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STRENGTHENING STUDENTS' CRITICAL REASONING CHARACTER IN PAI LEARNING: CONTEXT OF IMPLEMENTING THE INDEPENDENT LEARNING CURRICULUM

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Abstract. This research aims to explore and analyze the implementation of the Independent Learning Curriculum in forming critical reasoning character in PAI learning. This research uses the library research research method, with a descriptive qualitative approach. This research was carried out by exploring documents (libraries) in the form of books, notes or reports of previous research results. The research results show that the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum is effective in forming critical reasoning character in PAI learning where the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum provides a learning environment that is more inclusive and student-centered. Through this approach, students are encouraged to become active subjects in the learning process, which helps them develop critical, analytical and reflective thinking skills. Apart from that, in PAI learning, students are invited to link religious values with real life contexts, thereby strengthening the link between theory and practice in building critical reasoning character. The Merdeka Belajar curriculum also emphasizes the importance of using a variety of learning resources, including information and communication technology, to increase students' activeness in seeking information and evaluating various perspectives. This positively contributes to forming a critical reasoning character who is able to understand the complexity of religious and social issues.

Keywords: *Merdeka curriculum; Critical reasoning, Learning Islamic religious education.*

A. INTRODUCTION

Education is the process of changing the attitudes and behavior of a person or group in an effort to mature humans through teaching and training (Aminullah et al., 2023). In the context of Islamic religious education learning, the main goal to be achieved is that apart from making students become human beings, complete human beings (kaffah), with good morals, character and noble character, it also encourages mastery of the skills and knowledge of teaching religion by reasoning critically and analytically. In line with the goals of national education, namely creating a generation with noble morals, forming national character, developing cognitive, affective and psychomotor abilities. Based on this, the government is trying to strengthen the character of education by implementing it in the fields of study in schools with the aim of growing student character (Susilowati, 2022). The national education goals above show that apart from emphasizing the attainment of knowledge, it also prioritizes the realization of changes in attitudes and noble character in students.

Strengthening character is an effort to grow students' basic character into students with more character. The concept of strengthening character has always been an alternative and choice in strengthening children's character dimensions, the goal is that apart from students knowing

important values, it also makes students have good behavior, superior and holistic personalities and develop moral values (Umar et al., 2021). There are a number of character values, critical reasoning is one of the important characters or profiles of the six other profiles of Pancasila students such as having faith and being devoted to God Almighty and having noble character, global diversity, mutual cooperation, independence and creativity (Juliani & Bastian, 2021) , which needs to be realized through character education in the independent learning curriculum policy of the Ministry of Education and Culture, namely to achieve the Pancasila Student profile (Ismail et al., 2020). Critical reasoning is a process of cognitive engagement by means of careful analysis, synthesis and evaluation of a problem and solving it with the right strategy. Therefore, critical reasoning is very necessary for students, not only at school but also outside the school environment, because with critical reasoning students can be ready to solve various problems. Studies show that students' low reasoning abilities can cause low critical thinking abilities in science learning (Hayati & Setiawan, 2022).

Apart from being a character objective in the Pancasila student profile project, students' critical reasoning in learning so far has not been completely as expected, there are many cases of learning confirming this, such as in mathematics learning (Rosnawati, 2013), (Sumartini, 2015). Students' low critical thinking, language and reasoning skills in science learning (Hayati & Setiawan, 2022). Apart from that, findings (Kibtiyah, 2022) in Indonesian language learning show that students have difficulty classifying discourse information, thereby offering a Project Based Learning model that can improve elementary students' critical reasoning abilities. Meanwhile, in PAI learning, empirically students place a lot of emphasis on memorization and internalization efforts, the aspect of critical reasoning has not shown any serious efforts. Studies show that evaluations in PAI subjects predominantly emphasize memory and display memory results without further affirmation, this is low-level thinking (Ahmad, 2019), (Asfiyah, 2021).

On the other hand, there are studies that inform the importance of strengthening critical reasoning character in independent learning curriculum programs such as those based on moral integration for elementary school students. This also suggests the importance of integrating moral knowing, feeling, synverbal, action, habitus and culture (Nursalam & Suardi, 2022) . Apart from that, there are studies in Islamic religious education PAI learning at the junior high school level where implementing HOST-loaded assessments can improve students' abilities in terms of critical-creative-systematic thinking, confidence in solving problems (Asfiyah, 2021). The same thing has highlighted the implications of the independent learning curriculum, especially the Pancasila student profile project, which can improve the critical reasoning character of students in high school (Rahmawati et al., 2023). There is an increase in student involvement and helps them have a critical reasoning character that is in line with religious values (Susilowati, 2022). It also has a positive impact on improving students' independent thinking skills in understanding and studying religious teachings in depth (Umam & Hamami, 2023). In short, implementing the independent learning curriculum can encourage students to develop critical reasoning character and become more actively involved in the learning process (Hasibuan et al., 2022). These findings show that the output of implementing the independent learning curriculum can provide positive changes to student independence in studying and solving problems in the learning process.

The results of the study above show that in the implementation of islamic religious education learning there have not been any special and in-depth studies related to strengthening the character of critical reasoning, especially in the independent learning curriculum context approach. Considering that Islamic religious education has a central role in forming quality student character, including the importance of critical reasoning skills in the era of globalization which requires problem-solving responses. Islamic religious education has a distinctive characteristic, namely Islamic education which is based on the normative sources of the Qur'an and Sunnah which covers

all aspects of life including the learning context, strengthening the basic dimensions and character of students as well as aspects of critical thinking-reasoning and problem-solving skills. Therefore, students need to be equipped with character strengthening and critical thinking skills that can help them face various challenges and make wise decisions based on religious and ethical values.

To achieve this goal, the implementation of the independent learning curriculum becomes relevant for application in Islamic religious education learning (Sunhaji, 2022). Also, character education requires efforts based on school culture (Rahman, 2020). Although there is research on the benefits of the independent learning curriculum in Islamic religious education learning, an in-depth study of its implications for the formation of critical reasoning character is needed.

Therefore, this research tries to expand studies on the implementation of Islamic religious education learning using an independent learning curriculum which focuses on strengthening students' critical reasoning character (Achmad et al., 2022). This effort is needed to understand the focus of the study which is expected to support previous studies comprehensively, so that it can provide contributions and input for the development of more effective and relevant curriculum and learning strategies (Dayu et al., 2022). Based on the description above, this research specifically aims to describe and analyze the strengthening of students' critical reasoning character in Islamic religious education learning in the context of an independent learning curriculum approach. It is hoped that there will be findings that can contribute to the effectiveness of the curriculum and critical reasoning character as one of the outcomes of Islamic religious education learning.

B. METHODS

This research uses the library research method with a descriptive qualitative approach, namely describing and analyzing the focus of studies related to strengthening students' critical reasoning character in Islamic religious education learning in the context of implementing the independent learning curriculum. The data collection technique used is to identify sources obtained through various literature, especially books, relevant and indexed scientific journal articles, generally published in the last five years, while the analysis uses content analysis techniques, which is carried out by examining the content and characteristics of messages from the main data sources systematically. Content analysis techniques are also used to analyze thoughts from literature using theoretical categories so that the context of the messages presented in various document sources is found.

C. RESULT & DISCUSSION

The educational curriculum is defined as a learning experience program that is implemented systematically by elements both at school and outside of school, including planning, implementing and evaluating learning and is used as a guide for implementing learning (Assegaf, 2016). Therefore, the curriculum functions as a guide in implementing the learning process for teachers, as a guideline for implementing supervision or supervision for school/madrasah principals, as a guideline in guiding their children to study at home for parents, as a guideline for providing assistance for the implementation of the educational process in schools or madrasahs for the community, and as a guideline for carrying out learning activities for students (Khoirurrijal et al., 2022)

In the context of national education policy, the curriculum has undergone evolution in line with the development of society's needs. The latest policy, namely the implementation of the independent learning curriculum initiated by the Ministry of Education and Culture, has a clear orientation, including the Pancasila student profile project. The independent learning curriculum is a new generation curriculum which is expected to be able to answer the challenges and educational needs

of the current era. Conceptually, this curriculum provides freedom for institutions and students in carrying out their learning process (Faiz & Kurniawaty, 2020). Providing freedom for institutions and students in the learning process means that students, teachers and educational institutions have the right to create the latest learning methods, strategies or media related to subject matter without deviating from the rules of the curriculum in place.

Learning in this curriculum uses a differentiated learning and assessment system, namely a series of decisions made by teachers that are oriented towards student needs which are modified and developed through a learning system so as to stimulate and facilitate integration between spiritual development, logic, ethical values, aesthetics, and can develop holistic, systemic, linear, convergent capabilities, to meet current and future demands (Murtianto, 2013).

The independent learning curriculum is different from the previous one, in this curriculum teachers are given the freedom to choose formats, experiences and essential materials that are suitable for achieving learning goals. Students have as much space as possible to explore their own uniqueness. In practice, teachers need to understand the competencies of each student, where at the beginning of the learning meeting the teacher explores the competencies possessed by each student before entering the learning material (Marlina, 2022). In this way, students are more active in taking the initiative, thinking independently, exploring themselves, creating work projects, stimulating their own innovative abilities and creativity if they are given the opportunity by the teacher. Therefore, the independent curriculum uses a student-centered learning approach, providing freedom and autonomy in the teaching and learning process (Hasim, 2020).

The concept of freedom of learning in this curriculum is to return the national education system to the essence of the law, namely to give schools the freedom to associate the basic competencies of the curriculum into their assessments. Freedom to learn means freedom to think, freedom to work, and respect or respond to changes that occur. The learning atmosphere in independent learning will be more comfortable, because students can discuss more with the teacher, can study outing classes, and the teacher not only teaches, but also forms the character of students who are brave, independent, clever in socializing, civilized, polite, competitive, and not only relies on a ranking system (Indriani et al., 2023).

The implication of the independent learning curriculum in the learning process is a new way to activate students' reasoning, including in Islamic Religious Education subjects which require critical analysis. This is in line with restoring the true essence of education, namely education to humanize humans or education that liberates. In the concept of independent learning, teachers and students are subjects in the learning system. This means that the teacher is not used as a source of truth for students, but teachers and students collaborate to seek the truth. Because the teacher's position in the classroom is not to plant or homogenize the truth according to the teacher, but to explore the truth, students' reasoning power and critical thinking about the world and its phenomena. This opportunity can also reform the workload of teachers and schools which is too devoted to administrative matters. Therefore, the freedom to innovate, learn independently and be creative can be exercised by educational units, teachers and students (Murtianto, 2013).

Islamic religious education learning in the independent learning curriculum is an integral part of the education system which aims to form good character in students, including critical reasoning abilities. According to (Hasibuan et al., 2022) Implementation of this curriculum can encourage students to build critical reasoning character and become more actively involved in the learning process. Islamic religious education learning materials include material elements such as Al-Quran-hadith, Aqidah, Morals, Fiqh, and the History of Islamic Civilization, these materials can be integrated into the dimensions of the Pancasila student profile, so that the scope of islamic religious education material does not only discuss human relationships with Allah (hablum

min Allah) but also humans with themselves and fellow humans (*ḥabl min al-nas*) and the universe (*ḥabl min al-alam*) (Nur'Inayah, 2021).

In islamic religious education learning, students can use a student-centered approach, giving them the opportunity to raise questions, present arguments, and participate in class discussions. As a result, students develop the ability to analyze information critically and consider various points of view on each islamic religious education material before reaching a conclusion. In the process, students are encouraged to be more independent in searching for learning resources, identifying relevant information, and compiling their own understanding of islamic religious education material. This helps students develop independent thinking skills that are essential to becoming lifelong learners.

In the next stage, it helps students to build critical reasoning character and be more sensitive to religious issues faced by individual students and society at large. With critical reasoning skills, students can face and overcome complex problems better, and make wiser decisions based on the religious values they learn. Therefore, teachers have a key role in building the strengthening of critical reasoning character in islamic religious education learning.

The teacher's role in strengthening critical reasoning character, initially, is; First, we must play a more active role in diagnosing learning difficulties experienced by students. If a diagnosis of learning difficulties has been found, the teacher must do his best to provide the best solution to the student so that the student can complete the learning process well. Second, teachers need to adopt innovative approaches, design engaging learning experiences, and provide appropriate support and guidance to students. Third, act as a facilitator to encourage active participation and involvement of students in the process of building critical reasoning character in islamic religious education learning (Widari, 2023). As educational actors, teachers do not only act as educators, but teachers have a dual role, namely being largely responsible for the success of students' character, playing an active role in providing solutions and new ways to students in resolving the obstacles faced during the learning process. Fourth, teachers play a role in selecting appropriate and varied islamic religious education learning assessment instruments to measure student progress in aspects of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Apart from written tests, assessments can take the form of projects, reports, portfolios, or performance assessments. Carrying out regular formative assessments, namely an evaluation process that is carried out periodically to identify students' weaknesses and learning difficulties. Therefore, teachers can provide guidance and support according to students' needs in building critical reasoning character (Nasution, 2022).

Thus, the important role of teachers in building critical reasoning character in students is because critical reasoning is the ability to actively and objectively consider, analyze and evaluate a situation, information or argument before reaching a conclusion or making a decision. This ability is important because it helps to become an open-minded individual, a critical student, and able to make informed decisions (Kiska et al., 2023). Becoming an educator is not easy, but being an educator is a very noble thing, because with teachers as educators, problems in education, especially for students, can be detected and resolved well.

Strengthening critical reasoning character in islamic religious education learning through the implementation of an independent learning curriculum can have a positive impact on students' critical reasoning abilities. In this approach, students are encouraged to actively participate in the learning process, analyze various information, and ask in-depth questions. This results in an increased ability of students to consider multiple points of view before reaching a conclusion. Forming study groups in the class then gives students the freedom to carry out discussions and ask questions. With these activities, students are able to reason and express various creative and innovative ideas as a form of exploring their own abilities.

With class discussions and collaboration between students, students' critical reasoning abilities are increasingly honed and develop significantly (Hilali, 2023). Discussions and questions and answers are able to create an atmosphere of extreme and critical thinking in students, so that teachers no longer find it difficult to provide explanations to students because they can understand the material based on their reasoning and needs. In conditions like this the teacher is present as a facilitator who provides solutions (conclusions) to the Islamic religious education material that has been discussed.

This curriculum approach in Islamic religious education learning creates a new direction that relieves more pressure on student independence, encouraging students to explore space and material more deeply (Anggila, 2022). By giving students the freedom to explore learning resources and understand the material independently, students become more independent in managing their learning. This independent thinking skill is very important because it will prepare students to continue learning throughout life, be able to pursue new information, and develop knowledge independently (Nadhiroh & Anshori, 2023). In the learning process, thinking skills are very necessary in order to realize students' thinking power that is increasingly long and not stagnant on the same axis of thinking. Maturity in thinking is one manifestation of the independent learning curriculum because students are not limited in searching for information and then they are given the opportunity to criticize what they obtain.

More broadly, with developed critical reasoning skills, students can face and overcome complex problems better, and make wiser decisions based on the religious values they learn. This is important to shape the character of students who have a deep understanding of religion and ethics, and are able to face various moral challenges in the future (Vica, 2023). Students' critical reasoning abilities in the Islamic religious education learning process make students more concerned with the conditions of religious diversity that exist now and in the future. The free learning curriculum is one of the spearheads of civilization which makes students' reasoning more intelligent and critical of problems that occur, especially in terms of religion.

Based on the construct of the view above, an important formulation that can be used as action and change is strengthening students' thinking character in Islamic religious education learning subjects which can be realized by implementing the independent learning curriculum. The independent learning curriculum offers the concept of independence in carrying out the learning process, meaning teachers and students collaborate in solving problems in the learning process. The independent learning curriculum becomes a teacher as a facilitator who helps students carry out their function of thinking and expressing opinions on what they find during the learning process. Strengthening students' critical reasoning character in Islamic religious education learning in the context of an independent curriculum can be effectively carried out with the participatory role of all parties to help strengthen students' critical reasoning character, so that students can become individuals with more integrity, responsiveness and quality amidst the challenges of ever-changing times (Qolbiyah, 2022).

D. CONCLUSION

Strengthening students' critical reasoning character in Islamic religious education learning in the context of implementing the independent learning curriculum can be done through providing a more inclusive and student-centered learning environment. Using this approach, students are encouraged to become active subjects in the learning process, which helps them develop critical, analytical and reflective thinking skills. In addition, in Islamic religious education learning, students are invited to relate religious values to real life contexts, thereby strengthening the link between theory and practice in building critical reasoning character. The Merdeka Belajar curriculum also

emphasizes the importance of using a variety of learning resources, including information and communication technology, to increase students' activeness in seeking information and evaluating various perspectives. This positively contributes to forming a critical reasoning character who is able to understand the complexity of religious and social issues.

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