

BUILDING A STRONG RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING: THE ROLE OF CONSTRUCTIVIST THEORY IN ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the implementation of constructivist theory in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning as an effort to enhance students' religious understanding in a meaningful and contextually relevant manner. Conventional PAI learning, which remains predominantly teacher-centered, is considered less effective in developing deep understanding and critical thinking skills. Therefore, constructivist theory is applied as an alternative approach that emphasizes learners' active role in constructing knowledge through experience, interaction, and reflection. This research employs a qualitative approach with a case study design conducted at SD Negeri 02 Lubuk Keliat. The research participants include an Islamic Religious Education teacher and sixth-grade students. Data were collected through classroom observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, and were analyzed using data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing techniques. The findings reveal that the implementation of constructivist strategies such as group discussions, case studies, learning simulations, and the integration of educational technology positively influences students' learning motivation, religious understanding, critical thinking skills, and learning independence. However, several challenges were identified, including limited facilities and varying student abilities. To overcome these constraints, teachers implement differentiated instruction and strengthen collaborative learning. In conclusion, constructivist theory is effective in Islamic Religious Education learning and contributes significantly to fostering students' deeper, more critical, and contextually applicable religious understanding in their daily lives.

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INTRODUCTION

Islamic Religious Education plays a central and strategic role in shaping the character, morality, and spirituality of the younger Muslim generation as the future successors of the nation (Yosita, 2023). Beyond merely conveying factual information about the pillars of faith, the pillars of Islam (rukun Islam), the history of Islamic civilization, and other formal aspects, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) has deeper and more comprehensive objectives. The primary goal of PAI is to instill the noble, universal, and enduring values of Islam such as honesty, justice, compassion, tolerance, and responsibility into every aspect of students' lives. Thus, PAI is expected to guide learners to become individuals of noble character, high integrity, and strong moral responsibility toward themselves, their families, and society, as well as to contribute positively and constructively to the advancement of society, the nation, and the state. In addition, PAI plays an important role in equipping students with a sound and comprehensive understanding of Islamic teachings, enabling them to respond wisely to the challenges of the modern era while remaining grounded in religious values. (Gani, Oktavani, and Suhartono, 2024). Islamic Religious Education (PAI) is important for shaping the personality of young Muslims as the future generation. PAI is not only about learning the pillars of faith and the pillars of Islam, but also about teaching good values such as honesty, justice, compassion, tolerance, and responsibility (Munkhakim, 2025). Through PAI, students are expected to develop good character, a sense of responsibility, and the ability to contribute positively to society and the country. PAI also helps students gain a correct understanding of Islam so that they can face the challenges of the modern era wisely based on Islamic teachings.

However, the implementation of PAI learning in schools often still relies on traditional, teacher-centered approaches that emphasize lecturing and memorization (Rusydiyah, 2024). Such approaches tend to limit student participation, reduce learning motivation, and hinder the development of critical thinking skills. As a result, students frequently experience difficulty in understanding religious concepts deeply and relating them to real-life contexts, leading to superficial and less meaningful learning outcomes. One of the major challenges in PAI learning is bridging abstract religious concepts such as *tawhid*, *ibadah*, *akhlak*, and *muamalah* with students' dynamic daily experiences. When these concepts are delivered through passive instructional methods, students often struggle to internalize and apply them in practical situations. Therefore, PAI learning requires an interactive, participatory, and contextual approach that enables students to actively engage with religious teachings and perceive their relevance to everyday life (Salis, Anggreini, & Sa'diyah, 2025).

Constructivist theory offers a promising alternative to address these challenges. This theory emphasizes that knowledge is actively constructed by learners through meaningful experiences, social interaction, and reflection, rather than passively received from teachers (Sholihin, 2024; Casmudi, 2025). In this approach, students function as active subjects who construct their own understanding of religious values, making learning more meaningful, personal, and applicable. Although previous studies have discussed constructivist learning in general education contexts, research that specifically examines the implementation of constructivist theory in Islamic Religious Education at the elementary school level remains limited. In particular, there is a lack of empirical studies that explore how constructivist strategies contribute to strengthening students' religious understanding in a contextual and practical manner. This gap highlights the need for focused research that investigates constructivist based PAI learning in real classroom settings. The urgency of this study lies in the increasing demand for innovative PAI learning models that are capable of responding to contemporary educational challenges, fostering critical thinking, and strengthening students' moral and religious foundations from an early age. Without meaningful learning approaches, PAI risks becoming merely formalistic and disconnected from students' lived realities.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the implementation of constructivist theory in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning and its impact on students' religious understanding. The research was conducted at SD Negeri 02 Lubuk Keliat and involved one sixth-grade Islamic Religious Education teacher and five students as research informants. Data were collected through classroom observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observations focused on the application of constructivist

principles and student interactions during the learning process, while interviews explored participants' experiences, perceptions, challenges, and the perceived impact of constructivist learning (Kristina, 2024). The analyzed documents included teaching modules, instructional materials, student worksheets (LKPD), observation notes, and interview transcripts. Research instruments consisted of observation guidelines, open-ended interview protocols, and document analysis sheets. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, which involved data familiarization, initial coding, categorization of codes into themes, and interpretation of themes related to learning strategies, supporting and inhibiting factors, and their impact on students' religious understanding. Data validity was ensured through source and method triangulation (Moleong, 2017).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Classroom observations were conducted to examine the implementation of constructivist principles in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning. The observations focused on teachers' instructional strategies and students' interactions during discussions, collaborative activities, and problem-solving tasks. The results indicate that PAI learning was implemented in an interactive and student-centered manner. Teachers facilitated learning by encouraging discussion, providing feedback, and adjusting instructional strategies to accommodate students' individual needs. Students actively participated in knowledge construction through interaction and reflection, reflecting the core principles of constructivist learning (Yogaswara, 2024). Figure 1 illustrates an interactive classroom environment in which students actively engage in discussion with the teacher. This setting demonstrates a constructivist learning atmosphere, where the teacher acts as a facilitator and students construct understanding through dialogue, collaboration, and critical reflection, making learning more meaningful and contextually relevant.



Figure 1. Islamic Religious Education Teacher and Students Engaged in Discussion

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Interviews with the sixth-grade PAI teacher reveal that constructivism is understood as an approach that emphasizes active knowledge construction through experience, reflection, and social interaction. In practice, the teacher implemented student-centered learning strategies such as group discussions, case studies, simulations, projects, and the integration of instructional technology. These strategies enabled students to explore and apply Islamic values independently and collaboratively. The teacher identified several challenges, including students' initial reliance on lecture-based learning, limited technological facilities, and differences in students' academic abilities. To address these challenges, the teacher applied differentiated instruction, utilized alternative learning resources, provided additional guidance, and collaborated with colleagues through the Teachers' Working Group (KKG). According to the teacher, the constructivist approach increased students' motivation, understanding of PAI material, critical thinking skills, independence, and self-confidence.

Interviews with sixth-grade students indicate that constructivist-based PAI learning created a more enjoyable, engaging, and meaningful learning experience. Students reported that discussions, simulations, case studies, projects, and interactive media helped them better understand religious concepts and apply them in daily life. The approach encouraged greater student participation, critical thinking, independence, confidence, and motivation to practice Islamic teachings. Despite these positive outcomes, students also reported challenges, including limited access to learning resources and technology, time constraints during discussions, uneven participation among peers, and difficulties in understanding abstract religious concepts.

The Merdeka Curriculum teaching module for Grade VI Islamic Religious Education (IRE) at SD Negeri 02 Lubuk Keliat discusses halal and haram food. Students are expected to have prior knowledge of the basic concepts of halal and haram. This module aims to develop the profile of Pancasila Students and the values of Rahmatan lil ‘Alamin. The learning process applies the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) model and is designed for Grade VI students who are at the early formal operational stage of thinking. The learning objectives include explaining the concepts of halal and haram, providing relevant examples, identifying the legal foundations, and fostering cautious and responsible attitudes (Sholihin 2024). The success criteria include students’ ability to answer questions correctly, provide examples of attitudes in choosing halal options, and actively participate in discussions. The learning activities consist of an introduction, a core phase (following the syntax of Problem-Based Learning), and a closing session, emphasizing conceptual understanding, application, and the wisdom of observing halal and haram principles.

Student Worksheet (LKPD) for Grade VI Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in the even semester, focusing on the laws of halal and haram with the theme of making halal and haram life choices. The worksheet aims to enable students to explain the concepts of halal and haram, identify relevant examples, analyze real-life cases, work collaboratively in groups, and develop attitudes of honesty, discipline, and responsibility. It includes triggering questions related to appealing foods whose halal–haram status is unclear. The learning activities follow the syntax of Problem-Based Learning (PBL), beginning with an exploration phase involving observation and questioning.

Constructivist Theory in Learning



Figure 2. Illustration Supporting Constructivist Theory (Jean Piaget) (Casmudi 2025)

Constructivism is a deep and comprehensive learning theory which states that learners do not merely receive information passively from their surrounding environment, but actively construct their own knowledge through a dynamic and continuous process. This process is based on their direct experiences, the interactions they engage in with the social and physical environment, as well as the interpretation and reflection they carry out on those experiences and interactions. In other words, knowledge is not something that is transferred from the outside, but something that is internally constructed by each individual based on their unique understanding and interpretation of the world around them (Suyanti and Lubis 2023).

According to Owon et al. (2024), there are five main principles of constructivism, which include:

1. **Active Learning:** Learners must be actively involved in the learning process, participating in activities that stimulate thinking and reflection.
2. **Learner-Centered Learning:** The focus of learning should be on the learners, with the teacher acting as a facilitator or guide rather than the sole source of knowledge.

3. Meaningful Learning: Learning should be meaningful and relevant to learners, connected to their own experiences and prior understanding.
4. Knowledge Construction: Knowledge is not something that is simply given, but is constructed by individuals through their own interpretation, reflection, and understanding.
5. Collaboration and Discussion: Interaction with others and the sharing of ideas are essential parts of learning, as they support reflection and the development of deeper understanding.

According to Sya'ban et al. (2025), to understand the main principles of constructivist theory, several key principles can be identified, including:

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According to Sya'ban et al. (2025), to understand the main principles of constructivist theory, several key principles can be identified, including:

1. Active Subject: Constructivism holds that learners are active participants in building their own knowledge. This principle emphasizes that knowledge is not passively received but actively constructed by learners through interaction with their environment and experiences.
2. Normativity: This principle involves the idea that knowledge construction is influenced by social norms and values. It implies that what is considered knowledge is shaped by cultural and societal contexts, making the learning process inherently normative.
3. Historicity: Constructivism acknowledges that knowledge is historical. This means that understanding and interpreting knowledge are influenced by context and historical development.
4. Social Interaction: Social constructivism, a branch of constructivist theory, highlights the importance of social interaction in the learning process. According to Vygotsky, learning occurs through social engagement and collaboration, which assists in the joint construction of knowledge.
5. Reflective Balance: This method involves balancing and adjusting beliefs to achieve coherence among them. It is a process used in the constructivist approach to ensure that the principles and knowledge constructed are justifiable and reliable.

6. Epistemological Claims: Constructivism makes important claims about the nature of knowledge and human rationality. It asserts that knowledge is built based on individual experience and interaction, rather than being an objective reality existing independently of the observer.

Owon et al., (2024) emphasizing five principles of constructivism centered on active learning, learner-centeredness, meaningful learning, individual knowledge construction, as well as collaboration and discussion. Meanwhile, Sya'ban et al., (2025) highlighting the principles of active subject, normativity, historicity, social interaction, reflective balance, and epistemological claims in constructivism. Both perspectives align in emphasizing the active role of learners in constructing knowledge through interaction with their environment and experiences, as well as the importance of social context and reflection in the learning process. Constructivism views knowledge as the result of individual construction influenced by norms, history, and social interaction, rather than something passively received. Therefore, effective learning should actively involve learners, be relevant to their experiences, and facilitate collaboration and reflection to achieve deep understanding. According to Lathifah et al. (2024), there are six ways to implement constructivist theory in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning:

Setting Learning Objectives: In PAI, learning objectives should encompass cognitive (understanding), affective (attitude), and psychomotor (behavior) aspects. For example, learning objectives on zakat could include: (a) Understanding the concept of zakat and its types (cognitive); (b) Developing awareness of the importance of giving zakat (affective); (c) Being able to calculate and distribute zakat correctly (psychomotor).

Selecting Learning Materials: PAI learning materials should be relevant to students' lives and presented in an engaging way. For example, using inspirational stories from the Quran and Hadith, animated videos about how to perform prayers, or articles on social issues related to Islamic values.

Designing Themes for Active Learning: PAI themes should be based on issues or problems relevant to students' lives. For example, a theme like "Caring for the Environment in Islam" can be explored through activities such as planting trees, creating posters about recycling, or organizing cleanliness campaigns at school.

Determining and Organizing Learning Processes According to the Theme: The PAI learning process should be designed for active and collaborative learning. Examples include:

Group Discussion: Discussing case studies about moral dilemmas in daily life and finding solutions based on Islamic teachings.

Experiments: Conducting simple experiments to demonstrate scientific concepts aligned with Islamic teachings, such as experiments on the benefits of water.

Role Play: Acting out figures from Islamic history or situations related to religious values.

Problem Solving: Solving social problems related to Islamic values, such as poverty, injustice, or environmental degradation.

Preparing Questions to Foster Students' Creative Thinking, Critical Thinking, Discussion, and Inquiry: PAI teachers should be able to ask questions that stimulate students to think critically and creatively. Examples include:

"How can we care for the environment according to Islamic teachings?"

"What can we do to help people in need around us?"

"How can we resolve conflicts with friends peacefully?"

Evaluating Learning Activities and Outcomes: PAI learning evaluation should be comprehensive, covering cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects. Examples include written tests, performance assessments (practicing prayers, reading the Quran), observation of attitudes, and project assessments.

Benefits of Implementing Constructivism in PAI Learning

According to Wijayanti et al. (2025) and Indrawan et al. (2023), the implementation of constructivist theory in PAI learning can provide various benefits, including:

Deeper Understanding: Students do not merely memorize religious concepts but also comprehend their meaning and relevance in their daily lives.

Greater Engagement: Students become more active and motivated in learning because they play a central role in the learning process.

Critical Thinking Skills: Students develop critical thinking abilities as they are challenged to analyze, evaluate, and solve problems.

Social Skills: Students learn to collaborate, communicate, and respect differing opinions.

Relevance to Life: Students recognize how religious teachings are relevant to their everyday lives, increasing their motivation to practice them.

Challenges and Solutions

Although it offers many benefits, according to Parnawi (2023), the implementation of constructivism in PAI learning faces several challenges, including:

Time Allocation: Problem-based and project-based learning, which are characteristic of constructivism, often require more time compared to traditional methods. This can be a challenge in aligning with a tight curriculum schedule and the learning targets that must be achieved.

Limited Resources: Not all schools have adequate access to the resources needed to support constructivist learning. These limitations include access to technology such as the internet and computers, as well as the availability of relevant and engaging interactive learning materials.

Student Ability Diversity: The varying levels of understanding and learning abilities among students can pose a challenge in implementing constructivism. Students with lower abilities may struggle to keep up with discussions or actively participate in group projects, requiring additional attention and support.

According to Parnawi (2023), Ahmad and Arifin (2024), the solutions to the challenges of implementing constructivist theory in PAI learning include:

Time Allocation

Curriculum Integration: Integrating several basic competencies (KD) or relevant learning materials into a single project or activity. This makes time usage more efficient as it covers multiple learning objectives simultaneously.

Flexibility in Time: Utilizing a blended learning approach, combining face-to-face classroom learning with online learning. Online learning can provide students with flexibility to complete tasks and projects outside of class hours.

Prioritization of Material: Identifying essential materials that students must master and focusing constructivist learning on these topics. Less essential materials can be delivered through more concise methods.

Limited Resources

Utilization of Local Resources: Making use of resources available in the school's surrounding environment as learning media. For example, using the natural environment as a laboratory to study scientific concepts in Islam, or interviewing local religious figures to understand religious practices.

Collaboration with External Parties: Cooperating with external parties such as universities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), or companies to obtain resource support, including teacher training, access to technology, or learning materials.

Development of Self-Created Materials: Teachers can develop their own interactive learning materials by utilizing freely available platforms or applications such as Canva, Quizizz, or Google Forms.

Diversity of Students' Abilities

Differentiated Instruction: Implementing differentiated learning by adjusting teaching methods, learning materials, and assignments to accommodate students' varying ability levels and learning styles. For example, providing simpler tasks for students who experience learning difficulties, or offering more complex challenges for students who progress more quickly.

Collaborative Learning: Using collaborative learning strategies, such as think-pair-share or jigsaw, in which students work together in groups to help and support one another in the learning process.

Individual Support: Providing individual assistance to students who experience learning difficulties. Teachers can offer additional explanations, targeted guidance, or constructive feedback.

CONCLUSION

Constructivist theory offers a transformative approach to Islamic Religious Education by emphasizing students' active role in constructing knowledge through experience, social interaction, and reflection. The findings indicate that the implementation of constructivist learning characterized by clear learning objectives, relevant materials, active learning themes, collaborative activities, reflective questioning, and holistic evaluation effectively enhances students' religious understanding, learning engagement, critical thinking skills, social competence, and the contextual application of Islamic values in daily life. Despite these positive outcomes, the implementation of constructivist learning faces several challenges, including limited instructional time, inadequate learning resources, and variations in students' academic abilities. To address these challenges, teachers apply adaptive strategies such as flexible time management, the utilization of local and digital learning resources, curriculum integration, differentiated instruction, collaborative learning, and individual mentoring. This study is limited by its qualitative case study design, which involved a small number of participants and was conducted in a single elementary school context. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized broadly to all Islamic Religious Education settings. In addition, this research focused primarily on teachers' and students' perceptions and classroom practices, without measuring learning outcomes quantitatively. Future research is recommended to involve larger and more diverse samples, apply mixed-method or experimental designs, and examine the long-term impact of constructivist-based PAI learning on students' religious attitudes, behaviors, and academic achievement. Further studies may also explore the integration of constructivist approaches with digital learning innovations to strengthen the effectiveness of Islamic Religious Education in contemporary educational contexts.

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