervention. As a result, students' emotional conditions are more often positioned as explanations for the limitations of learning rather than as aspects that need to be addressed through specific instructional strategies. In this regard, students' psychological readiness is viewed as a prerequisite for critical thinking to occur, rather than as part of the learning process that should be intentionally developed and facilitated by teachers.

4.1.3.2.2 Teacher-Related Challenges: Pedagogical Readiness and Professional Capacity

Unlike teachers in NU elementary schools, who tended to emphasize teacher creativity and the need to design engaging instructional methods, the challenges identified in PERSIS schools were more closely related to teachers' capacity to facilitate the thinking process itself. The findings indicate that teachers are required not only to master the subject matter but also to follow students' lines of reasoning, respond to unexpected questions, and translate complex concepts into language that can be understood by elementary school children.

Mrs. Silvi explained:

> This is very hard when we cannot keep up with their thinking capacity. We also have our constraints, you see. Or sometimes it is difficult to explain things. The language is the main difficulty for us. I'm afraid that I may use the wrong wording or explan something incorrectly. (Mrs. Silvi, Homeroom Teacher, Interview, May 18, 2026)

The findings suggest a transformation in the role of teachers from providers of information into providers of opportunities for logical reasoning. However, such a change in some cases can be difficult to achieve, especially in religious education in which case the position of teachers are traditionally perceived as a source of knowledge. Teachers face situations where they must cope with uncertainty when students ask unexpected questions or present unpredictable reasoning, challenging their ability to maintain pedagogical authority. In this context, critical thinking instruction is viewed as more challenging than instruction that primarily focuses on content.

Furthermore, teachers highlighted that the effectiveness of critical thinking instruction is greatly influenced by their personal readiness. According to Mrs. Dewi, the quality of learning is inseparable from teachers' mental and physical conditions. For instance, one of the teachers said the following:

> First, it depends on the teacher's intentions. Because for example, if I am not feeling well, either physically or mentally, then I will just give them exercises to work on. (Interview, Homeroom Teacher, Mrs. Dewi, May 18, 2026)

This means that critical thinking instruction entails a deeper level of participation compared to instruction focuses on information transmission. Whenever the physical, psychological, or motivational conditions of the teachers worsens, the learning process becomes more passive and goal oriented. That is to say, critical thinking instruction is not only dependent on the professional competence of teachers, but also their ability to remain emotionally and intellectually involved in the process of teaching and learning.

Along with this, teachers consistently identified teaching critical thinking as requiring significantly more preparation than conventional instruction. One teacher explained:

> There's a lot of preparation involved because we must first be very familiar with the material. Then we have to think about our audience, who we are teaching. It is easier in some subjects than in others as it demands a strong understanding of the underlying theory. Then learning process itself must also be carefully considered. (Mr. Budi, Homeroom Teacher, Interview, May 18, 2026)

It appears from these findings that teaching critical thinking is a more complicated and challenging pedagogical activity in the eyes of teachers. This means that the issues that arise in PERSIS classrooms are not just ones of interest and intent to encourage critical thinking but, high professional demands of putting it into practice.

The overall findings point to the fact that the challenges of implementing critical thinking in PERSIS schools are not primarily about the resistance of the concept of critical thinking, but it is related to the significant pedagogical requirements that need to be addressed by teachers to encourage critical thinking process effectively. Effecting critical thinking means that teachers must be more than a mere transmitter of information; they must connect students' thinking to their learning content, deal with uncertainty when engaging in dialogue, and maintain quality learning interactions over time. This is where many teachers feel they are at their most challenged.

4.1.3.2.3 Institutional Challenges: Limited Professional Development and Practical Support

One of the main challenges in implementing critical thinking instruction in religious education, according to teachers in PERSIS primary school, is the insufficient training and support for teachers to develop critical thinking pedagogy. This was conveyed by Mrs Silvi & Mr Budi as follows:

> There has never been any training specifically for religious subjects. So when I heard critical thinking I thought, “Oh, so this actually exists.” (Mrs. Silvi, Homeroom Teacher, Interview, May 18, 2026)

> Actually, there is no training specifically focused on that in religious subjects. However, the textbooks are indirectly filled with HOTS (Higher-Order Thinking Skills) questions, and that also helps train students' thinking skills. (Mr. Budi, Homeroom Teacher, Interview, May 19, 2026)

The lack of training directed at enhancing the capability of teachers to teach critical thinking has led to poor understanding of critical thinking as a concept for teaching even though the teachers have indeed been using the principles of critical thinking in their daily teaching routines. This is because they viewed their teaching of critical thinking as being mainly intuitive based on personal knowledge and experience of critical thinking.

However, those were not the end of the concerns of teachers. They also identified other problems, which show differences in expectations of both government and organization regarding critical thinking education and what actually happens in schools. Another curriculum that has been discussed was the Love Based Curriculum (Kurikulum Berbasis Cinta or KBC) in which it is expected that students of primary level have skills to use digital media, but readiness of the *madrasa* facilities is not considered.

> There are numerous tasks these days where digital tools are needed to produce something, like a digital poster or article. However, at school it is challenging

> due to the lack of computer labs at school, and when students are required to search for articles, the library here is not sufficient. (Mrs. Silvi, Homeroom Teacher, Interview, May 18, 2026)

In addition, Mrs. Silvi revealed her dissatisfaction with the training programs which, in her opinion, were mainly procedural and not truly developmental in nature.

> Even when there is teacher training for the new curriculum, it is only through lecture-based training. We become bored, and we do not understand anything. No after-training assistance is done to guide us on how we should incorporate the new strategy into our class lessons, making us feel very confused. And there are no facilities. The teacher performance evaluation (PKG) seems like it is just carried out to meet certain administrative necessities. Personally, I prefer constructive criticism. I would like to know where I lack and what should be improved, since just by teaching does not mean that I teach well. (Mrs. Silvi, Homeroom Teacher, Interview, May 18, 2026)

> From PERSIS there is also nothing specifically about this critical thinking. Most of the study sessions for Pemudi PERSIS (the young women's organization of PERSIS) focus on parenting, aqidah, or akhlaq. (Mrs. Silvi, Homeroom Teacher, Interview, May 18, 2026)

These findings indicate that the challenges faced by teachers in teaching critical thinking stem not only from their own readiness as individuals but also from the fact that institutional support for building teachers' capacity to teach critical thinking in religious education classrooms remains underdeveloped.

4.2 Discussion

This section discusses the findings presented in the previous section through the lens of Ennis's critical thinking framework and relevant prior literature. The discussion is organized according to the three research questions, namely teachers' perceptions of critical thinking in religious education, the practices employed by NU and PERSIS elementary school teachers in teaching critical thinking in religious education, and the challenges they face in implementing critical thinking instruction within religious education.

4.2.1 NU and PERSIS Primary School Teachers' Perceptions of Critical Thinking in Religious Education

4.2.1.1 Critical Thinking as a Religious Education Necessity

The findings of this study indicate that religious education teachers in NU and PERSIS primary schools do not perceive critical thinking as a foreign or contradictory

concept. Instead, they see it as a skill that enables them to meet their education-related goals in a better way. This is evident in the way they conceptualize critical thinking through the contemporary educational terminology, which is largely influenced by Western theories, including higher order thinking skills, a disposition toward questioning, the ability to evaluate information, and the capacity for active reasoning. These definitions indicate a similar understanding of critical thinking as active, persistent and careful consideration of a belief or knowledge form, which was defined by Dewey (1993). These definitions are consistent with the Ennis's (1990) definition of critical thinking as reflective and purposive thinking.

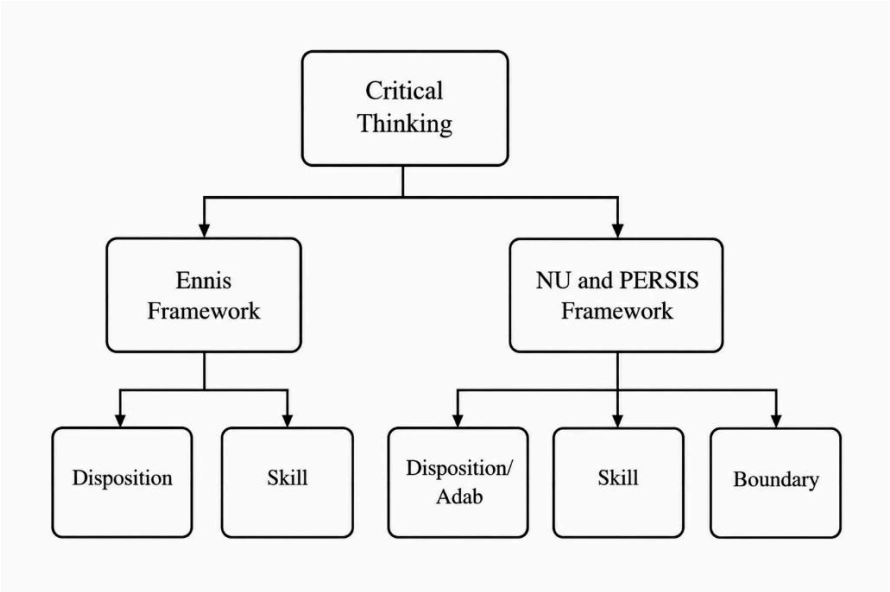
Moreover, these teachers stressed the need for the development of critical thinking in the sphere of religious education, since in their opinion, religion is not only a set of beliefs, but also a way of life that should be comprehended and put into practice in daily activities. Several teachers explained the significance of critical thinking in religious education. In their opinion, it contributes to the development of comprehension, as suggested by MacIntyre (1999), develops critical consciousness regarding different acts of religion that the students perform (Sahin, 2013) and defends them against any negative impact performed in the name of religion. On the basis of this information, the researcher concludes that these teachers have quite comprehensive knowledge about the discussed topic.

Another finding from this research was that while these teachers agree that critical thinking is a desirable aim of religious education, such openness does not imply that pupils are given unlimited freedom to question and think without restriction. The teachers highlighted the presence of some principles, values, forms of *adab,* and authoritative references that must be the basis for critical thinking so that it can be applied responsibly and in accordance with the religious values upheld by their organizations. This point distinguishes the concept of critical thinking in Islamic education from the concept advanced by Ennis and other universal theorists, who generally define it as a cognitive ability without attachment to any particular values or norms that might give it a distinctive character (Ennis, 1990; Facione, 1990; Paul & Elder, 2006). Therefore, while Santos-Meneses (2020) argues that individuals think critically as a result of being shaped by their cultural and socio-political environments, this study suggests that, within the context of Islamic education, critical thinking is strongly influenced by the ideology of the Islamic organization under whose authority it is practiced.

The differences between the components of critical thinking in Ennis's framework and those found in Islamic education are illustrated in the following diagram.

Figure 4.10

Comparison of Ennis's Critical Thinking Framework and the NU-PERSIS Critical Thinking Framework



For teachers in NU elementary schools, the most visible direction and boundaries of critical thinking are reflected in the emphasis on validating knowledge through the system of *sanad* (a chain of teachers that authentically transmits religious teachings back to the Prophet Muhammad) and on contextualizing religion within the culture of society. In other words, within the NU tradition, critical thinking is not regarded as an independent concept but rather as part of a tradition of evaluating claims by referring to sources considered credible within their scholarly tradition. In addition, they establish boundaries around matters of *ilahiyah*, which are not considered open to criticism unless approached from a strong foundation of *tawhid*.

For PERSIS teachers, critical thinking is emphasized through the concept of *ittiba'*, namely evaluating the validity of religious practices or beliefs based on primary sources of authority, namely the Qur'an and authentic Hadith. Thus, for PERSIS teachers as well, critical thinking does not mean encouraging students to ask questions without restriction; rather, it involves ensuring that every belief and religious practice is grounded in clear and accountable evidence. In parallel to the context at NU, teachers in the PERSIS tradition also find something that falls outside of the scope of critical thinking, namely matters of the unseen *(ghaybiyyah)*.

Although it might appear that these prohibitions act as barriers to critical thinking, in a more profound way, these prohibitions of the matters of *ilahiyah* in the NU approach and the matters of *ghaybiyyah* in the PERSIS approach actually seem to be consistent with the aims of critical thinking in Islamic education as well as those of the Western critical thinking traditions, which is to encourage critical questioning of empirical and rational matters (Jarmer, 2024).

The presence of specific principles and limitations within this idea of critical thinking can be considered as an important step in maintaining the validity and integrity of religious teachings. In addition, such limitations might serve as an answer to longstanding concerns regarding the threats of secularism and liberalism brought by unfounded critical thinking (Zarkasyi, 2020) as well as concerns about the stagnation of Islamic thoughts (Abdullah, 2014). In the context of Islamic education, this idea may help to reconcile the contradiction between the problem of unlimited research-based teaching, which is often perceived as challenging religious authority, and traditional approaches to education that are increasingly viewed as outdated (Reza et al., 2025). However, on the other side, there is also the possibility that having such boundaries in critical thinking can provide room for separating what questions can be asked from those that should not be asked.

Interestingly, the findings of this study found that in the context of religious education, the discussion on critical thinking is no longer one-sided on whether students are allowed to think critically or what the limits of critical thinking should be. Instead, the new issue to focus on is who will have the right to set such boundaries and why they need to be set. The answer to this question in the context of NU and PERSIS will be explained in the next section.

4.2.1.2 Organizational Ideology and Its Influence on the Construction of Critical Thinking

As mentioned in the previous section, teachers in the NU and PERSIS primary schools have a similar understanding of critical thinking as the free flow of ideas. Instead, they consider it as a tool that is directed to serve a specific purpose, preserving the integrity and authenticity of Islamic beliefs. This perception is embedded in the mission of both organizations; NU's dedication to *Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah* and PERSIS motto of returning to the Qur'an and Sunnah. The teachers who participated in both the NU and PERSIS primary schools view critical thinking as a reasoning act that is normatively

oriented and regulated by theological frameworks, principles, and norms, and not as a value-neutral cognitive ability as is generally seen in global critical thinking frameworks (Ennis, 1996; Paul & Elder, 2006).

With respect to this view, memorization of religious texts does not seem to be set against the principles of critical thinking in Islamic education tradition. Rather, it is considered to be religious cognitive base. Learning theories (Anderson et al., 2001; Biggs & Collis, 2014) generally depict memorization as a lower level in the learning hierarchy, however, in the Islamic education tradition of NU and PERSIS, whose main aim is the preservation of religious authenticity, memorization is seen as one of the main learning tools. Memorizing the Qur'an, Hadith or other authoritative sources serves as a building block of critical thinking or what could be called valid background knowledge. Considering this aspect, it would mean that it belongs to the *Bases for a Decision*, as suggested by Ennis (2011), whereby critical thinkers require previous validated knowledge as a cognitive standard to filter information.

In connection with this mission of maintaining religious authenticity, teachers also reported on unique intellectual traditions that are then carried out in the classroom within their respective organizations. NU teachers manifested critical thinking through the concept of *sanad,* a chain of scholarly transmission that functions as a rigorous system for verifying sources. The implementation of the critical thinking approach allows understanding the necessity to contextualise religious beliefs from the viewpoint of the tradition and social dynamics. Within the framework of this model, the questioning of traditions is not promoted; only their validation and continuation are questioned. In this context, the chain of scholarly transmission becomes a proof of validity of religious knowledge rather than direct textual criticism.

PERSIS teachers, by contrast, operationalize critical thinking in the form of *ittibā',* namely the practice of following religious teachings based on solid textual evidence in the Qur'an and Sunnah, rather than through unquestioning conformity to religious authority *(taqlīd).* This approach encourages students to evaluate religious claims using primary text sources. Students' critical skills are developed to purify the religious truth from whatever PERSIS considers to be unsupported additions *(bid'ah).*

In simple terms, the differences between NU and PERSIS conceptions of critical thinking can be seen in the following table.

Table 4.4

The Concept of Critical Thinking According to NU and PERSIS Ideologies

Component	NU	PERSIS
Boundaries	*Ilāhiyyah* (Divine Matters)	*Ghaibiyyah* (Unseen Matters)
Valid Authority	*Sanad* / *Taqlid*	*Ittibāʿ*
Purpose	Contextualizing Religious Teachings	Purifying Religious Teachings

Based on the characteristics of critical thinking described above, the researcher concludes that the model of critical thinking within the educational traditions of NU and PERSIS is not one of unlimited skepticism but instead a guided critical thinking. This pattern is consistent with what Kunda (1990, as cited in Van Doorn, 2024) explained as directional motivated reasoning, the reasoning that is not pursued to reach the maximum accuracy but reaches a conclusion that has been directed beforehand. But while in Kunda's sense of the desired conclusion is shaped by personal motives and desires such as self-esteem, self-interest, or group identity, in the sense of NU and PERSIS the directionality is based on religious institutional authority, namely the Qur'an, the Sunnah, and the *ijtihad* of the scholars of Islam.

Within guided critical thinking model, students' critical thinking is stimulated in two directions at the same time: outward, as a filter to avoid erroneous information and inward as a cognitive guidance to teach students to understand the deeper meaning of religious practices.

4.2.1.3 The Ethics *(Adab)* of Critical Thinking in NU and PERSIS Islamic Education

The findings indicate that both NU and PERSIS place *adab* in a position higher than critical thinking itself. This finding is particularly noteworthy considering the dominant view in the critical thinking literature that deference to authority may hinder the development of critical thinking. In both cases, critical thinking is seen acceptable only when it is accompanied by *adab*. Therefore, *adab* is not positioned as a limitation for critical thinking but rather as the condition that legitimizes its use.

These findings can be interpreted through Ennis's framework, which distinguishes between critical thinking abilities and critical thinking dispositions. However, this study also demonstrates that the concept of disposition within Ennis's framework requires a more contextualized interpretation when applied to Islamic education. Whereas critical thinking dispositions in the broader literature are generally discussed in terms of open-mindedness, the pursuit of sound reasons, or a willingness to revise one's beliefs, the findings of this study suggest that such dispositions are

manifested through the concept of *adab*. In other words, *adab* functions not merely as an ethical code but also as a mechanism that regulates one's relationship with knowledge, authority, and truth.

The following is a summary of the *adab* of critical thinking according to teachers in NU and PERSIS elementary schools.

Table 4.5

The Adab of Critical Thinking According to NU and PERSIS Primary School Teachers

Ennis' Criteria	NU Teachers	PERSIS Teachers
Truth-seeking	- Grounded in a strong foundation of *aqidah* and knowledge. - Must not enter the domain of *ilahiyyah* (divine matters).	- Scientific and evidence-based (*dalil*-based). - Must not enter the domain of *ghaybiyyah* (the unseen). - Subject to divine revelation.
Intellectual Honesty	- *Khidmat* (devotion and respect) toward teachers.	- *Adab* serves as a boundary for critical thinking
Intellectual Empathy	- Learning should be open and inclusive.	- Teacher–student relationships are egalitarian.
-	- *Ilmu amaliyyah* (critical thinking oriented toward action and good character).	- *Ilmu maslahah* (critical thinking oriented toward the common good and societal benefit).

While Ennis defines critical thinking as *"deciding what to believe or do"* in a relatively neutral sense, NU teachers add the criterion of *ilmu amaliyah*, namely thinking that is translated into good actions and character in everyday life. PERSIS teachers, on the other hand, supplement it with *ilmu maslahah*, namely thinking that is oriented toward the collective good. Therefore, according to teachers in these elementary schools, critical thinking does not simply mean thinking correctly; it means thinking in ways that are good and that lead to goodness.

More broadly, these findings reveal a fundamental difference between the conceptualization of critical thinking in Islamic education and that found in much of the global critical thinking tradition. The global literature is generally built upon the assumption that intellectual autonomy is a prerequisite for critical thinking. By contrast, the findings of this study indicate that neither NU nor PERSIS begin critical thinking from the premise of autonomy; rather, both begin from the premise of responsibility.

From this point of view, the main role of critical thinking lies in ensuring that reason works within the ethical and moral bounds. However, this research shows another paradox that should not be overlooked. Adab plays the role of disposition that enhances critical thinking through the development of intellectual humility, prudent assessment of

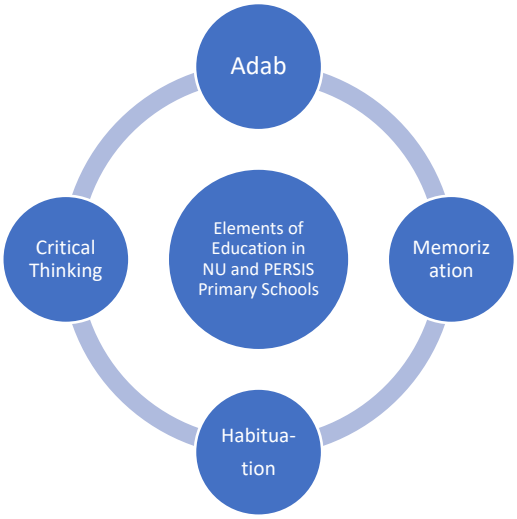
statements and responsible critique. However, at the same time, the same basis can potentially reduce the role of the evaluative process in critical thinking, if respect for authority turns into absolute epistemic obedience. Therefore, the connection between *adab* and critical thinking cannot be perceived romantically as something always in harmony. The two aspects are in a state of continuous tension. The lack of *adab* may result in ungrounded criticism, while the emphasis on *adab* too much can narrow the scope of critical thinking regarding authority.

This study argues that the significance of *adab* extends beyond its role as a critical thinking dispositions in Islamic education. The more important point raised is that the connection between authority and critical thinking must be re-examined. Instead of looking at the two as opposite ends, the findings of this research indicate that the notion of authority can play dual roles, which are the prerequisite and the target of critical thinking. *Adab* plays the role of the tool that makes these two functions work at the same time in the case of NU and PERSIS.

From the discussion above it can be concluded that critical thinking is not the only component regarded important within Islamic education. Both NU and PERSIS believe that critical thinking should be built along with the development of *adab*, the habituation of Islamic values and the acquisition of religious knowledge through systematic learning processes, with some memorization in domains of religious knowledge. The elements of Islamic education identified by teachers in NU and PERSIS primary schools are presented in full in the figure below.

Figure 4.11

Elements of Islamic Education in NU and PERSIS



4.2.2 Practices of Teaching Critical Thinking in Religious Education by NU and PERSIS Primary School Teachers

This part will analyze the findings regarding the practices employed by NU and PERSIS primary school teachers in teaching critical thinking in religious education. Ennis' critical thinking theory is used as a lens for discussion, especially regarding infusion as an approach employed by teachers in both institutions.

Ennis (1989) categorizes approaches to teaching critical thinking into four broad models: (a) *general*, in which critical thinking is taught as an independent subject and its principles are taught explicitly; (b) *infusion*, in which critical thinking principles are taught explicitly but integrated into other subjects; (c) *immersion*, in which students are taught critical thinking implicitly through activities within a particular subject; and (d) *mixed*, a combination of the general approach and either the immersion or infusion approach, in which critical thinking is taught explicitly in specific parts of a subject.

Based on findings from interviews with all informants, classroom observations, and curriculum content analysis, the researcher concludes that both NU and PERSIS elementary schools employ the same approach in teaching critical thinking, namely the *infusion approach*. Nevertheless, differences were found in the type of infusion approach employed by the two schools. At the NU primary school, each religious subject is taught by a different teacher. Consequently, the infusion approach is implemented by integrating critical thinking instruction within the same subject across different grade levels.

On the one hand, assigning different teachers to different subjects is usually based on each teacher's expertise in a particular field of knowledge, allowing them to facilitate students' critical questions in greater depth. On the other hand, if teachers focus solely on teaching their specific religious subject without providing sufficient connections to other contexts, students may develop a fragmented understanding of religious teachings and experience difficulties relating them to other domains or applying them in everyday life (Sahin, 2013). Moreover, the limited time for instruction in the subject might lead to partial comprehension as the process of dialogue, reflection, and inquiry typically takes much more time.

However, in contrast, at the PERSIS primary school, most of the religious classes are conducted by the homeroom teacher. This arrangement provides teachers with greater flexibility and control in integrating critical thinking instruction across different subjects and contexts. Mr. Budi explained how he integrates critical thinking through Aqidah and Science (IPAS) lessons, as well as through students' daily activities at school:

> For example, today I taught both Science (IPAS) and Aqidah, and both lessons were about the environment. So I simply connected them. For instance, why is clean water becoming scarce when Allah created water and its quantity has remained constant throughout history? Then we discuss how environmental damage affects water availability. Another question in Science is: why can water become clean again? The answer is through the recycling process of rainfall. In religious language, this relates to "*wa al-sama'i dhat al-raj'*." (Mr. Budi, Homeroom Teacher, Interview, May 19, 2026)

Their role as homeroom teachers provides PERSIS primary school teachers with greater opportunities to cultivate students' critical thinking skills. They can more easily integrate religious content into other subjects and activities, thereby expanding the scope of religious learning so that religious values and teachings become embedded in students' daily lives and encourage them to think more critically and openly. Greater flexibility in instructional time also creates a more conducive environment for critical thinking instruction because lessons are not interrupted by subject transitions. Moreover, teachers can monitor the development of students' critical thinking skills more comprehensively throughout the academic year (Ennis, 1989).

Both schools teach critical thinking principles, whether general principles or institution-specific concepts such as *ittiba'* and the *sanad* system, across all religious education subjects and through habituation programs consisting of worship practices and memorization activities. All learning activities are designed to cultivate a generation characterized by *adab* and good moral conduct.

From the aforementioned data collection process, including the observation of classes of Fiqh, Aqidah Akhlak, Qur'an Hadith, and students' routine habituation program, it can be argued that the development of critical thinking skills in the two schools is grounded in the principle of "cultivating conscious habits," which means that students are encouraged to practice worship in an enlightened manner. They are also provided with ample opportunities to understand the underlying meaning of those practices through the dialogues embedded within Aqidah, Fiqh, and Qur'an Hadith lessons, which frequently explore why a particular act of worship should be performed, what its foundations are, and what implications it has for students' lives.

This practice of conscious religious habituation aligns with one of Ennis's (2011) critical thinking dispositions, namely *"seek a clear statement of the thesis or question,"* which refers to the tendency of critical thinkers to seek clarity and justification behind every action or decision they undertake. Accordingly, when teachers ask questions or facilitate students' questions regarding the foundations of a particular religious practice,

they are in fact cultivating this disposition among their students. Furthermore, when viewed through the lens of Piaget's (1952) theory of cognitive development, the practice of conscious religious habituation may be regarded as one of the most effective forms of critical learning at the elementary school level because it is developmentally appropriate for children at this stage.

According to Piaget (1952), the students at primary school level (ages 7-11) are in the concrete operational stage, during which, children do not yet have the ability to think abstractly and reflectively, so the best way to teach them is through concrete, repetitive and experience-based learning (Mariana, 2020). These are aimed at establishing children's cognitive and affective foundations and developing the cognitive basis that will enable them to participate in religious practice more meaningfully at later stages. The conscious habit formation serves as a developmental precursor to the emergence of more advanced critical thinking skills later in life. In this context, the religious and moral habituation programs implemented in NU and PERSIS primary schools should not be regarded as form of indoctrination nor as suppressing children's critical thinking abilities. Instead, they represent an Islamic educational approach that is well grounded in theories of child cognitive development.

The distinctive critical thinking concepts practiced by each school*, sanad* in NU school and *Ittiba*' in PERSIS school, are frequently practiced in the classroom. During interviews with the teachers and learning observations in both schools, the researcher found that students often asked questions on *furu'iyyah* (subsidiary) issues, including differences in religious practices due to varying *madhhab* (school of thought) backgrounds among their peers in the classroom. Pupils frequently asked about why their classmate's religious practices differed from another's.

One query from an NU primary school was:

"Sir, why was the tarawih prayer at that mosque only 11 rak'ahs, while at my mosque it is 20?"

A question reported by a teacher in a PERSIS elementary school was:

"My friend's mother went to the mosque for a maulid celebration yesterday. Why are we not allowed to do that?"

In responding to these questions, the researcher observed the influence of organizational ideology in the ways teachers formulated their answers. The teacher in the NU primary school responded by explaining the existence of different *madhhab* traditions and then provided several supporting religious references. However, toward the end of

the explanation, the teacher tended to direct students toward preferring the evidence associated with Imam Shafi'i, which aligns with NU's scholarly tradition. In contrast, the teacher in the PERSIS primary school responded to the question regarding the *maulid* tradition, which is generally discouraged within the PERSIS religious tradition, by explaining that the practice lacks textual evidence in either the Qur'an or the Hadith.

The presence of diverse religious orientations within the classroom appears to stimulate students to think more critically and to question many of the practices and experiences they encounter in their daily lives. Teacher's response helps students understand the reasoning behind various religious practices and beliefs without undermining their commitment to their own religious convictions. This conclusion corresponds with the *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* developed by the Council of Europe, which identifies critical thinking as an essential competence for individuals living in pluralistic societies (Jarmer, 2024).

On the other hand, the researcher also found a tendency among some teachers who potray one religious group as superior to the other. Such a tendency contradicts the spirit of pluralism that has been cultivated through classroom instruction and scouting activities and should therefore be avoided, as it can cause some tension among students. Furthermore, in the context Indonesia's multicultural society, religious education should promote peaceful coexistence.

Alongside religious habituation practices, the researcher also identified memorization programs, which differ significantly between the two schools in several aspects. PERSIS primary schools encourage students to memorize three *juz* of the Qur'an and sixty selected Hadiths. At the same time, NU primary schools focus on enabling students to memorize one *juz* of the Qur'an and the *Asmaul Husna* (the 99 names of Allah). It should be noted that memorization is often considered as the the lowest level in the hierarchy of learning in both Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson et al., 2001) and the SOLO Taxonomy (Biggs & Collis, 2014).

Nevertheless, memorization occupies one of the main methods in both NU and PERSIS traditions as it serves as an important means of preserving the authenticity of religious teachings. Therefore, memorization of the Quran, Hadiths, and other religious texts is viewed as providing the foundational knowledge necessary for critical thinking. In this sense, according to Ennis (2011), such knowledge would be classified as *bases for a decision.* This means that critical thinkers need previously validated knowledge as a criterion for judgement and reasoning. In addition, according to cognitive load theory,

novice learners need to acquire foundational knowledge and cognitive schemas before engaging in higher-level thinking tasks. Sweller (1988) explained that, without such foundations, the demands of high-order thinking may exceed learners' cognitive capacity, potentially hindering rather than enhancing learning.

The memorization program in PERSIS primary schools is implemented through two main practices*: ziyadah* (the memorization of new material) and *muraja'ah* (the review of previously memorized verses). To facilitate understanding of the meanings of the Qur'anic verses, the school adopts a thematic approach; verses memorized during *tahfidz* lessons are later studied thematically in other religious subjects such as Fiqh, Qur'an Hadith, Aqidah, *Imla*, and others. However, the researcher's observations revealed an imbalance between the number of verses memorized by students and the number of verses whose meanings are actually explored. Furthermore, there appears to be no formal coordination regarding the distribution of verses to be discussed across different subjects. Consequently, if meaning-making activities are limited to the materials provided in the religious textbooks used in those subjects, a substantial gap may emerge between the number of verses students genuinely understand and those that they merely memorize without comprehending their meanings.

Therefore, it would be beneficial for the school to improve its system for distributing and integrating the interpretation of memorized verses so that memorization can more effectively serve its intended function as a resource for critical thinking. As Sahin (2013) argues, the Qur'an is inherently dialogical, critically reflective, and transformative in nature. When the Qur'an is memorized only at a textual level without meaningful understanding, the essence of *tarbiyyah* (Islamic education) itself cannot be fully realized.

Upon closer analysis of the educational approaches employed by the two schools, it can be concluded that both NU and PERSIS primary schools embody elements of both *Ta'dib* and *Tarbiyyah.* This is because, in addition to cultivating students' moral character through various habituation programs, both schools also provide opportunities for students to engage in open reasoning in order to understand the meanings, rationales, and purposes underlying the religious practices they perform. An overview of the educational pattern implemented in NU and PERSIS primary schools is presented in the following table.

Table 4.6

NU and PERSIS Eduactional Approaches

Dimension	Ta'dib	Tarbiyyah	NU and PERSIS (Integration of Ta'dib and Tarbiyyah)
Instructional Approach	Instilling	Critical dialogue	Instilling and dialogue
Method	Teacher-centred	Student-centred	Guided Discovery Learning
Objective	*Insan adabiy* (Human with good morals)	Human development; Flourishing	*Al-Insan Al-Salih:* Holistic development (spiritual, intellectual, ethical)

The relation between *ta'dib* and *tarbiyyah* in NU and PERSIS primary schools is not characterized by the dichotomy often portrayed in the existing literature. Rather, the findings indicate an integration of the two through guided critical thinking which simultaneously promotes the development of students' critical thinking skills and religious character. Within this integrated approach, the cultivation of *adab* does not restrict critical inquiry, instead it provides ethical guidance for how students' intellectual capacities should be exercised. This finding is consistent with the Islamic educational perspective that intellectual, spiritual, moral, psychological, and social developments constitute an inseparable whole (Ahdar et al., 2020 as cited in Momen, 2024).

Accordingly, the educational objective in NU and PERSIS primary schools extends beyond developing students as critical thinkers to nurturing them as responsible critical thinkers. The integration of *ta'dib* and *tarbiyyah* therefore seeks to cultivate *al-insan al-salih,* that is individuals who possess a balanced combination of knowledge, morality, and spirituality and who are able to fulfil their social responsibilities while making positive contributions to an increasingly complex society (Momen, 2024).

4.2.3 Challenges Faced by NU and PERSIS Primary School Teachers in Teaching Critical Thinking

Based on the analysis of religious education teachers' perceptions in NU and PERSIS elementary schools regarding the challenges they face in teaching critical thinking within religious education, the researcher concludes that critical thinking is not a pedagogical competency that can develop within a neutral classroom environment. More complex than that, the effectiveness of its instruction is influenced by factors that extend well beyond the classroom itself. A synthesis of teachers' accounts from both NU and PERSIS elementary schools identified at least three broader domains that influence

the success of critical thinking instruction in religious education classrooms: the challenge of digital devices, teacher readiness, and family synergy. This study further confirms Ennis (1996, 2011) view that critical thinking dispositions do not develop in isolation but rather emerge within the contexts in which individuals are immersed.

4.2.3.1 Digital Media: Between Challenges and Opportunities

The teachers at NU primary schools also agreed that the use of digital media has had a major effect on the quality of students' learning process. Mrs. Hana, a Qur'an Hadith teacher, has directly mentioned that the use of digital media has led to a decrease in students' motivation and performance. It is claimed that students now have less time for study because they prefer to play games and spend their time on social media.

Mrs. Hana's views on the impact of social media on students' motivation are supported by the framework of Cognitive Load Theory. According to Sweller (1988), human working memory has a limited capacity. Over-exposure to high-stimuli digital material including social media and videos leads to an increase in extraneous cognitive load; hence there is limited cognitive capacity for deeper processing of information. It is difficult to develop critical thinking because critical thinking requires sustained focus, reflection, and greater cognitive processing capacity. Also, due to the nature of social media which involves the provision of information at a rapid pace, the individual is encouraged to shift his attention often, thus making him not engage in tasks that require attention.

Nevertheless, teachers from NU primary school perceive gadgets and digital media as barriers to the development of critical thinking skills, whereas teachers from PERSIS school view that social media as a medium that can encourage students to develop these skills. According to Mr. Budi, his students become critical of homework after encountering information on social media claiming that students should no longer be given homework. Similarly, Mrs. Silvi noted that her students pose many critical questions concerning religion after encountering religious information on social media.

The differing perceptions of teachers from NU and PERSIS schools regarding social media and its impact on the development of critical thinking suggest that social media cannot simply be categorized as either a threat or a support for teaching critical thinking. Rather, its impact depends largely on students' ability to evaluate information encountered on social media, as well as on teachers' guidance in assessing the credibility and reliability of evidence and arguments in digital environment.

An alternative viewpoint was presented by the chair of LP Ma'arif. While being aware of the possible harmful effects of the fast development of technology and social media, the informant did not advocate for limiting students' access to gadgets and social networks. Rather, the chair of LP Ma'arif suggested the stakeholders and teachers of the NU educational institution to adjust the *Aswaja* education and the examplary lives of NU figures to the social media format. She considered social media as an actual chance to make religious knowledge relevant in students' modern life. Moreover, she stressed the importance of the three-party (student, teacher, and parent) cooperation in protecting children from the negative impact of social media through the guidance, supervision, and monitoring.

The standpoint taken by the Chair of LP Ma'arif presents an alternative approach to social media that emphasizes its proper use rather than its limitation. From this point of view, the challenge of religious education in the digital age is not to isolate students from social media but to equip them with the skills to access, analyze, evaluate, and critically assess information. However, any attempts to encourage religious educators to develop digital learning materials must be supported by adequate training, skills, and resources, otherwise, it will only place an additional burden on teachers.

The necessity of such training is further highlighted by the digital literacy studies, which also help to explain why NU and PERSIS teachers have different perceptions regarding social media. According to Butler (2024), social media platforms may contribute to the past spreading of misinformation as well as reinforcing echo chambers that may narrow users' way of thinking. As noted by Nasir and Bayley (2025), these challenges have been further aggravated by the emergence of generative AI that creates opportunities for the dissemination of credible but possibly misleading information on an unprecedented scale, making it increasingly difficult for students to distinguish between the two. However, Kahne and Bowyer (2017) found that young people's capacity to evaluate online information does not depend on their level of knowledge but on their habitual practice of critically evaluating information sources. This means that social media and AI are essentially pedagogically neutral, and their effect on education depends on how well students are equipped with critical literacy and taught to apply them, rather than rather than having unrestricted or limited access to these technologies.

4.2.3.2 Teacher Readiness: The Shift from Knowledge Transmitter to Learning Facilitator

The findings indicate that implementing critical thinking instruction requires considerably more preparation and readiness on the part of teachers than traditional teaching methods. According to Mr. Budi, the teacher at a PERSIS elementary school, teaching critical thinking demands that teachers have a deep understanding of the subject matter, design challenging questions, and prepare appropriate learning materials. Moreover, Mrs. Dewi explained that teachers' physical and mental well-being, as well as their welfare, significantly affect the quality of critical thinking instruction and classroom interaction. Similarly, Mrs. Hana, a teacher at an NU primary school, admitted openly that when she experiences psychological distress, she is unable to prepare lessons properly or facilitate critical thinking activities effectively.

> One of the problems here is that by the time we reach the end of our lessons, we get distracted and often lose focus, and sometimes this is simply due to lack motivation. The moment I feel demotivated, I do not switch on my laptop, do any preparation before the lesson, and plan anything for the lesson. (Mrs. Hana, Qur'an Hadith Teacher, Interview, May 13, 2026)

Despite their simplicity, the claims made by Mrs. Hana and Mrs. Dewi have deeper implications that are often overlooked. They suggest that teaching critical thinking is not merely about curriculum design and teaching methods but also depends on the the intellectual and emotional condition of the teacher. Teaching critical thinking requires teachers to be actively involved in the learning process, constantly facilitating the exchange of ideas among students and managing their interaction in the class.

However, the increasing demands placed on teachers to support the development of critical thinking are not accompanied by adequate support. All teachers in the NU and PERSIS primary schools agreed that there is no specific and systematic training to help them teach critical thinking in religious education. The teachers explained that professional development activities are usually conducted only when a new curriculum is introduced. Meaning that the training tends to focus on broader curricular issues rather than on teaching on critical thinking. More concerningly, Ms. Silvi stated that even such training programs are not effective in improving teachers' competence in this area.

> Even when the training for the new curriculum is available, it is mostly just lecture which becomes very tedious and hard to comprehend. There is no follow-up and feedback on how we are actually supposed to teach in the class. (Mrs. Silvi, Homeroom Teacher, Interview, May 18, 2026)

This finding highlights a contradiction between the increasing expectations of the curriculum, which place greater emphasis on higher order critical thinking skills, and the limited capacity-building programs to support teachers in meeting these expectations.

This leads teachers to teach critical thinking intuitively, drawing on their own experience and judgement. Their practices are often informed by internet resources rather than by formal pedagogical training. This finding is consistent with the concept of the *'implementation gap'* described by Viennet and Pont (2017). They argue that effective implementation of educational policies depends on the extent to which the policymakers take into account practical challenges in the field, including financial issues, infrastructure, learning materials, and teacher capacity building programs.

4.2.3.3 A Psychologically Safe Space: Between the Classroom, Family, and Students' Emotional Conditions

Teachers from both NU and PERSIS primary schools highlighted that students' emotional conditions, which are frequently shaped by their family environments, significantly influence their willingness to engage in classroom thinking activities. Teachers claimed that it is difficult for them to conduct critical thinking instruction effectively when students come to class feeling sad, withdrawn, or demotivated because of problems at home.

Nevertheless, a more critical finding emerged from the observation is that although teachers acknowledging the significant influence of students' emotional conditions on critical thinking instructions, they rarely address this issue through planned pedagogical strategies. Instead, teachers tend to perceive students' psychological well-being as an external factor beyond their professional responsibility, rather than as one of learning dimensions that require active management. This finding is noteworthy because responsive and supportive teacher-student relationships have been shown to mitigate such challenges and enhance students' academic performance (Lippard et al., 2017). Therefore, in the context of critical thinking instruction, strengthening teacher competencies should not be limited to curriculum knowledge or instructional methods, but should also encompass child psychology and cognitive development. Such competencies would enable teachers to effectively identify, understand, and respond to students' emotional conditions, thereby creating an environment that support the implementation of critical thinking instruction.

Based on the discussion above, it can be concluded that the role of teachers and parents is crucial in ensuring students' readiness to actively involved in critical thinking activities in the classroom. Effective coordination and collaboration between these two parties are indispensable for the successful implementation of critical thinking instruction

in religious education. This finding is consistent with Bronfrenbrenner (1992) Ecological Systems Theory, which stated that interaction between the students' immediate environment (microsystem) will form a mesosystem that significantly influence their development.

4.2.3.4 Conclusion on the Challenges Teachers Face in Teaching Critical Thinking in Religious Education

The results of the research suggest that teaching critical thinking in religious education is not dependent entirely upon the ideology of religion. Basically, all teachers and stakeholders of NU and PERSIS elementary schools advocate for the introduction of critical thinking, but with specific limitations and focuses. Hence, it makes sense to ask about whether it is appropriate to teach critical thinking in religious education, rather than about the conditions under which such education may occur.

The results show that there is a number of interlinked factors which influence the successful application of critical thinking among other things the difficulty of influencing the attention behavior of students in the digital environment, the preparedness of teachers to play the role of facilitators of learning, and the provision of psychologically safe environment where students can feel confident enough to voice their questions, thoughts, and concerns. This means that critical thinking development is an integral problem which cannot be solved by teachers or students independently. These results agree with the viewpoint of Viennet & Pont (2017) who believe that educational policy implementation depends on the coordination of several factors including teachers' competencies, resources, and institutional support.

In this situation, the impact of the Muslim mass organizations is not the absolute presence or absence of critical thinking skills. The influence of the organizations in question can rather be observed through the impact they have on the epistemic framework, teaching methods and the direction towards which critical thinking skills are oriented in religious studies. It follows that the distinction between NU and PERSIS lies not in the opportunity to develop critical thinking skills or lack thereof, but in how this process is shaped by the religion specific to each organization. Consequently, critical thinking in religious education can be perceived as the outcome of the interaction of pedagogical, institutional and ideological aspects.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This chapter presents the conclusions drawn from the findings and discussion of the study. It begins with a summary of the main conclusions, followed by a discussion of the study's limitations in terms of research setting and methodology. The chapters then offers suggestions based on the field findings for several stakeholders, namely schools, the NU and PERIS organizations, government authorities, and further research.

5.1 Conclusion

This research was prompted by the perennial issue of the clash between religion and critical thinking in Islamic education. The findings reveal that there is no dichotomy between maintaining religious orthodoxy and fostering intellectual independence in the religious education practices of NU and PERSIS primary schools in West Java, Indonesia. Both teachers and other educational stakeholders in these two schools acknowledge the importance of cultivating critical thinking, viewing it as a long-standing tradition within their institutions and as an integral component of the Islamic intellectual tradition.

Both institutions promote guided critical thinking that allows students to question, evaluate, and reason while remaining within the epistemological, moral, and pedagogical boundaries by their religious tradition. In this regard, critical thinking is not intended to challenge religious beliefs; rather; it serves to deepen religious understanding, strengthen argumentation skills, and enhance students' ability to address religious issues thoughtfully and responsibly.

The findings reveal notable differences between NU and PERSIS in their conceptualizations of critical thinking. *First,* both organizations have differed regarding domains that are open to critical examination. NU excludes theological matters *(ilahiyyah)* from critical inquiry, except insofar as such inquiry is conducted within the framework of tawhid. While PERSIS limits inquiry concerning matters *ghaibiyyah* (the unseen). *Second,* they differ in the source of authority that guides critical inquiry; for NU, authority is grounded in sanad while for PERSIS rest primarly on dalil (authenticity of scriptural evidence). *Third,* both organizations have different objectives of critical thinking; NU aims at contextualizing the religious teachings in response to local traditions and social change, and PERSIS focuses on validating religious teachings through direct engagement with scriptural sources.

With regard to classroom implementation, the study reveals that both institutions employ infusion approaches with methods commonly used within the Indonesian national education system to foster critical thinking in religious education. These methods include interactive lecturing, problem-based learning, experiential learning, and many more learner-centered methods. However, the ideology of each institution plays a crucial role in define the limits, locus of authority, and general direction of critical thinking. These findings have important implications for research on critical thinking in religious education, that evaluating critical thinking solely based on instructional methods may fail to recognize the more fundamental dimensions, namely its boundaries, aims, and orientation.

Moreover, the findings of this study suggest that the successful implementation of critical thinking is not determined by religious ideology itself but rather by the quality of the educational environment that supports it. In the context of this research, the most significant determinants include the management of the digital environment, teachers' readiness to facilitate critical thinking, and the creation of psychologically safe classroom conditions. These three factors emerged as the most significant determinants of students' critical thinking development in religious education is no longer whether it is permissible but how to create the classroom conditions that enable it to flourish.

From a theoretical perspective, future research may need to move beyond the paradigmatic question of whether Islam is compatible with critical thinking. Instead, future research should give greater attention on how religion shape the characteristics of critical thinking, such as its orientation, scope, and boundaries. From a practical perspective, promoting critical thinking in religious education requires more than curriculum reform or adoption of innovative instructional methods. It also requires improvement across the broader educational system, including strengthening teachers' competencies, providing adequate educational resources, coping with digital environment challenges, and establishment of psychologically safe learning environments. In religious education, while religion may provide direction, but it is systemic educational support enable critical thinking to develop effectively.

5.2 Limitations of the Research

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to several limitations.

1. This research was conducted in only one school affiliated with NU organization and one school affiliated with PERSIS organization. Therefore, the findings

primarily reflect the context of these schools and cannot be generalized to all schools associated with either organization.

2. This study concentrated on teachers' understanding of critical thinking and how they implemented it in classroom practice. It did not evaluate the actual development of students' critical thinking skills.
3. This study was limited to the context of primary level and did not encompass other levels of Islamic education. Therefore, the findings of this study cannot fully capture how critical thinking is conceptualized and implemented in these two Islamic organizations as a whole. Apart from the influence of ideology, every perception or approach carried out by teachers also has the potential to be influenced by the stages of student development.

5.3 Suggestions

1. For Schools and School Principals

   The findings of this study indicate that the successful development of critical thinking is determined not only by teachers' competence in the classroom but also by students' psychological and social conditions, which are often shaped before they enter the classroom. Furthermore, students' extensive access to the internet at home requires greater attention and supervision from parents. Therefore, fostering a culture of critical thinking should be understood as a collective responsibility of the school rather than merely the individual responsibility of teachers. In this context, schools should strengthen coordination with parents as an integral part of the learning ecosystem.
2. For NU and PERSIS Educational Organizations

   This study suggests that the primary challenge currently faced by NU and PERSIS is no longer establishing the legitimacy of critical thinking but rather translating the well-defined ideological orientations and boundaries into more concrete and operational classroom practices. The variation in teachers' understanding observed in this study indicates the need for strengthened professional development programs that focus not only on the organizations' general values but also on pedagogical strategies that specifically support the development of critical thinking in religious education.
3. For the Government (the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Other Relevant Ministries)

The findings of this study have broader implications for the government's efforts to promote Indonesian Islamic education as moderate, inclusive, and responsive to the demands of the twenty-first century on the global stage. In this regard, the experience of NU and PERSIS education demonstrate that critical thinking can be cultivated within a religious context through Islamic values themselves, not despite of Islam. As a result, Guided Critical Thinking has the potential as an indigenous critical thinking framework that Indonesia may offer to the global discourse on Islamic education. However, realizing this potential requires a serious commitment on strengthening the Islamic education environment, especially in terms of teacher readiness, institutional support, and conducive learning environments. Without such systemic improvements, the implementation of critical thinking is unlikely to be fully realized in classroom practice.

4. For Future Research

   Given that this study involved only one NU-affiliated primary school and one PERSIS-affiliated primary school, future research should include a larger number of schools with more diverse characteristics. In addition, future studies should encompass different educational levels to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the characteristics of critical thinking within NU and PERSIS education, as well as to distinguish the influence of educational organizations from the influence of students' developmental stages.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Interview Instruments for Teachers

Questions Components	No.	Questions for Teachers (English Version)	Pertanyaan untuk Guru dalam Bahasa Indonesia
(RQ 1) How do teachers in Islamic elementary schools perceive critical thinking?	1.	In your view, what is critical thinking?	Menurut Anda, apakah critical thinking itu?
	2.	In your view, is critical thinking important in religious education at the primary school level? Why?	Menurut Anda apakah critical thinking penting dalam pembelajaran agama di sekolah dasar? Mengapa?
	3.	In your religious education class, have students ever asked critical questions about religion? -How did you respond? -To what extent are students allowed to think critically in the context of religion?	Di kelas Agama Anda, adakah siswa yang pernah bertanya kritis tentang agama? -bagaimana sikap Anda? -Sejauh apa siswa boleh berpikir kritis dalam konteks agama?
	4.	In your view, what does a student who thinks critically in religious education look like?	Menurut Anda, bagaimanakah siswa yang berpikir kritis dalam pelajaran agama itu?
	5.	What has most shaped your understanding of critical thinking (e.g., organizational influence, training, etc.)?	Apa yang paling membentuk pemahaman Anda mengenai critical thinking (seperti organisasi, pelatihan, dll)?
(RQ 2) How do teachers promote critical thinking in their teaching activities?	6.	How do you usually teach religious education in your class? Can you generally describe the process from the beginning to the end of the lesson?	Bagaimana biasanya Anda mengajar mata pelajaran agama di kelas? Dapatkah Anda menceritakan secara umum prosesnya dari awal hingga akhir pembelajaran?
	7.	What teaching methods do you use to encourage students' critical thinking in religious education?	Metode pengajaran apa yang Anda gunakan untuk mendorong critical thinking siswa dalam pelajaran agama?
	8.	Which approach do you find most effective in enhancing students' critical thinking?	Pendekatan mana yang menurut Anda paling efektif dalam meningkatkan critical thinking siswa?
	9.	How do you assess students' critical thinking skills in your teaching?	Bagaimana Anda menilai kemampuan berpikir kritis siswa dalam pembelajaran yang Anda lakukan?

(RQ 3) What challenges and opportunities do teachers encounter in the process of promoting critical thinking in Islamic elementary schools?	10.	What opportunities or support do you have in developing students' critical thinking in religious education?	Apa saja peluang atu dukungan yang Anda miliki dalam mengembangkan critical thinking siswa dalam pelajaran agama?
	11.	What challenges or difficulties do you face in developing students' critical thinking in religious education?	Apa saja tantangan atau kesulitan yang Anda hadapi dalam mengembangkan critical thinking siswa dalam pelajaran agama?
	12.	What efforts do you make to address these challenges?	Upaya apa yang Anda lakukan untuk menangani tantangan tersebut

Adapted from Eslami (2016); Parlindungan (2019); Foundation for Critical Thinking (n.d.)

Appendix 2: Interview Instrument for Students

Question Components	No.	Questions for Students (English Version)	Pertanyaan untuk Siswa dalam Bahasa Indonesia
Learning Experience	1.	How do you feel about studying at this school?	Bagaimana perasaanmu belajar di sekolah ini?
	2.	What is your favorite subject? Why do you like it?	Apa mata pelajaran favoritmu? Mengapa?
	3.	Do you like religious education class? Why or why not?	Apakah kamu suka pelajaran agama? Mengapa?
Experience in Learning Religious Education	4.	What activities do you usually do in religious education class? *(ex: listening to stories, discussing, answering questions, or working in groups)*	Kegiatan apa saja yang biasanya kamu lakukan dalam pelajaran agama? (Misalnya mendengarkan cerita, berdiskusi, menjawab pertanyaan, atau bekerja dalam kelompok)
	5.	Which activities do you like the most and the least? Why?	Kegiatan mana yang paling kamu sukai dan tidak sukai? Mengapa?
Classroom Interaction and Discussion	6.	If you do not understand something in religious education class, what do you usually do?	Kalau kamu tidak mengerti sesuatu dalam pelajaran agama di kelas, biasanya kamu melakukan apa?
	7.	Do you like discussing or working in groups with your classmates during religious education? Why or why not?	Apakah kamu suka berdiskusi atau bekerja dalam kelompok dengan teman-teman saat pelajaran agama? Mengapa?
	8.	How do your teacher and classmates respond when you ask questions in class?	Bagaimana respon guru dan teman-temanmu ketika kamu bertanya di kelas agama?
Challenges in Learning	9.	Is there anything you find difficult when learning religious education?	Adakah hal yang menurutmu sulit ketika belajar pelajaran agama?

Adapted from Parlindungan (2019)

Appendix 3: Interview Instrument for Leaders

Question Components	No.	Questions for Leaders (English Version)	Pertanyaan untuk pimpinan dalam Bahasa Indonesia
Institutional Context	1.	How would you describe the characteristics of the educational institutions under your organization (such as goals, core values, and instructional approaches)?	Bagaimana karakteristik lembaga pendidikan yang dinaungi oleh organisasi Anda (seperti tujuan, nilai-nilai, pendekatan pembelajaran, dll)?
	2.	What are the distinctive features of your organization's primary school that differentiate it from other primary schools?	Apakah ciri khas sekolah dasar organisasi Anda yang membedakannya dengan sekolah dasar lain?
(RQ 1) How do teachers in Islamic elementary schools perceive critical thinking?	3.	How does your organization define critical thinking?	Bagaimana organisasi Anda mendefiniskan critical thinking?
	4.	How does your organization view critical thinking in religious education at the primary school level? - Are there any limitations in its implementation?	Bagaimana pandangan organisasi Anda terhadap critical thinking dalam pelajaran agama di sekolah dasar? - Apakah terdapat batasan dalam pengimplementasiannya?
	5.	How does your organization ensure a balance between the development of critical thinking and the preservation of students' religious values?	Bagaimana organisasi Anda memastikan keseimbangan antara nalar kritis dan nilai-nilai keagamaan siswa?
	6.	In your view, which specific critical thinking skills should be prioritized in religious education at the primary school level (e.g., analysis, interpretation, evaluation, inference)? Please elaborate.	Menurut Anda, keterampilan berpikir kritis apa saja yang perlu diprioritaskan dalam pembelajaran Agama di sekolah dasar (misalnya: analisis, interpretasi, evaluasi, penarikan kesimpulan)? Mohon dijelaskan.
(RQ 2) How do teachers promote critical thinking in their teaching activities?	7.	How does your organization promote and support teachers in fostering critical thinking in religious education at the primary school level?	Bagaimana organisasi Anda mendorong dan mendukung guru untuk mengembangkan critical thinking dalam pelajaran agama di sekolah dasar?
	8.	Does your organization provide specific guidelines	Apakah organisasi Anda memiliki pedoman dan

		and standards to support the teaching and assessment of students' critical thinking in religious education?	standar tertentu untuk mengajar dan menilai critical thinking siswa dalam pelajaran agama?
	9.	Are there differences in the implementation and outcomes of critical thinking across primary schools under your organization? - What factors contribute to these differences?	Apakah terdapat perbedaan dalam penerapan dan pencapaian critical thinking diantara sekolah-sekolah dasar di bawah naungan organisasi Anda? - Apakah penyebabnya?
(RQ 3) What challenges and opportunities do teachers encounter in the process of promoting critical thinking in Islamic elementary schools?	10.	What challenges are encountered in integrating critical thinking into religious education in primary schools under your organization?	Tantangan apa sajakah yang dihadapi dalam mengintegrasikan critical thinking ke dalam pembelajaran agama di sekolah-sekolah dasar organisasi Anda?
	11.	In terms of developing critical thinking, how does your organization's religious education curriculum differ from the national curriculum? -Are there specific elements of the national curriculum that are added or reduced in practice within your schools?	Dalam hal pengembangan critical thinking, apa yang membedakan kurikulum pendidikan agama organisasi Anda dengan kurikulum nasional? -Adakah bagian-bagain tertentu dari kurikulum nasional yang ditambahkan atau dikurangi dalam praktik pembelajaran di sekolah-sekolah Anda?
	12.	Has the promotion of critical thinking in religious education within both the national curriculum and your organization's curriculum been well implemented in your schools?	Apakah dorongan terhadap critical thinking dalam kurikulum pendidikan agama pada kurikulum nasional dan kurikulum organisasi Anda telah terlaksana dengan baik di sekolah-sekolah Anda?

Adapted from Foundation for Critical Thinking. (n.d.); Fullan's theory of educational change (2007)

Appendix 4: Classroom Observation Sheet

School :
Date/Time :
Venue :
Class :

1. Participants

Participants	Notes
Students	

2. Observation

What did the teacher do in the class?	Comments and reflections

3. Critical Thinking Instruction

Teacher's critical thinking instruction	How was it implemented?	Students' responses

4. Students' Learning

No.	Involvement	What did students do/show?	To do notes

5. Classroom Interaction Notes

Time	Persons (Who were involved? Who said what?)	Events and details of interaction (What happen?)	Setting and context

6. Types of assignments

What assignment? To what extent it was given?	When was it delivered? How?	How was the response of the class?

7. Types of supports

What kind of supports?	Setting and context	How was the response of the students?

8. Other opportunities

What other opportunities available in the classroom?	Who used what?	Contexts

9. Additional notes (General comments and reflections)

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***** *Adapted from Parlindungan (2019)*

Appendix 6: Cross-case Analysis Matrix

Participants		**Teachers' Perceptions**	**Instructional Approaches**	**Challenges and Opportunities**
NU School	Teacher 1			
	Teacher 2			
PERSIS School	Teacher 1			
	Teacher 2			
Convergence				
Divergence				
Cross-case Analysis				

Adapted from Case-ordered Effects Matrix (Miles et al., 2014)

Appendix 7: Consent Form

SURAT PERSETUJUAN MENGIKUTI PENELITIAN

Kepada Yth. Ibu/Bapak Guru,

Saya mengundang Ibu/Bapak untuk berpartisipasi dalam penelitian yang dilakukan oleh saya, Santi Dianah, mahasiswa pascasarjana Fakultas Pendidikan di Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia (UIII), sebagai bagian dari penelitian tesis untuk program MA.

Topik dan Tujuan Penelitian

Penelitian ini berjudul *"Critical Thinking Instruction of NU and PERSIS Primary School Teachers in West Java: Perceptions, Practices, and Challenges"* Penelitian bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi persepsi dan praktik pembelajaran guru mengenai berpikir kritis pada mata pelajaran agama (Qur'an Hadits, Akidah Akhlaq, Fiqih, Sejarah Kebudayaan Islam, dan atau mata pelajaran agama khas institusi) di sekolah dasar Islam terafiliasi NU dan PERSIS di Jawa Barat, serta mengidentifikasi faktor pendukung dan penghambatnya.

Peran Anda Sebagai Partisipan

Jika bersedia, Anda akan diminta untuk;

a. Mengikuti **wawancara** selama ± 30–45 menit mengenai persepsi dan praktik pembelajaran berpikir kritis pada mata pelajaran agama Islam.
b. Mengizinkan peneliti melakukan **observasi kelas** (jika Anda bersedia) untuk melihat praktik pembelajaran.
c. Memberi akses pada beberapa **dokumen pembelajaran** (jika relevan dan sesuai kenyamanan Anda).

Partisipasi Sukarela dan Hak untuk Mengundurkan Diri

Partisipasi bersifat sukarela. Anda dapat menolak atau mengundurkan diri kapan saja tanpa konsekuensi apa pun. Data yang telah diberikan tidak akan digunakan jika Anda mengundurkan diri.

Risiko dan Ketidaknyamanan

Penelitian ini memiliki resiko minimal. Anda mungkin merasa tidak nyaman saat menjawab suatu pertanyaan atau tidak ingin menyampaikan informasi tertentu. Anda dapat menolak menjawab pertanyaan apapun yang membuat Anda tidak nyaman.

Manfaat

Penelitian ini diharapkan menjadi refleksi praktik pembelajaran dan berkontribusi pada pengembangan pembelajaran berpikir kritis dalam Pendidikan Agama Islam.

Kerahasiaan

Semua informasi yang dikumpulkan dalam studi ini akan dirahasiakan dengan cara:

a. Identitas Anda akan dirahasiakan dan tidak dicantumkan dalam laporan atau publikasi.
b. Semua data akan disimpan dengan aman dan hanya dapat diakses oleh peneliti.
c. Data akan dimusnahkan secara permanen setelah lima tahun.

Penggunaan Data

Data yang dikumpulkan akan digunakan semata-mata untuk tujuan akademis, yaitu penelitian tesis dan kemungkinan presentasi atau publikasi ilmiah.

Pertanyaan atau Kekhawatiran

Untuk pertanyaan atau informasi lebih lanjut, Anda dapat menghubungi: santi.dianah@uiii.ac.id atau 083854435121.

Pernyataan Persetujuan

Dengan menandatangani surat ini, Anda menyatakan bahwa telah membaca, memahami, dan secara sukarela bersedia berpartisipasi dalam penelitian ini.

☐Saya setuju untuk berpartisipasi dalam penelitian ini.

Nama Responden : _____

Tanda Tangan : _____

Tanggal : _____

Terima kasih atas waktu dan dukungan Anda dalam berkontribusi pada penelitian ini

SURAT PERSETUJUAN WAWANCARA DAN OBSERVASI KELAS

Kepada :
Dari : Santi Dianah, mahasiswa pascasarjana Fakultas Pendidikan, Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia (UIII)
Subyek : Undangan untuk Berpartisipasi dalam Riset Pendidikan

Kepada Yth. Bapak/Ibu _____,

Saya, Santi Dianah, sedang melakukan proyek penelitian sebagai bagian dari tesis Magister saya di Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia (UIII), yang berjudul: "Critical Thinking Instruction of NU and PERSIS Primary School Teachers in West Java: Perceptions, Practices, and Challenges." Studi ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi persepsi guru di sekolah dasar terafiliasi NU dan PERSIS mengenai berpikir kritis dan bagaimana mereka menerapakannya dalam pembelajaran agama.

Dengan hormat saya memohon partisipasi sukarela Anda dalam studi ini melalui observasi kelas dan wawancara pada waktu yang sesuai. Pertanyaan-pertanyaan dan aspek-aspek yang diamati akan berfokus pada pengajaran berpikir kritis di kelas Anda. Partisipasi Anda Meliputi:

1. Observasi dan perekaman aktivitas kelas pada mata pelajaran agama sebanyak 2-3 kali (dengan persetujuan wali murid).
2. Satu wawancara terjadwal sekitar 30-45 menit (online atau tatap muka).
3. Rekaman video dan audio saat wawancara (dengan persetujuan Anda).
4. Anonimitas dan kerahasiaan terjamin.
5. Hak untuk menolak pertanyaan apa pun atau menarik diri kapan saja.

Pernyataan Persetujuan:

Dengan menandatangani surat ini, Anda menyatakan telah membaca, memahami tujuan dan proses penelitian, serta setuju untuk berpartisipasi secara sukarela.

Nama Guru :

Tanda Tangan : _____

Tanggal :

Terima kasih atas waktu dan dukungan Anda dalam berkontribusi pada pene

SURAT PERSETUJUAN ORANG TUA/WALI UNTUK PARTISIPASI SISWA DALAM OBSERVASI KELAS

Judul Penelitian

"Critical Thinking Instruction of NU and PERSIS Primary School Teachers in West Java: Perceptions, Practices, and Challenges"

Peneliti

Santi Dianah, mahasiswa pascasarjana Fakultas Pendidikan, Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia (UIII). Kontak: santi.dianah@uiii.ac.id / 083854435121

Tujuan dan Prosedur Penelitian

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi persepsi dan praktik pembelajaran guru mengenai berpikir kritis pada mata pelajaran agama (Qur'an Hadits, Akidah Akhlaq, Fiqih, Sejarah Kebudayaan Islam, dan atau mata pelajaran agama khas institusi) di sekolah dasar Islam terafiliasi NU dan PERSIS di Jawa Barat, serta mengidentifikasi faktor pendukung dan penghambatnya.

Dalam pelaksanaannya, penelitian dilakukan dengan prosedur sebagai berikut:

a. Observasi dilakukan selama proses pembelajaran agama berlangsung.
b. Fokus penelitian adalah pada praktik mengajar guru; anak Anda bukan subjek utama penelitian.
c. Kegiatan pembelajaran dapat didokumentasikan dalam bentuk foto atau video.
d. Anak Anda hanya terlibat secara tidak langsung sebagai bagian dari aktivitas kelas biasa, tanpa partisipasi tambahan.
e. Tidak ada intervensi, perlakuan khusus, atau eksperimen yang diberikan kepada anak.
f. Penelitian dilakukan secara alami tanpa mengganggu proses belajar mengajar.

Kerahasiaan

Seluruh data akan dijaga kerahasiaannya. Identitas dan dokumentasi anak tidak akan dicantumkan atau di samarkan dalam laporan atau publikasi, dan digunakan secara terbatas untuk kepentingan akademik semata.

Partisipasi Sukarela

Partisipasi bersifat sukarela dan memerlukan persetujuan orang tua/wali. Jika orang tua/wali tidak memberikan persetujuan, anak tidak akan dilibatkan dan tidak akan dikumpulkan data ataupun dokumentasinya. Keputusan untuk tidak berpartisipasi tidak menimbulkan konsekuensi apa pun bagi anak maupun orang tua/wali.

Pernyataan Persetujuan

Saya telah membaca dan memahami informasi di atas, serta memberikan izin kepada anak saya untuk berpartisipasi dalam penelitian ini.

Nama Anak : Tanda Tangan

Nama Orang Tua :

Tanggal : _____

SURAT PERSETUJUAN ORANG TUA/WALI UNTUK PARTISIPASI SISWA DALAM WAWANCARA PENELITIAN

Judul Penelitian

"Critical Thinking Instruction of NU and PERSIS Primary School Teachers in West Java: Perceptions, Practices, and Challenges."

Peneliti

Santi Dianah, mahasiswa pascasarjana Fakultas Pendidikan, Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia (UIII).
Kontak: santi.dianah@uiii.ac.id / 083854435121

Tujuan dan Prosedur Wawancara

Wawancara ini bertujuan untuk memahami pengalaman dan pandangan siswa terkait proses pembelajaran agama di kelas, khususnya mengenai bagaimana mereka memahami dan merespons kegiatan yang mendorong kemampuan berpikir kritis.

Apabila Bapak/Ibu memberikan persetujuan, anak Anda akan diminta untuk berpartisipasi dalam wawancara dengan ketentuan sebagai berikut:

a. Wawancara dilakukan secara singkat, sekitar 10–15 menit.
b. Pertanyaan bersifat umum dan berkaitan dengan pengalaman belajar di kelas.
c. Tidak ada jawaban benar atau salah; anak bebas menyampaikan pendapatnya.
d. Wawancara dilakukan di lingkungan sekolah dengan tetap memperhatikan kenyamanan dan keamanan anak.
e. Wawancara dapat direkam (audio) untuk keperluan analisis data dan poto untuk dokumentasi penelitian.

Kerahasiaan Data

Seluruh data akan dijaga kerahasiaannya. Identitas dan dokumentasi anak tidak akan dicantumkan atau di samarkan dalam laporan dan publikasi. Seluruh informasi digunakan secara terbatas untuk kepentingan akademik semata.

Partisipasi Sukarela dan Hak Partisipan

Partisipasi dalam wawancara ini bersifat sukarela; anak Anda berhak menolak atau menghentikan partisipasi kapan saja, serta tidak menjawab pertanyaan yang dirasa tidak nyaman, tanpa konsekuensi apa pun terhadap proses belajar maupun hubungan dengan pihak sekolah.

Pernyataan Persetujuan

Saya telah membaca dan memahami informasi di atas. Saya memberikan izin kepada anak saya untuk berpartisipasi dalam wawancara penelitian ini.

Nama Anak : _____

Nama Orang Tua/Wali : _____

Tanggal : _____

Tanda Tangan : _____

Appendix 8: Interview Member Checking Form

FORMULIR MEMBER CHECKING WAWANCARA

Judul Penelitian : Critical Thinking Instruction of NU and PERSIS Primary School Teachers in West Java: Perceptions, Practices, and Challenges

Nama Peneliti : Santi Dianah

Inisial Partisipan :

Tanggal Wawancara :

Dokumen ini merupakan bagian dari prosedur member checking, dan diberikan kepada partisipan untuk meninjau transkrip hasil wawancara mereka. Tujuannya adalah untuk memastikan bahwa data yang ditranskrip oleh peneliti telah sesuai dan mencerminkan makna yang dimaksudkan oleh partisipan.

Transkrip Wawancara:
…… ……

Pertanyaan untuk Partisipan:

1. Apakah transkrip wawancara ini secara keseluruhan sudah sesuai dengan apa yang Anda sampaikan dalam wawancara?
   - [ ] Ya
   - [ ] Tidak
2. Jika tidak, mohon tuliskan koreksi atau klarifikasi Anda:
   .....
3. Apakah Anda ingin menambahkan informasi atau pandangan lain yang belum sempat disampaikan saat wawancara?
   .....

Tanda Tangan Partisipan:
Saya yang bertanda tangan di bawah ini adalah Informan Ke-1 dengan kode….dan inisial …. Dengan ini, Saya menyatakan bahwa data yang diperoleh peneliti atas nama Santi Dianah dengan NIM 04212410013 dalam penelitiannya yang berjudul “Critical Thinking Instruction of NU and PERSIS Primary School Teachers in West Java: Perceptions, Practices, and Challenges” adalah benar berasal dari saya dan sesuai dengan fakta yang terjadi di lapangan.

……, …. Mei 2026

Partisipan

Appendix 9: Research Permit Application Letter

Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia | Faculty of Education

Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia
Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia
Jalan Raya Bogor KM. 33,5
Cisalak, Sukmajaya, Depok, West Java 16416
secretariat@uiii.ac.id
www.uiii.ac.id

Nomor : 168/Dek.FIP/UIII/UM.02/4/2026 Depok, 20 Mei 2026
Lampiran : -
Hal : Permohonan Izin Penelitian

Kepada Yth.
Kepala Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Zainul Millah Babakan Limus
Di Tempat

Assalamu'alaikum Wr. Wb.,

Dengan ini kami menyatakan bahwa mahasiswa di bawah ini:

Nama	: Santi Dianah
NIM	: 04212410013
Fakultas	: Fakultas Ilmu Pendidikan
Program Studi	: Magister Ilmu Pendidikan

sedang melakukan penelitian tesis dengan rincian sebagai berikut:

Judul	: *Critical Thinking Instruction of NU and PERSIS Primary School Teachers in West Java: Perceptions, Practices, and Challenges*
Lokasi Penelitian	: Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Zainul Millah Babakan Limus
Waktu Penelitian	: 20 Mei s.d. 6 Juni 2026

Oleh karena itu, kami memohon bantuan Ibu/Bapak untuk memberikan izin penelitian kepada mahasiswa tersebut. Data penelitian hanya akan digunakan untuk tujuan akademis dan tidak akan digunakan untuk tujuan lain. Demikian permohonan ini kami sampaikan, atas perhatian dan kerja sama Ibu/Bapak kami ucapkan terima kasih.

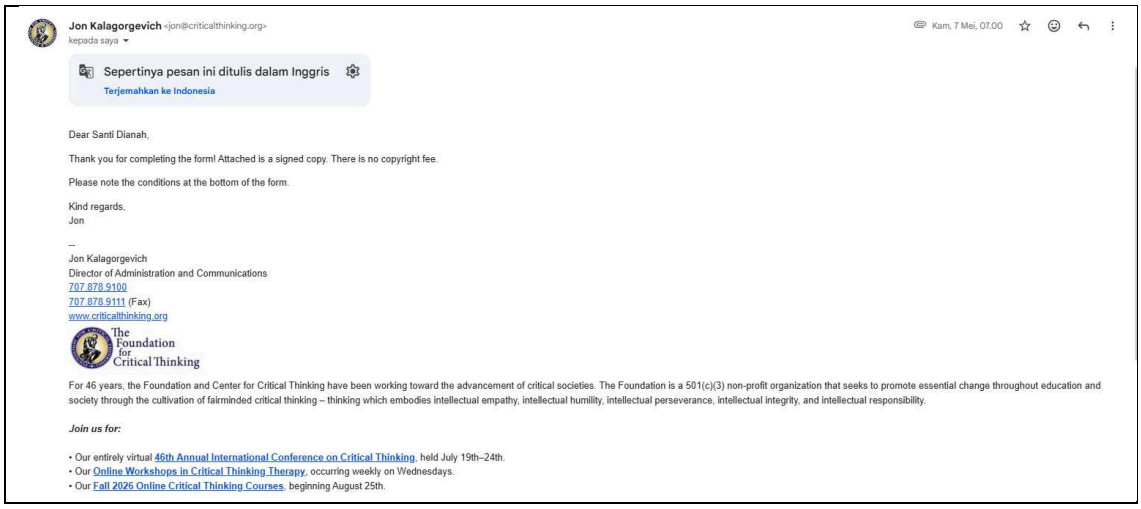
Wassalamu'alaikum Wr. Wb.,

Dengan Hormat,
Dekan Fakultas Ilmu Pendidikan

Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia | Faculty of Education

Prof. Nina Nurmila, PhD

Appendix 10: Approval for the Adaptation of Interview and Classroom Observation Protocols



Jon Kalagorgevich <jon@criticalthinking.org>
kepada saya

Kam, 7 Mei, 07.00

Sepertinya pesan ini ditulis dalam Inggris
Terjemahkan ke Indonesia

Dear Santi Dianah,

Thank you for completing the form! Attached is a signed copy. There is no copyright fee.

Please note the conditions at the bottom of the form.

Kind regards,
Jon

--
Jon Kalagorgevich
Director of Administration and Communications
707.878.9100
707.878.9111 (Fax)
www.criticalthinking.org

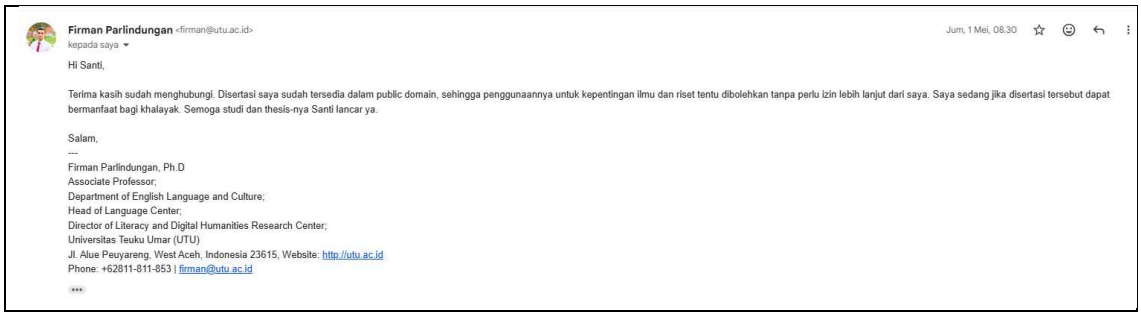
The Foundation for Critical Thinking

For 46 years, the Foundation and Center for Critical Thinking have been working toward the advancement of critical societies. The Foundation is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that seeks to promote essential change throughout education and society through the cultivation of fairminded critical thinking – thinking which embodies intellectual empathy, intellectual humility, intellectual perseverance, intellectual integrity, and intellectual responsibility.

Join us for:

- Our entirely virtual **46th Annual International Conference on Critical Thinking**, held July 19th–24th.
- Our **Online Workshops in Critical Thinking Therapy**, occurring weekly on Wednesdays.
- Our **Fall 2026 Online Critical Thinking Courses**, beginning August 25th.

Approval for the Adaptation of Interview Instruments from The Foundation for Critical Thinking



Firman Parlindungan <firman@utu.ac.id>
kepada saya

Jum, 1 Mei, 08.30

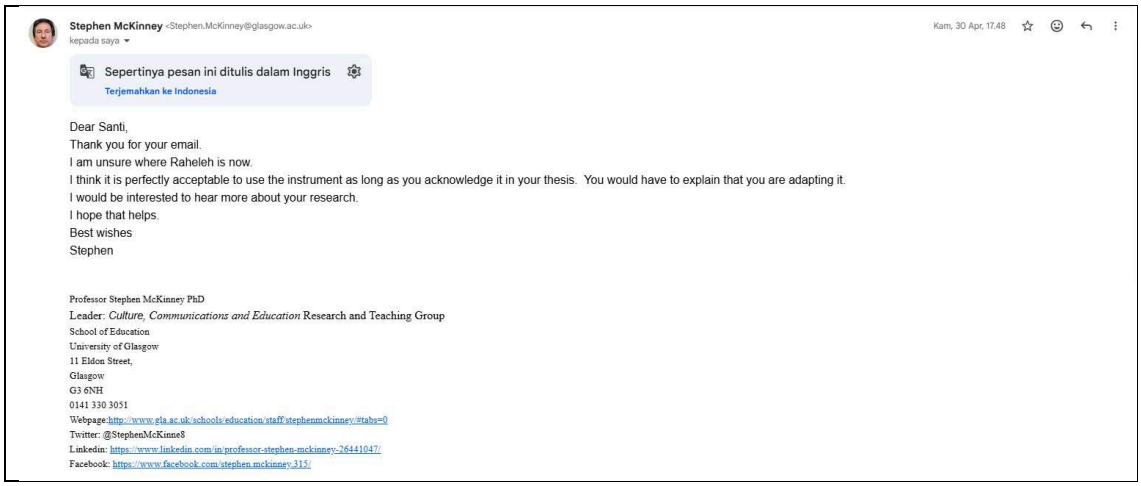
Hi Santi,

Terima kasih sudah menghubungi. Disertasi saya sudah tersedia dalam public domain, sehingga penggunaannya untuk kepentingan ilmu dan riset tentu dibolehkan tanpa perlu izin lebih lanjut dari saya. Saya sedang jika disertasi tersebut dapat bermanfaat bagi khalayak. Semoga studi dan thesis-nya Santi lancar ya.

Salam,

Firman Parlindungan, Ph.D
Associate Professor;
Department of English Language and Culture;
Head of Language Center;
Director of Literacy and Digital Humanities Research Center;
Universitas Teuku Umar (UTU)
Jl. Alue Peuyareng, West Aceh, Indonesia 23615, Website: http://utu.ac.id
Phone: +62811-811-853 | firman@utu.ac.id

Approval for the Adaptation of Interview and Classroom Observation Instruments from Firman Parlindungan



Stephen McKinney <Stephen.McKinney@glasgow.ac.uk>
kepada saya

Kam, 30 Apr, 17.48

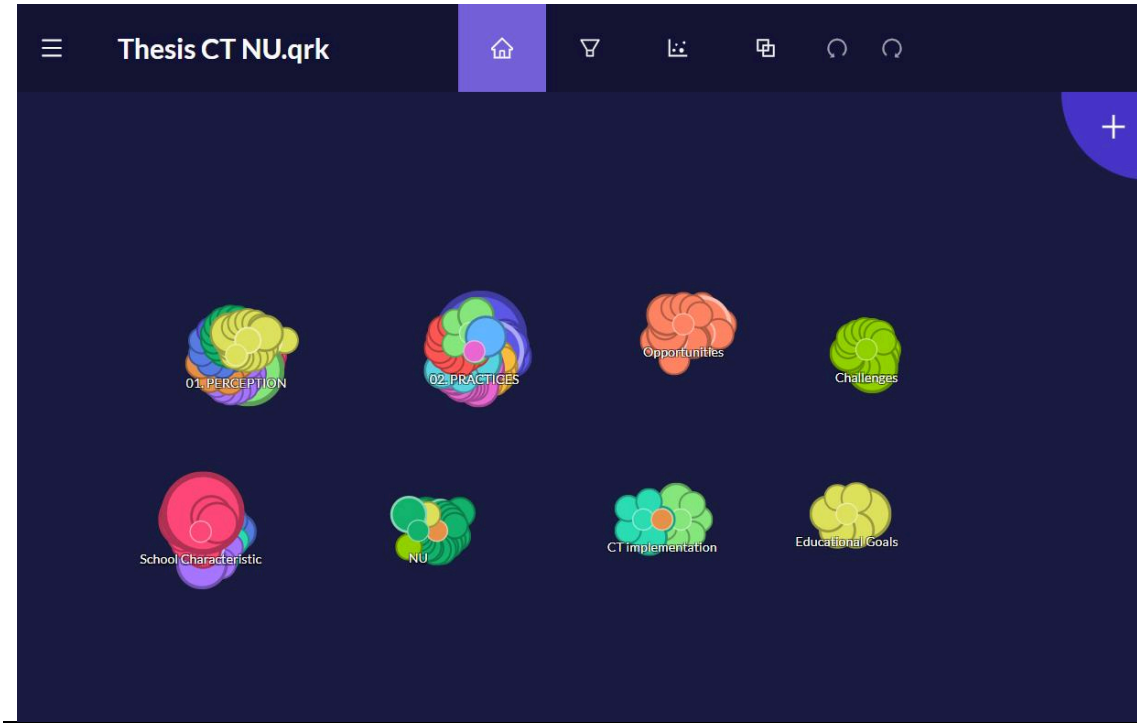
Sepertinya pesan ini ditulis dalam Inggris
Terjemahkan ke Indonesia

Dear Santi,
Thank you for your email.
I am unsure where Raheleh is now.
I think it is perfectly acceptable to use the instrument as long as you acknowledge it in your thesis. You would have to explain that you are adapting it.
I would be interested to hear more about your research.
I hope that helps.
Best wishes
Stephen

Professor Stephen McKinney PhD
Leader: *Culture, Communications and Education* Research and Teaching Group
School of Education
University of Glasgow
11 Eldon Street,
Glasgow
G3 6NH
0141 330 3051
Webpage:http://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/education/staff/stephenmckinney/#tabs=0
Twitter: @StephenMcKinne8
Linkedin: https://www.linkedin.com/in/professor-stephen-mckinney-26441047/
Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/stephen.mckinney.315/

Approval from Supervisor Raheleh Eslami for the Adaptation of Interview Instruments

Appendix 11: Thematic Coding Process Using Quirkos 3.1.0



Thematic Coding Structure of the NU Case Generated Using Quirkos 3.1.0



Thematic Coding Structure of the PERSIS Case Generated Using Quirkos 3.1.0

Appendix 12: Interview Documentation

a). Teachers



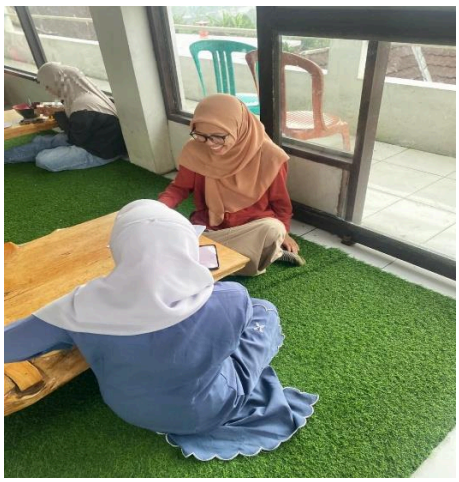
Interview with Mr. Putra (Fiqh Teacher, NU Primary School)



Interview with Mrs. Hana (Qur'an-Hadith Teacher, NU Primary School)



Interview with Mrs. Rina (Aqidah Akhlak Teacher, NU Primary School)



Interview with Mrs. Silvi (Homeroom Teacher, PERSIS Primary School)



Interview with Mr. Budi (Homeroom Teacher, PERSIS Primary School)



Interview with Mrs. Dewi (Homeroom Teacher, PERSIS Primary School)

b). Students

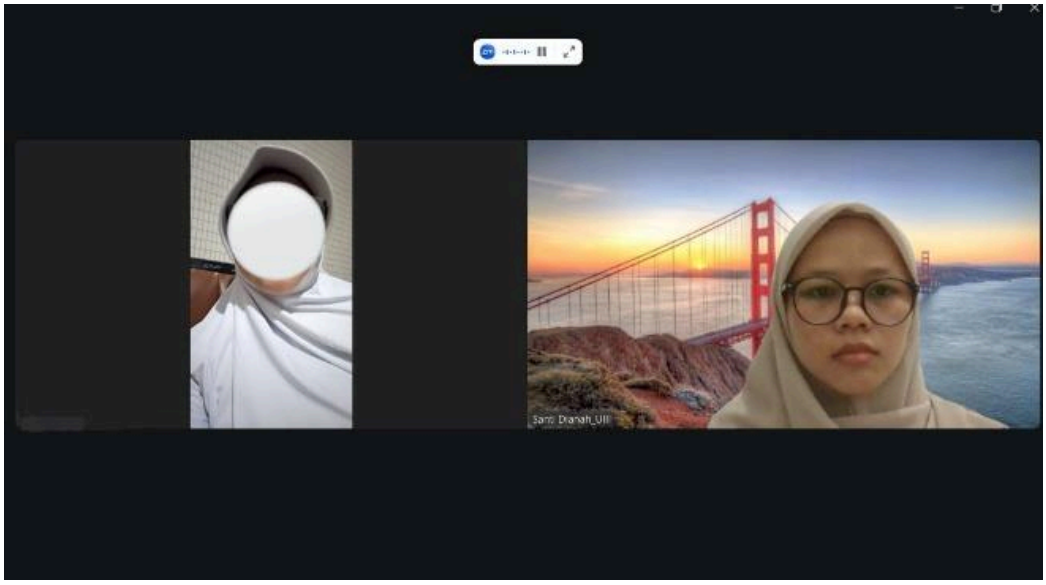


Interview with NU Primary School Students

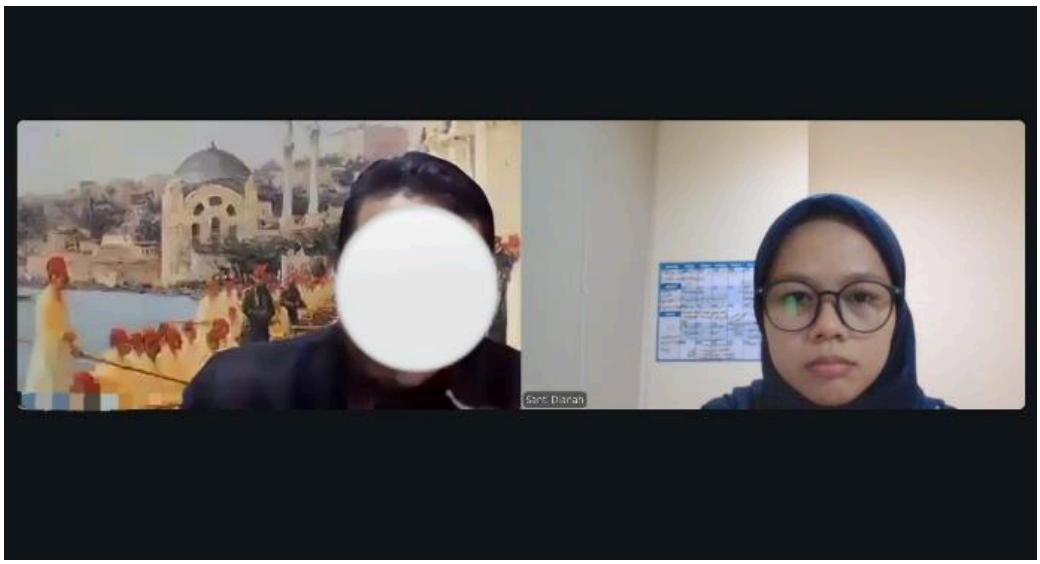


Interview with PERSIS Primary School Students

c). Heads of the Education Divisions of NU and PERSIS



Interview with Mrs. Rahma (Head of *Lembaga Pendidikan* Ma'arif NU)



Interview with Mr. Dani (Head of the PERSIS Tarbiyyah Division)