

Analysis of the role of islamic religious education teachers in enhancing students' critical thinking in moral learning based on the merdeka curriculum at SMP Muhammadiyah 1 Sukoharjo

Sulistiawati Mawarni ^{a1,*}, Isfihani ^{b2}, Iffah Mukhlisah^{c3}.

^{*ab} Institut Islam Mamba'ul Ulum, Surakarta, Indonesia.

^{*1}sulistyawatimawarni85@gmail.com, ²isfihani@gmail.com, ³iffahmukhlis85@gmail.com

^{*}Correspondent Author

Received: 24-08-2025

Revised: 10-10-2025

Accepted: 05-12-2025

KEYWORDS

Islamic Education Teacher,
Critical Thinking,
Moral Education,
Merdeka Curriculum

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the role of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers in enhancing students' critical thinking skills in moral learning based on the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Muhammadiyah 1 Sukoharjo in the 2024/2025 academic year. The focus lies on how teachers carry out their roles as demonstrators, classroom managers, mediators, and evaluators, along with the supporting and inhibiting factors influencing these roles. A qualitative approach with a case study design was employed, and data were collected through classroom observations, in-depth interviews with teachers, students, and the principal, as well as document analysis of teaching modules. The findings show that the IRE teachers' roles are relatively effective. The Grade VII teacher was categorized as *Good* with an average score of 3.5, while the Grade VIII teacher was *Very Good* with an average score of 3.6. The roles of demonstrator and classroom manager were well executed, while mediator and evaluator roles need improvement. Supporting factors include teachers' awareness of critical thinking, principal support, comprehensive modules, and positive student perceptions. Inhibiting factors include the dominance of lecturing, limited facilitation of discussions, and uneven student participation. The study implies that strengthening critical thinking in IRE requires comprehensive teacher roles, institutional support, and innovative teaching strategies.

This is an open-access article under the [CC-BY-SA](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/) license.



Introduction

Teachers hold a highly strategic position in the educational process, as the success of learning is largely determined by the quality of their role in managing classrooms and transferring knowledge. Teachers are not merely responsible for delivering subject matter but also for encouraging, guiding, and facilitating students in achieving educational goals (Artawan et al., 2023). In the context of Islamic Religious Education (IRE), teachers' roles become even more significant because they are not limited to teaching the cognitive dimensions of religion, but also to shaping students' morals and character in accordance with Islamic values. This is particularly relevant in the era of globalization and digitalization, where students are required to possess critical thinking as a core 21st-century competency.

The Qur'an and Hadith provide normative foundations for critical thinking. The concept of *tafakkur* in Surah Ali Imran (3:190–191) emphasizes the importance of deep reflection on God's creation as a means of strengthening faith, while Surah Al-Hujurat (49:6) highlights *tabayyun*, or the verification of information, before disseminating it. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) also warned that a person may incur sin by spreading unverified information (Hadith Muslim No. 5). These scriptural references demonstrate that critical thinking is an integral part of Islamic teachings and therefore must be internalized in IRE learning.

The Merdeka Curriculum, as Indonesia's most recent educational policy, offers teachers greater flexibility to develop students' potential through student-centered learning and emphasizes higher-order thinking skills. Nevertheless, preliminary observations of IRE at SMP Muhammadiyah 1 Sukoharjo revealed that the learning process remained dominated by lectures, resulting in students being less active in asking, answering, and engaging in discussions. This indicates that students' critical thinking skills had not yet developed optimally, exposing a gap between the ideal concepts of the Merdeka Curriculum and the actual classroom practices.

Previous studies have explored the teacher's role in fostering critical thinking, such as the application of cooperative learning strategies (Suriadi, Supriyatno, & Adnan, 2020), *Problem-Based Learning* models (Wibowo & Abbas, 2024), and various scientific methods (Hidayat, Iskanadar, & Azhari, 2022). However, these studies mainly focused on specific strategies or methods without providing a comprehensive analysis of teachers' holistic roles in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Moreover, much of the research was conducted at the elementary and senior high school levels, leaving limited attention to the junior high school level, particularly in moral (akhlak) learning within IRE. This study, therefore, seeks to fill that gap by focusing on the role of IRE teachers at SMP Muhammadiyah 1 Sukoharjo.

These earlier findings underline the importance of teachers as central agents in developing critical thinking skills. However, most of the literature emphasizes instructional strategies rather than an in-depth analysis of teachers' comprehensive roles within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum. Consequently, this research contributes a new perspective by focusing on moral education in junior high school as part of IRE.

Theoretically, the teacher's role encompasses functions as educator, instructor, facilitator, motivator, and evaluator (Dwikirani & Ridwan, 2024; Muadzin, 2021). According to Zakiyah Daradjat, the goal of Islamic Religious Education is to nurture faith, piety, noble character, and the ability to live in accordance with Islamic principles (Daradjat, 2017). Critical thinking, meanwhile, is understood as a cognitive process involving the analysis, evaluation, and synthesis of information to arrive at rational decisions (Sastradinata, 2023). The Merdeka Curriculum, as articulated by the Ministry of Education and Culture (Kemendikbud, 2022), underscores teachers' flexibility in designing student-centered learning to develop the *Pancasila Student Profile*. These four theoretical perspectives constitute the conceptual foundation of this study.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus not only on particular instructional strategies but also on examining the holistic roles of IRE teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Moreover, the study emphasizes moral education as the cornerstone of character development, distinguishing it from earlier studies that largely concentrated on cognitive domains. Conducted at SMP Muhammadiyah 1 Sukoharjo during the 2024/2025

academic year, this research also provides updated empirical evidence relevant to the current dynamics of education under the Merdeka Curriculum.

Based on the foregoing background, the research questions are formulated as follows: First, how do IRE teachers enhance students' critical thinking skills in moral education based on the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Muhammadiyah 1 Sukoharjo in the 2024/2025 academic year? Second, what supporting and inhibiting factors affect the roles of IRE teachers in fostering students' critical thinking skills in moral education under the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Muhammadiyah 1 Sukoharjo in the 2024/2025 academic year?

Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach, as it aims to understand the phenomenon of the role of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers in enhancing students' critical thinking skills in moral learning based on the Merdeka Curriculum. A qualitative descriptive design enables the researcher to describe learning situations holistically through words, actions, and interactions that occur in the classroom (Moleong, 2016). This model is consistent with (Creswell & Poth, 2016), who affirm that qualitative research is used to explore social or human issues in depth through patterns of meaning.

The study was conducted at SMP Muhammadiyah 1 Sukoharjo, an accredited Islamic educational institution that has implemented the Merdeka Curriculum. The research subjects consisted of the school principal, two IRE teachers, and students. The research was carried out over four months, from February to May 2025, with a preliminary observation phase starting in November 2024 to provide an initial overview of the learning process. The subjects were selected using purposive sampling, as they were considered to have relevant experience and information regarding the implementation of IRE learning in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum (Sugiyono, 2013).

Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. Non-participatory observation was applied to examine the teachers' roles in the classroom without the researcher directly engaging in the learning activities. In-depth interviews were conducted with the school principal, IRE teachers, and students to obtain comprehensive information on strategies, challenges, and learning experiences. Documentation included lesson plans, student worksheets, assessment results, and photographs of classroom activities, serving as supporting evidence to strengthen the findings. Triangulation of techniques was employed to ensure the validity and reliability of the data (Denzin, 1997; Moleong, 2016).

The data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model, which consists of three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data reduction was carried out by coding and categorizing essential information. Data display was organized in narrative descriptions, tables, and charts to highlight the interrelationship of phenomena. Finally, conclusion drawing was conducted iteratively, with continuous verification through triangulation and member checking to ensure the credibility of the findings. Through this process, the analysis is expected to provide a comprehensive depiction of the roles of IRE teachers in fostering students' critical thinking skills within the Merdeka Curriculum (Miles, 1994).

Result and Discussion

1. The Role of Islamic Religious Education Teachers in Enhancing Critical Thinking

The findings indicate that the role of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers at SMP Muhammadiyah 1 Sukoharjo in improving students' critical thinking skills in moral learning based on the Merdeka Curriculum varied across classes. During the preliminary stage, the learning process was still dominated by lectures, resulting in students becoming passive, less confident to ask questions, and struggling to answer open-ended ones. This condition implied limited development of critical thinking skills, which should have been the primary focus of the Merdeka Curriculum.

In contrast, during the main research phase (February–May 2025), teachers began implementing more active approaches such as inquiry-based learning and *problem-based learning*. Observations and interviews demonstrated improvement, particularly in presenting materials, managing classrooms, and providing constructive feedback. However, the teachers' role as mediators was not yet optimal, as students' engagement in critical discussions and deeper analysis remained limited.

Observations were conducted in Grade VII and Grade VIII, assessing four aspects of teacher roles: demonstrator, classroom manager, mediator, and evaluator. The results are summarized in the following table.

Table 1. Observation Results of IRE Teachers' Roles in Enhancing Critical Thinking

Class	Teacher's Role	Score	Category
VII	Demonstrator	3.8	Very Good
	Classroom Manager	3.6	Very Good
	Mediator	3.4	Good
	Evaluator	3.2	Good
Average	—	3.5	Good
VIII	Demonstrator	3.6	Very Good
	Classroom Manager	3.8	Very Good
	Mediator	3.4	Good
	Evaluator	3.6	Very Good
Average	—	3.6	Very Good

Interpretation of the table shows that the Grade VII teacher achieved an average score of 3.5 (*Good*), while the Grade VIII teacher obtained an average score of 3.6 (*Very Good*). This indicates a difference in teacher quality across the two classes. In Grade VII, the teacher was relatively stronger as a demonstrator and classroom manager but weaker as a mediator and evaluator. In Grade VIII, the teacher was more balanced, achieving *Very Good* scores in three roles simultaneously: demonstrator, classroom manager, and evaluator.

In addition to observations, students' perceptions were gathered through questionnaires assessing their experiences with IRE learning under the Merdeka Curriculum. The results are presented below.

Table 2. Summary of Student Perceptions of Teachers' Roles in Enhancing Critical Thinking

Class	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Interpretation
VII	91.2	6.6	2.2	High positive perception
VIII	92.9	5.8	1.3	Very high positive perception

The table indicates that the majority of students (over 90% in both classes) agreed that the teaching methods applied by teachers were effective in enhancing interest, understanding, and participation. Students felt it was easier to understand IRE when given opportunities to seek information independently, gained greater confidence in presenting discussion outcomes, and valued the constructive feedback provided by teachers. These results demonstrate that teachers effectively fulfilled their roles as facilitators and motivators, although the mediator role still required strengthening.

In general, the findings confirm that the roles of IRE teachers at SMP Muhammadiyah 1 Sukoharjo are aligned with the theoretical framework of teacher functions as demonstrators, classroom managers, mediators, and evaluators. Teachers successfully modeled critical thinking (demonstrator) and created conducive learning environments (classroom manager). However, their ability to facilitate in-depth critical discussions (mediator) was still limited, as reflected in the lower average scores compared to other roles.

These findings reinforce Ennis's assertion that critical thinking can flourish if students are facilitated in evaluating evidence and constructing arguments. In this study, the Grade VIII teacher was relatively more successful than the Grade VII teacher, as the former integrated *problem-based learning* that encouraged students to analyze real-life cases. Meanwhile, the Grade VII teacher was still exploring the most effective strategies for interactive learning, despite attempts to employ inquiry-based approaches (Ennis, 2011).

The theoretical implications of this study relate to its contribution to the development of educational science, particularly in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) and critical thinking studies. First, the findings strengthen Rusman's theory that teachers function as demonstrators, classroom managers, mediators, and evaluators (Fatmawati, 2021). All four roles significantly contributed to shaping students' critical thinking, though variations in implementation quality were evident. Second, the study provides empirical evidence of the Merdeka Curriculum's application, which emphasizes student-centered learning and the cultivation of higher-order thinking skills. When teachers actively served as facilitators and motivators, students developed curiosity, confidence, and the courage to express ideas. This supports Vygotsky's scaffolding theory, which emphasizes the importance of teacher guidance within the zone of proximal development (Schunk, 2012).

Third, the study expands theoretical perspectives on critical thinking in religious education. While most literature addresses critical thinking within science and social contexts, the findings indicate that it is also highly relevant to IRE, particularly in moral education. Thus, critical thinking should be recognized not only as an academic competency but also as a religious and moral skill cultivated through faith-based learning. Fourth, the study highlights that teachers' effectiveness is not solely determined by pedagogical competence but also by structural support such as curriculum policies, teaching modules, and

the school environment. In this case, strong support from the principal and comprehensive teaching modules reinforced teachers' ability to foster critical thinking.

From the students' perspective, the data confirmed that they felt more motivated and better understood IRE through active learning models emphasizing independence. This aligns with the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum, which focus on developing critical thinking competencies and active participation (Kemendikbud, 2022). Therefore, it can be concluded that IRE teachers significantly contributed to students' critical thinking development, though further reinforcement

2. Supporting and Inhibiting Factors

a. Supporting Factors

Based on observations, interviews, and document analysis, several factors were found to support the role of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers in developing students' critical thinking skills. First, teachers' commitment and understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum were relatively strong. Both IRE teachers emphasized the importance of critical thinking and made efforts to incorporate it into their teaching strategies, such as using inquiry methods in Grade VII and problem-based learning in Grade VIII.

Second, support from the school principal emerged as an important factor. The principal emphasized that teachers should not merely serve as content deliverers but also as facilitators who encourage students' questioning, discussion, and exploration. This created an academic climate conducive to critical thinking development.

Third, the availability of comprehensive teaching modules aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum standards strengthened the learning process. These modules included SMART learning objectives (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound), interactive activities, as well as formative and summative assessments that support critical thinking skills.

Fourth, students' positive perceptions further reinforced the teachers' role. Questionnaire data revealed that more than 90% of students in both Grade VII and VIII felt that the learning methods applied by teachers increased their enthusiasm, confidence, and curiosity. This response demonstrates that students' attitudes significantly supported the promotion of critical thinking.

b. Inhibiting Factors

Despite these supporting factors, the study also identified several obstacles that hindered the optimization of teachers' roles. First, the dominance of lectures during the preliminary stage hindered student participation, leaving students passive. Although improvements were made later, this initial tendency continued to affect student engagement.

Second, teachers' roles as mediators and evaluators had not been maximized. Observation scores revealed that these roles only reached the "Good" category, in contrast to the "Very Good" performance in the roles of demonstrator and classroom manager. Teachers still needed to enhance their skills in facilitating critical discussions, providing equal opportunities for all students, and offering deeper reflective feedback.

Third, technical challenges such as difficulty in managing classrooms during group discussions and a lack of confidence among Grade VII teachers in applying interactive methods also became obstacles. Even the Grade VIII teacher acknowledged difficulties in finding relevant real-life cases to be used as problem-based learning materials.

Fourth, active student engagement still required reinforcement. Although most students showed enthusiasm, a small portion remained hesitant or passive in formulating questions and conducting critical analysis. This indicates that fostering a classroom culture of discussion and reflection must continue to be prioritized.

Table 3. Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in the Roles of IRE Teachers in Enhancing Critical Thinking

Aspect	Supporting Factors	Inhibiting Factors
Teachers	1. Awareness of the importance of critical thinking. 2. Use of inquiry and problem-based learning.	1. Initial dominance of lecturing and difficulty in applying interactive methods. 2. Lack of confidence among Grade VII teachers.
School Principal	Full support in positioning teachers as facilitators, motivators, and mediators.	Not all expectations from the principal were realized in practice, particularly in mediating discussions.
Learning Tools	Comprehensive modules (SMART objectives, formative and summative assessments, worksheets, reading materials, glossary).	Teachers' difficulties in finding relevant real-life cases for problem-based learning.
Students	Positive perceptions (over 90% agreed that learning encouraged critical thinking).	Some students remained passive or hesitant in discussions and in formulating critical questions.

The findings reveal that supporting and inhibiting factors interact to influence the roles of IRE teachers. School principal support and the availability of comprehensive modules proved to be strong foundations that enabled teachers to more easily integrate critical thinking into classroom practices. This aligns with (Indriani & Marno, 2024), who argued that structural support such as curriculum, media, and school policy plays a crucial role in teachers' success in implementing active learning.

Nevertheless, the challenges indicate a gap between teachers' theoretical understanding of critical thinking and its practical application. Teachers acknowledged the importance of critical thinking, but technical difficulties and habitual reliance on lectures limited its implementation. This is consistent with (David Darwin et al., 2025), who found that teachers often face challenges in shifting from traditional to participatory teaching models.

Thus, the study underscores the importance of strengthening teachers' competencies in mediating critical discussions and reflective evaluations, as well as the need for school strategies to overcome resistance to changes in teaching methods. Continuous teacher training, classroom discussion habituation, and the use of relevant real-life cases are essential

recommendations to optimize the development of critical thinking in IRE learning under the Merdeka Curriculum.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the role of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers at SMP Muhammadiyah 1 Sukoharjo in enhancing students' critical thinking in moral learning under the Merdeka Curriculum has been carried out effectively, although several challenges remain. Teachers performed their roles as demonstrators, classroom managers, mediators, and evaluators with varying levels of achievement in each class. The Grade VII teacher achieved the *Good* category with an average score of 3.5, while the Grade VIII teacher reached the *Very Good* category with an average score of 3.6. The roles of demonstrator and classroom manager were the most prominent, whereas the mediator and evaluator roles still required further reinforcement to foster students' critical discussions and reflective thinking more optimally.

Several factors supported teachers' success, including teachers' awareness of the importance of critical thinking, the application of inquiry and problem-based learning methods, the principal's support, the availability of comprehensive teaching modules, and students' positive perceptions of active learning. Nonetheless, challenges persisted, such as the dominance of lecturing, limited facilitation of in-depth discussions, classroom management difficulties during group work, and uneven student engagement.

This research highlights that strengthening critical thinking skills in IRE requires teachers to perform comprehensive roles, supported by adequate learning resources and a conducive school culture. Structural reinforcement through curriculum support, innovative teaching modules, and continuous professional development for teachers is necessary to ensure that the objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum can be fully achieved.

References

- Artawan, P., Muhammadijah, M. u., Hamsiah, A., Pongpalilu, F., Rachmandhani, M. S., Utari, T. I., . . . Wahyuningsih, N. S. (2023). *Pengantar Ilmu Pendidikan: Teori, Konsep Dan Aplikasinya Di Indonesia*: PT. Sonpedia Publishing Indonesia.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*: Sage publications.
- Daradjat, Z. (2017). Ilmu pendidikan islam.
- David Darwin, S., Cahyono, D., Tohir, A., Djunaedi, H., SE, M., Wulandari, O., . . . Subaeki, B. (2025). *Transformasi Pembelajaran Berbasis Teknologi: Memadukan Pembelajaran Tradisional Dan Digital*: PT. Nawala Gama Education.
- Denzin, N. K. (1997). *Interpretive ethnography: Ethnographic practices for the 21st century*: Sage.
- Dwikirani, C., & Ridwan, A. (2024). Peran Guru Pendidikan Agama Islam dalam Membentuk Akhlak di Era Digital: Tinjauan Sosial-Edukasi Berbasis Teori Amin Abdullah. *Social Studies in Education*, 2(2), 139-156. doi:<https://doi.org/10.15642/sse.2024.2.2.139-156>
- Ennis, R. (2011). Critical thinking: Reflection and perspective Part II. *Inquiry: Critical thinking across the Disciplines*, 26(2), 5-19.
- Fatmawati, I. (2021). Peran guru dalam pengembangan kurikulum dan pembelajaran. *Revorma: Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Pemikiran*, 1(1), 20-37. doi:<https://doi.org/10.62825/revorma.v1i1.4>
- Hidayat, R., Iskanadar, D., & Azhari, A. (2022). Strategi Guru Pendidikan Agama Islam Dalam Menerapkan Pembelajaran Pendekatan Saintifik Pada Kurikulum 2013. *AL JAMI: Jurnal Ilmiah Keagamaan, Pendidikan dan Dakwah*, 15-38.
- Indriani, S. M., & Marno, M. (2024). Dampak perubahan kebijakan kurikulum terhadap guru. *Edukatif: Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan*, 6(1), 32-40.
- Miles, M. B. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks.
- Moleong, L. J. (2016). *Metodologi penelitian kualitatif (edisi revisi)*.
- Muadzin, A. M. A. (2021). Konsepsi peran guru sebagai fasilitator dan motivator dalam proses pembelajaran pendidikan agama Islam. *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, 7(2), 171-186. doi:<https://doi.org/10.37286/ojs.v7i2.102>
- Sastradinata, B. L. N. (2023). *Transformasi mindset dalam membangun kemampuan berpikir kritis melalui metode pembelajaran aktif*: Deepublish.
- Schunk, D. H. (2012). *Learning theories*: Pearson.
- Sugiyono, D. (2013). *Metode penelitian pendidikan pendekatan kuantitatif, kualitatif dan R&D*.
- Suriadi, S., Supriyatno, T., & Adnan, A. (2020). Al-Qur'an hadits learning using cooperative learning strategy. *Jurnal Tarbiyatuna*, 11(2), 153-160. doi:<https://doi.org/10.31603/tarbiyatuna.v11i2.2750>
- Wibowo, K. B., & Abbas, N. (2024). Implementasi Pembelajaran Berbasis Masalah pada Mata Pelajaran Akidah Akhlak Siswa Kelas IX di Madrasah Tsanawiyah Negeri 4 Sragen Tahun Pelajaran 2024/2025. *Lisyabab: Jurnal Studi Islam dan Sosial*, 5(2), 76-92. doi:<https://doi.org/10.58326/jurnallisyabab.v5i2.301>
- Miles, M. B. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks.

- Moleong, L. J. (2016). Metodologi penelitian kualitatif (edisi revisi).
- Muadzin, A. M. A. (2021). Konsepsi peran guru sebagai fasilitator dan motivator dalam proses pembelajaran pendidikan agama Islam. *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, 7(2), 171-186. doi:<https://doi.org/10.37286/ojs.v7i2.102>
- Sastradinata, B. L. N. (2023). *Transformasi mindset dalam membangun kemampuan berpikir kritis melalui metode pembelajaran aktif*: Deepublish.
- Schunk, D. H. (2012). *Learning theories*: Pearson.
- Sugiyono, D. (2013). Metode penelitian pendidikan pendekatan kuantitatif, kualitatif dan R&D.
- Suriadi, S., Supriyatno, T., & Adnan, A. (2020). Al-Qur'an hadits learning using cooperative learning strategy. *Jurnal Tarbiyatuna*, 11(2), 153-160. doi:<https://doi.org/10.31603/tarbiyatuna.v11i2.2750>
- Wibowo, K. B., & Abbas, N. (2024). Implementasi Pembelajaran Berbasis Masalah pada Mata Pelajaran Akidah Akhlak Siswa Kelas IX di Madrasah Tsanawiyah Negeri 4 Sragen Tahun Pelajaran 2024/2025. *Lisyabab: Jurnal Studi Islam dan Sosial*, 5(2), 76-92. doi:<https://doi.org/10.58326/jurnallisyabab.v5i2.301>