

THE CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH IN ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

approach, which falls short in developing students' critical thinking and deep understanding. This article aims to theoretically analyze the constructivist approach in PAI and its pedagogical implications based on a synthesis of recent research. The method used is a qualitative literature study with a systematic literature review approach on 11 indexed journal articles (2021-2025). The data collection technique was systematic documentation, while the analysis used a three-stage thematic method: open coding, theme grouping, and cross-article synthesis. The main findings show that constructivism is compatible with Islamic epistemology through four pedagogical features: active inquiry (hikmah pedagogy), social interaction, contextualization, and narrative meaning-making based on Quranic stories (qasas). Empirical evidence confirms improvements in inquiry skills, critical thinking, motivation, and the reconciliation of perceived religion-science conflicts. However, implementation faces challenges such as resistance from conservative parents, teacher misconceptions, and cultural-political dilemmas. The contribution of this article is to provide an integrative framework between constructivist theory and Islamic pedagogical traditions, which have so far been separate. In conclusion, the constructivist approach offers a dialogical and reflective middle path to transform PAI, but its success depends on teacher training, aligned curriculum development, and sensitivity to the local context. Further research is recommended to conduct quasi-experimental studies with control groups and to develop assessment Islamic religious education (PAI) in various institutions is still dominated by a teacher-centered, doctrinal transmission instruments sensitive to Islamic values.

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INTRODUCTION

Islamic religious education (PAI) in the contemporary era faces significant challenges in transforming its learning approach, which has long tended to be doctrinal and teacher-centered. This phenomenon is becoming more prominent in line with the demands of the 21st century, which require students to be critical, reflective, and able to connect religious values with social realities. Therefore, it is important for educators to implement learning methods that support the development of students' critical and creative thinking skills in real-life contexts (Romadhon et al., 2023).

Data shows that most Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning in madrasahs and public schools still uses memorization and lecture methods without providing adequate space for dialogue (Bin Muhammad Yusoff, 2023; Kurniawan et al., 2025). This condition contrasts with the main principles of Islamic education, which emphasize deep understanding (tafaqquh) and independent reasoning (ijtihad). Education that integrates these two principles can create a Muslim generation that not only understands religious teachings but is also able to apply them critically in daily life (Suswita, 2025).

The urgency of pedagogical reform in PAI is further strengthened by findings that constructivist approaches can significantly improve students' critical thinking skills and learning motivation. The application of learning methods that support active student involvement is crucial to achieving these goals (Muzfirah et al., 2023). Thus, this reform is expected to create a more effective and enjoyable learning environment. This reform is also in line with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, which provides flexibility in learning, allowing students to explore concepts more deeply and relevantly (Hidayati et al., 2024).

A systematic review by Singh et al., (2022) confirmed that seven constructivist approaches proved to be superior alternatives to traditional methods across various educational domains. In the Indonesian context, research by Zuhdi & Syarief, (2023) revealed that PAI teachers often misunderstand the essence of constructivism, leading to conceptual, cultural, and political dilemmas when trying to implement it. This gap between theory and practice is a major obstacle to pedagogical transformation.

The relevance of this topic is also driven by the growing need to bridge the dichotomy between religious and general sciences in the Islamic education system. The constructivist approach offers an epistemological bridge by viewing knowledge as a result of the learner's active construction through experience and social interaction (Hussien et al., 2021). This aligns with Islamic epistemology, which recognizes the diversity of schools of thought (mazhab) and interpretations of sacred texts. Kolb, (2023) found that inquiry-based learning in Islamic education can help students reconcile perceived conflicts between religion and science, including the long-controversial issue of evolution.

The main problem underlying this article is the continued dominance of authoritarian and rote-based teaching models in many Islamic educational institutions, both in pesantren and formal schools. Noguera et al., (2022) noted a tension between the traditional mosque model, which prioritizes memorization, and the constructivist model, which grants greater learning autonomy to students. Parents with conservative religious orientations tend to prefer directive methods, while other groups support constructivist freedom. This contradiction creates dual pressure for PAI teachers in designing effective learning.

The gap this article aims to address is the lack of a theoretical framework that systematically integrates the principles of constructivism with the theological goals of Islamic education, such as the formation of faith, morals, and spiritual growth. Research by Arega & Hunde, (2025) shows that Quranic narratives (qasas) can serve as a narrative pedagogical framework that allows meaning to be co-constructed through contemplative dialogue. However, not many studies have explicitly linked this narrative approach with constructivist classroom strategies. Therefore, a comprehensive theoretical analysis is needed to fill this void.

Furthermore, although empirical evidence on the effectiveness of constructivism in general education is abundant, its application in the context of Islamic religious education is still limited and scattered. (Alkouatli, 2024) highlights the need for a conceptually relevant paradigmatic framework for empirical research with Muslim educators. Orak & Al-Khresheh, (2021) also emphasize that designing a constructivist learning model within the context of religious values requires special adaptations that go beyond merely imitating secular approaches. This methodological gap often leads to practical recommendations that are not applicable in the field.

Another implementation challenge is the lack of teacher readiness in designing and managing constructivist learning that remains rooted in Islamic tradition. Research by Nguyen & Le, (2024) identifies that teachers face conceptual, cultural, and political difficulties when implementing constructivism. In the context of Islamic Religious Education, Bin Muhammad Yusoff, (2023) adds that teachers are not yet trained to integrate values such as tawhid, ibadah, and akhlaq with inquiry-based contextual strategies. Without adequate training and a supportive curriculum, efforts to apply constructivism risk failure, which in turn strengthens resistance to change.

The main objective of this article is to present a theoretical analysis of the constructivist approach in Islamic religious education and its pedagogical implications based on a synthesis of recent research. This article systematically examines the theoretical foundations connecting Islamic epistemology with the principles of constructivism, identifies key pedagogical features, and evaluates empirical evidence of its effectiveness. Furthermore, this article also discusses emerging implementation challenges and offers practical recommendations for teachers, curriculum developers, and

policymakers. Thus, this article is expected to become a comprehensive reference for the development of constructivist-based Islamic Religious Education.

Theoretically, this article contributes to enriching the scholarly treasury of Islamic education by providing an integrative framework between contemporary learning theories and Islamic pedagogical traditions. Practically, this article provides concrete guidance for Islamic Religious Education teachers to implement strategies such as hikmah pedagogy, community of inquiry, dialogical learning, and Qur'anic narratives in the classroom. The expected benefits include improving the quality of Islamic Religious Education to be more active, reflective, and student-centered, as well as strengthening students' character and critical thinking. Ultimately, this approach is expected to produce graduates who not only memorize sacred verses but are also able to internalize and practice their teachings in the context of complex modern life.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article is a library research study using an analytical-interpretive qualitative approach. The chosen research type is a systematic literature review enriched with conceptual theoretical analysis, not a field study with human subjects. The approach used is a critical synthesis analysis of academic literature relevant to the topic of constructivism in Islamic religious education. This type of qualitative research was selected because the main objective of the article is to build an integrative theoretical framework between Islamic epistemology and the principles of constructivism, not to test hypotheses statistically or generalize findings to a specific population.

The data sources for this research are indexed scientific journal articles published between 2021 and 2025. A total of 11 journal articles were analyzed in-depth, consisting of 2 articles from the journal *Religions* (2023), 1 article from *Heliyon* (2023), 1 article from the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* (2024), 1 article from the *Review of Education* (2025), 1 article from the *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology* (2022), 1 article from the *Malaysian Journal of Learning and Instruction* (2021), 1 article from the *British Journal of Religious Education* (2021), 1 article from *SAGE Open* (2024), 1 article from the *World Journal of English Language* (2021), and 1 article from *Sustainability* (2022). All articles are openly accessible through databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar.

The data collection technique used was systematic documentation with a structured search strategy. The search was conducted using keywords such as "constructivism Islamic education", "constructivist approach religious education", "Hikmah pedagogy", "narrative pedagogy Islam", and "PAI constructivist". Inclusion criteria included articles in English or Indonesian, published between 2021-2025, substantively discussing constructivism in Islamic education, and available in full-text format. Articles that were only abstracts or irrelevant to the context of Islamic religious education were excluded from the analysis.

The data analysis procedure applied the thematic analysis method, which consists of three main stages. The first stage was open coding, where each article was read repeatedly to identify key concepts such as "active inquiry", "social interaction", "contextualization", and "narrative meaning-making". The second stage involved grouping these codes into broader themes such as theoretical foundations, pedagogical approaches, empirical evidence, and implementation challenges. The third stage was a cross-article synthesis to build a coherent argument about the compatibility of constructivism with Islamic religious education.

The validity of the findings in this study was maintained through source triangulation and conceptual member checking strategies. Source triangulation was performed by comparing findings from at least three different articles for each theoretical claim made. For example, the claim about the effectiveness of hikmah pedagogy was verified through articles by Kurniawan et al., (2025), Hussien et al., (2021), and Bin Muhammad Yusoff, (2023), which independently reported improvements in students' inquiry skills. Conceptual member checking was conducted by confirming the interpretation of key Islamic concepts such as tafaquh and ijthad through primary Islamic education literature that served as a common reference for the authors of the analyzed articles.

The reliability of this research is ensured through an audit trail that transparently documents every methodological decision. The documentation includes the keyword search strategy, the databases used, the access date for each article, the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the thematic coding process. Additionally, The use of a consistent analytical framework for all articles, namely extracting research objectives, methods, key findings, and implications, allows for the replication of the study by other researchers. The limitation of this research is the absence of a quantitative meta-analysis because all articles found were qualitative or theoretical.

Although it does not involve human subjects, this research implicitly has relevance to the population of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers and students in madrasahs and public schools. The population characteristics that are the focus of the findings' implications are PAI teachers who still use lecture and memorization methods, as well as Islamic educational institutions experiencing tension between the traditional pesantren model and the demands of modern pedagogy. The findings of this article are expected to serve as a basis for future field research involving purposive sampling of PAI teachers who have attempted to apply a constructivist approach in their daily teaching.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

Synthesis of Findings Based on Major Themes

The analysis of 11 journal articles indicates that the constructivist approach in Islamic religious education is theoretically compatible with Islamic epistemology and has been empirically proven effective in improving student learning outcomes. The main findings are grouped into four major themes: (1) the theoretical foundation connecting constructivism with Islamic traditions, (2) constructivist pedagogical features that can be implemented in Islamic Religious Education, (3) empirical evidence of this approach's effectiveness, and (4) challenges and obstacles to its implementation in the field. Each theme will be detailed with supporting data from across the studies.

Table 1: Summary of Main Findings from the 11 Analyzed Articles

Theme	Key Findings	Number of Articles	References
Theoretical compatibility	Constructivism aligns with tafaqquh, ijtihad, and the diversity of madhhabs	5	Hai-Ninh et al., 2023; Arega & Hunde, 2025; Zuhdi & Syarief, 2023
Pedagogical features	Pedagogical hikmah, community of inquiry, Qur'anic narrative learning	6	Hussien et al., 2021; Kurniawan et al., 2025; Yusoff, 2023
Empirical effectiveness	Increased inquiry, critical thinking, motivation, science-religion reconciliation	7	Singh et al., 2022; Alkoutali, 2024; Kolb, 2021; Orak & Al-Khreshheh, 2021
Implementation challenges	Parental resistance, teacher misconceptions, cultural-political dilemmas	4	Fructuoso et al., 2022; Nguyen & Le, 2024; Zuhdi & Syarief, 2023

Theoretical Compatibility between Constructivism and Islamic Epistemology

The first and most significant finding is that constructivism does not conflict with Islamic epistemology as previously assumed. Do et al., (2023) found that the Islamic paradigm emphasizes a holistic consciousness that includes cognition, emotion, and spirituality as the core of education. Arega & Hunde, (2025) show that the diversity of schools of thought (madhhabs) in Islam and the practice of lived Islam inherently contain interpretative and constructivist elements. Zuhdi & Syarief, (2023) add that the transformative model of Islamic education requires the deconstruction of the separation between religious knowledge and science through dialogical learning rooted in Islamic epistemology. This finding contrasts with the initial assumption that constructivism is a secular Western product.

Constructivist Pedagogical Features in Islamic Religious Education

The identification of pedagogical features resulted in four main categories that can be concretely implemented in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) classrooms. First, active inquiry manifested through hikmah pedagogy and a community of inquiry, where students ask higher-order questions and engage in collaborative investigation (Hussien et al., 2021; Kurniawan et al., 2025). Second, social interaction through dialogical learning, group reflection, and ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development)-based scaffolding (Bin Muhammad Yusoff, 2023; Singh et al., 2022). Third, contextualization

that connects PAI content with students' real lives as well as value-based learning (Bin Muhammad Yusoff, 2023; Nguyen & Le, 2024). Fourth, narrative meaning-making using Qur'anic stories (qasas) for self-reflection and identity formation (Arega & Hunde, 2025).

Empirical Evidence of the Effectiveness of the Constructivist Approach

Empirically, a systematic review by Singh et al., (2022) of various constructivist approaches in general education found that the seven analyzed approaches consistently improved learning outcomes across domains, making them a "proven alternative" to replace traditional methods. In the specific context of PAI, Hussien et al., (2021) reported that the application of hikmah pedagogy and a community of inquiry significantly improved students' inquiry skills, higher-order questioning abilities, and independent thinking. Kurniawan et al., (2025) added that the integration of monotheism (tauhid), worship (ibadah), and morals (akhlak) with humanistic contextual strategies can optimize the character formation of learners. Kolb, (2023) found an interesting result: inquiry-based learning helped Muslim students reconcile perceived conflicts between religion and science, including increasing acceptance of the theory of evolution after engaging in dialogue about the nature of science and faith. Orak & Al-Khreshah, (2021) confirmed that the constructivist approach results in higher motivation, critical thinking, as well as enjoyable and interactive learning.

Comparison of Effectiveness with Previous Research

When compared with previous research on Islamic religious education, which is still dominated by a doctrinal transmission approach, the findings above show a stark contrast. Traditional research tends to report success in aspects of memorization and ritual compliance, but is weak in deep understanding and the application of values in daily life. In contrast, the studies analyzed in this article collectively show that the constructivist approach excels in developing critical thinking skills, learning autonomy, and the ability to connect religious teachings with social reality. Alkoutli, (2024) emphasizes that a conceptually relevant paradigmatic framework is essential for empirical research with Muslim educators, as conventional quantitative approaches often fail to capture the complexity of the meaning-making process in religious learning. Therefore, it is important to implement a more holistic and integrative methodology, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to gain a deeper understanding in the context of Islamic education (Feri, 2025).

Challenges and Barriers to Implementation

Despite convincing evidence of its effectiveness, the implementation of a constructivist approach in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) faces serious challenges. Noguera et al., (2022) identified a tension between the traditional, authoritarian, and rote-based mosque model and the constructivist approach that grants greater autonomy to students. This research found that parents with conservative religious orientations consistently prefer directive methods, while other groups support constructivist freedom. Zuhdi & Syarief, (2023) reported that PAI teachers often misunderstand the essence of constructivism and face conceptual, cultural, and political dilemmas when trying to apply it. Nguyen & Le, (2024) added that the lack of adequate teacher training, an unsupportive curriculum, and an assessment system still oriented towards rote memorization are significant structural barriers. Without thorough preparation, implementation efforts risk failure, which in turn strengthens resistance to change.

Implications of Findings for the Article's Objectives

The findings above directly answer the research questions about the theoretical suitability and practical effectiveness of the constructivist approach in PAI. Collectively, the analyzed articles frame constructivism as a theologically compatible and pedagogically robust approach. These findings support the main objective of the article to present a comprehensive theoretical analysis with clear practical implications. The synthetic conclusion that can be drawn is that the successful adoption of the constructivist approach in PAI heavily depends on three key factors: (1) teacher preparation through adequate training, (2) the development of a curriculum aligned with constructivist principles, and (3) sensitivity to parental expectations and diverse local cultural contexts.

DISCUSSION

Connection of Findings with Classical Constructivism Theory

The findings on the compatibility of constructivism with Islamic epistemology both strengthen and expand the classical constructivist theories of Piaget and Vygotsky, which have long been dominated by a Western perspective. Do et al., (2023) show that holistic consciousness in Islam—encompassing cognition, emotion, and spirituality—is in line with the constructivist principle that knowledge is actively built by the learner. However, Vygotsky's theory of the ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) does not explicitly accommodate the spiritual dimension as a zone of development. The findings of Arega & Hunde, (2025) on lived Islam as an interpretive practice actually surpass Vygotsky by demonstrating that interpretive communities in Islam were inherently constructivist long before the term appeared in Western educational literature.

Reinterpretation of Qur'anic Narratives as Constructivist Pedagogy

One of the most original findings from this synthesis is the identification of Qur'anic narratives (qasas) as a constructivist pedagogical framework. Bin Muhammad Yusoff, (2023) found that when stories from the Qur'an are used as narrative learning material, students do not just listen passively but actively construct meaning through contemplation and dialogue. This finding enriches Bruner's narrative pedagogy theory, which emphasizes that narrative is a fundamental mode of human thought. However, Bruner does not specifically discuss how religious narratives can shape spiritual identity. The research by (Arega & Hunde, 2025) fills this gap by showing that Qur'anic qasas enable the transformation of the teacher-student relationship from hierarchical to dialogical, as well as the formation of a more authentic and reflective religious identity.

Implications of the Findings for the Epistemology of Islamic Education

Implicationally, these findings on theoretical compatibility call for a reformulation of the epistemology of Islamic education, which has long been trapped in the dichotomy between naqli (transmitted knowledge) and aqli (rational knowledge). Zuhdi & Syarief, (2023) propose a transformative model that deconstructs the separation between religious and scientific knowledge through dialogical learning rooted in Islamic epistemology. The practical implication is that the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum no longer needs to rigidly separate religious and general subjects. Instead, the principle of tawhid as the unity of knowledge can be realized through cross-disciplinary inquiry projects, for example, researching natural phenomena from the perspective of kauniyah verses (verses about the universe) using scientific methods combined with theological reflection. This approach aims to create harmony between scientific understanding and religious teachings, as well as to show how both can mutually enrich the understanding of natural phenomena (Nayya Ghifrani Alimin, 2024). This integration will help students not only in understanding science but also in developing a spiritual attitude that is harmonious with scientific knowledge (Muamar et al., 2024). Thus, the integration of science and religion becomes key to forming a generation that is not only intellectually but also spiritually intelligent. (Tilotama et al., 2025). Through this approach, it is hoped that students can internalize spiritual values in their daily lives, creating individuals with strong character and high competitiveness.

Contribution of the Findings to PAI Learning Practices

The findings on the effectiveness of hikmah pedagogy and the community of inquiry make a significant contribution to PAI learning practices, which have long been dominated by lecture and memorization methods. Hussien et al., (2021) documented an increase in students' higher-order questioning skills after implementing this approach. The implication is that PAI teachers need to transform from being the sole authority of knowledge to facilitators of philosophical dialogue. Kurniawan et al.,(2025) adds that integrating tawhid, worship, and morals with a contextual humanistic strategy can optimize character formation. This means that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) should not stop at cognitive mastery of the pillars of Islam and the pillars of faith, but must involve students in real ethical experiences, such as social projects based on Islamic values that are designed, implemented, and collaboratively evaluated by students.

Analysis of Differences with Previous Research

The most striking difference between the findings in this synthesis and previous Islamic education research is the shift in focus from rote memorization outcomes to understanding and application outcomes. Traditional research, as criticized by Noguera et al. (2022), tends to measure the success of PAI by how many short surahs or daily prayers students have memorized. In contrast, Kolb (2023) found that a constructivist approach can help students reconcile conflicts between religion and science—something impossible to achieve through rote memorization. This difference indicates that the PAI learning evaluation paradigm needs a complete overhaul. Instead of using multiple-choice objective tests that measure memorization, assessments should include reflective portfolios, argumentative essays, and project presentations that demonstrate students' ability to connect Islamic teachings with contemporary issues.

Factors Affecting Results and Research Limitations

Several potential factors influencing the findings need to be critically acknowledged. First, publication bias may occur because journals tend to publish studies with positive or statistically significant findings, while studies reporting the failure of constructivism implementation may go unpublished. Second, the diverse geographical contexts—from Austria (Kolb, 2023), Malaysia (Hussien et al., 2021), Indonesia (Kurniawan et al., 2025; Zuhdi & Syarief, 2023), to Vietnam (Nguyen & Le, 2024)—mean that generalizing the findings must be done with caution due to significant differences in educational cultures and national policies. Third, most of the analyzed articles are qualitative or theoretical, thus lacking strong quantitative evidence on the effect size of the constructivist approach compared to traditional methods. Singh et al. (2022), who conducted a systematic review of evaluative evidence, actually criticized the weak research design in many constructivism studies.

Suggestions for Future Research

Based on the limitations above, future research needs to be designed more rigorously. First, quasi-experimental studies with control groups and pre-test post-test measurements are needed to quantitatively estimate the effect size of the constructivist approach in PAI. Second, longitudinal research needs to be conducted to test whether the improvement in inquiry and critical thinking skills produced by the constructivist approach is long-lasting or merely temporary. Third, mixed-methods studies combining large-scale surveys with in-depth interviews of teachers, students, and parents can uncover contextual factors that moderate the success of implementation. Fourth, Alkoutli (2024) recommends developing a conceptually relevant paradigmatic framework for empirical research with Muslim educators, given that Western instruments are often insensitive to local values. Orak & Al-Khresheh (2021) also emphasize the need for constructivist learning models to be developed participatively with PAI teachers, not imported wholesale from secular educational contexts.

CONCLUSION

This synthesis of 11 qualitative research articles concludes that the constructivist approach is theoretically compatible with Islamic epistemology and empirically proven effective in Islamic religious education. Key findings include the identification of four pedagogical features: active inquiry, social interaction, contextualization, and narrative meaning-making, which align with the principles of tafaquh and ijihad (Bin Muhammad Yusoff, 2023; Hussien et al., 2021). This research provides a deep understanding that Islamic religious education (PAI) learning does not need to be trapped in a dichotomy between doctrinal memorization and secular freedom, as constructivism based on Quranic narratives offers a dialogical and reflective middle path (Arega & Hunde, 2025; Kolb, 2023).

The main contribution of this research to previous theory is the expansion of classical constructivism theory by incorporating spiritual dimensions and religious narratives as authentic sources of meaning formation. Its social implication is that this approach can bridge the tension between conservative parents who desire directive methods and the demands of modern participatory pedagogy (Noguera et al., 2022). Academically, these findings encourage the reformulation of the PAI curriculum and assessment systems based on reflective portfolios rather than mere memorization (Kurniawan et al., 2025; Zuhdi & Syarief, 2023).

The limitations of this research lie in the dominance of qualitative and theoretical studies without adequate quantitative meta-analysis, as well as the diversity of geographical contexts which complicates generalization. Future research is recommended to conduct quasi-experimental studies with control groups and longitudinal measurements to accurately estimate the effect size (Singh et al., 2022). The development of assessment instruments sensitive to local Islamic values is also highly necessary (Alkoutli, 2024; Orak & Al-Khresheh, 2021).

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