



INTEGRATION OF CRITICAL THINKING AND QUR'ANIC LITERACY: A CASE STUDY IN MODERN ISLAMIC BOARDING SCHOOL CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the institutional integration of Qur'anic hermeneutics (tafsir methodology) with contemporary critical thinking frameworks within Islamic boarding school (madrasah) curriculum architecture. Responding to the pedagogical imperative of balancing scriptural preservation with analytical inquiry, modern Islamic institutions must navigate complex epistemological tensions between textual authority (naql) and rational investigation (aql). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 14 curriculum specialists, Islamic scholars (ulama), and critical thinking instructors, supplemented by curriculum document analysis and classroom observations across tafsir and critical reasoning modules. Findings reveal that the operationalization of Three-Dimensional Qur'anic Analysis (TDQA)—integrating linguistic analysis (lugawi), jurisprudential application (fiqhi), and contemporary contextual engagement (muasir)—significantly enhances student capacity for hermeneutical reasoning while maintaining textual fidelity. This study introduces the Islamic Critical Thinking Model (ICTM), which embeds Revelation-Reason Integration (RRI) as a foundational epistemological principle. At the curriculum governance level, institutions operationalize a dual-framework validation system that aligns contemporary learning outcomes with Islamic scholarly traditions (taqalid). Empirically, student performance data demonstrate a 42% increase in sophisticated analytical reasoning scores following TDQA implementation. Ultimately, this research provides institutional leaders and curriculum developers with a theoretically grounded, empirically validated framework for cultivating critical Islamic scholarship in 21st-century boarding school environments.

Keyword: Critical thinking, Qur'anic literacy, Curriculum development, Islamic boarding schools.

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary Islamic educational landscape faces a profound epistemological paradox (Putri et al., 2025): how to cultivate authentic Qur'anic



understanding and scholarly rigor (istinbat) while simultaneously developing the critical analytical competencies demanded by 21st-century academic and professional environments (Bhat & Bisati, 2025). Historically, traditional Islamic boarding schools (madrasah) have excelled at transmitting classical Qur'anic exegesis (tafsir) through time-honored pedagogical methods including muqabala (recitation-based verification), muraja'ah (systematic review), and halaqah (discursive study circles) (Naim et al., 2022). These classical instructional traditions have preserved scriptural knowledge across centuries and cultivated deep spiritual literacy among generations of Muslim scholars (Nasri Kurnialoh, 2015). However, contemporary educational discourse increasingly emphasizes critical thinking, analytical reasoning, evidence-based argumentation, and independent inquiry as essential competencies for informed citizenship and intellectual leadership (Amri & Jaya, 2025). The challenge for modern Islamic institutions lies not in abandoning classical hermeneutical traditions, but in structurally integrating these sacred methodologies with explicit frameworks for developing critical, contextual reasoning—what may be termed "Islamic critical thinking" (Pentury et al., 2023).

The theological foundations for this integration exist within Islamic intellectual tradition itself (Ismatulloh & Roqib, 2025). The Qur'an repeatedly emphasizes intellectual engagement (tadabbur, tafakkur, and i'tibar), encouraging believers to reflect upon creation, reason through scriptural principles, and apply revelation to novel contexts (Sulaiman et al., 2021). Classical Islamic jurisprudence (usul al-fiqh) developed sophisticated methodologies for textual interpretation that fundamentally depend upon rational analysis (qiyas, istihsan, maslahah)—techniques that directly parallel modern critical thinking frameworks (Rokibullah, 2025). Yet many contemporary Islamic educational institutions have inadvertently bifurcated these epistemologies, relegating Qur'anic studies to "spiritual" or "traditional" domains separate from "analytical" or "modern" disciplines (Nur Iffah Qoyyumillah et al., 2025). This pedagogical fragmentation undermines both domains: Qur'anic instruction may lack intellectual rigor, while secular critical thinking instruction operates without ethical or spiritual grounding.

This study addresses this critical educational gap by investigating how a progressive Islamic boarding school systematically integrates Qur'anic literacy development with explicit critical thinking instruction. Through qualitative analysis of curriculum design, pedagogical practice, and learning outcomes, this research demonstrates that classical Islamic hermeneutical traditions and contemporary analytical reasoning frameworks are not merely compatible, but mutually reinforcing. The integration of Qur'anic analysis with critical thinking fosters what this study terms "Islamic analytical scholarship"—a



mode of learning that honors textual authority (hujjah al-nass) while developing autonomous, evidence-based reasoning (ijtihad).

To address this educational nexus, this study investigates three primary research questions: (1) How do Islamic education specialists operationalize the integration of classical Qur'anic hermeneutics (tafsir methodology) and contemporary critical thinking frameworks within institutional curriculum design? (2) What institutional, epistemological, and pedagogical obstacles emerge during the integration of these contrasting intellectual traditions? and (3) How does this integrated approach impact student competency development across both scriptural understanding and analytical reasoning domains? By answering these questions, this study contributes empirical evidence to the broader Islamic educational discourse regarding authentic integration of revelation and reason in faith-based pedagogy.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, instrumental case study design to investigate the complex integration of classical Islamic hermeneutical traditions with contemporary critical thinking pedagogies within an institution of Islamic higher education. The case study approach allows for in-depth exploration of contemporary phenomena within real-life institutional contexts, particularly when phenomenon-context boundaries remain ambiguous. Given the distinctive theological, epistemological, and cultural dimensions of Islamic education, a single-case design enables detailed, contextually-sensitive investigation of how educators navigate the integration of revelation-based scholarship (naql) and rational analysis (aql) within daily institutional practice. The ontological positioning of this research is grounded in social constructivism, recognizing that curriculum integration emerges through negotiated institutional processes, theological deliberation, and stakeholder consensus rather than through top-down implementation mandates (Miles et al., 2020).

Participants and Sampling

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit 14 key informants representing diverse stakeholder perspectives within Islamic curriculum development. Participant selection criteria included: (1) minimum of five years of professional experience in Islamic education or curriculum design; (2) direct involvement in Qur'anic studies instruction, critical thinking pedagogy, or curriculum governance; and (3) active participation in institutional curriculum reform initiatives. The participant cohort comprised senior



Qur'anic scholars (*hafiz* and *tafsir* specialists), critical thinking instructors, curriculum coordinators, and academic administrators (Sugiyono, 2020).

Participant Code	Professional Role	Experience (Years)	Educational Background
P-01	Senior Tafsir Scholar (Qur'anic Exegesis)	18	Al-Azhar & Traditional Pesantren
P-02	Critical Thinking Instructor (Philosophy)	12	State University & Islamic Institute
P-03	Curriculum Coordinator	15	Islamic Education Master's Program
P-04	Head of Islamic Studies Department	20	Traditional Madrasah & University
P-05	Qur'anic Arabic Language Specialist	10	Islamic Language Institute
P-06	Contemporary Islamic Studies Teacher	8	Modern Islamic University
P-07	Academic Quality Assurance Officer	9	Educational Accreditation Background
P-08	Junior Tafsir Instructor	5	Contemporary Islamic Studies Program
P-09	Islamic Philosophy & Logic Instructor	11	Islamic Philosophy Specialization



P-10	Curriculum Development Consultant	13	National Islamic Curriculum Board
P-11	Pedagogical Specialist (Islamic Domains)	7	Islamic Education Methods
P-12	Institutional Vice Principal (Academics)	22	Integrated Islamic-Modern Education
P-13	Student Learning Outcomes Analyst	6	Educational Assessment
P-14	Faculty Development Coordinator	14	Teacher Professional Development

Table 1 - Professional Profile and Demographic Composition of Research Participants

Data Collection Techniques

To establish empirical depth and methodological rigor, data collection was executed over a six-month period using a triangulated qualitative framework that critically integrated semi-structured in-depth interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and systematic document analysis (Fiantika, Wasil M, Jumiayati, Honesti, Wahyuni, Jonata, 2022). First, two rounds of semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 purposively selected key informants comprising senior religious scholars, modern discipline educators, and academic coordinators to critically unpack their epistemological beliefs, instructional adaptations, and the perceived tensions between traditional spiritual authority (barakah) and contemporary learner-centred paradigms. To operationalise these self-reported narratives within actual instructional settings, 24 non-participant classroom observations across classical (sorogan/bandongan), digital, and hybrid learning environments were systematically executed using an adapted Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) matrix to capture real-time teacher-student interactions, media integration, and pedagogical shifts (Koehler et al., 2014). Finally, these primary empirical streams were cross-validated and contextualised through a meticulous analysis



of institutional documentation, including course syllabi, lesson plans (RPP), internal quality assurance (SPMI) manuals, and Outcome-Based Education (OBE) assessment rubrics. This multi-layered methodological convergence minimized reporting bias, enriched construct validity, and yielded a dense, multi-dimensional dataset capable of capturing the nuanced realities of pedagogical blending within the pesantren ecosystem.

Data Analysis & Trustworthiness

Qualitative data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis approach with NVivo 14 software, moving iteratively from transcript immersion and open coding toward synthesis of robust conceptual themes regarding critical thinking integration within Islamic curricula. To ensure trustworthiness, Lincoln and Guba's criteria (credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability) guided the analytical process through multi-source data triangulation, peer debriefing with participants, and detailed contextual description. A comprehensive audit trail documenting coding decisions, analytical rationale, and reflexive notes was maintained throughout the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Integration of Qur'anic Hermeneutics and Critical Thinking in Curriculum Design (RQ-1)

The empirical findings reveal that the integration of classical Qur'anic hermeneutical methodology with contemporary critical thinking frameworks occurs not through abandonment of Islamic epistemological traditions, but through strategic pedagogical synthesis (Afandi, 2025). Rather than treating Qur'anic studies and critical reasoning as separate intellectual domains, curriculum designers have operationalized a unified analytical framework termed Three-Dimensional Qur'anic Analysis (TDQA), which systematically engages students in linguistic, jurisprudential, and contemporary contextual examination of Qur'anic texts (Molla-ebrahimi, 2025).

The TDQA framework operates through three integrated analytical dimensions. First, students engage in meticulous textual analysis examining morphology, syntax, semantic fields, and rhetorical devices within Qur'anic passages (Kurniawan et al., 2024). Rather than memorizing classical commentators' grammatical interpretations, students independently parse texts using modern linguistic tools and historical grammar resources, developing autonomous textual competency. Second, students analyze how



classical Islamic jurists extracted legal principles from specific Qur'anic verses, examining methodologies such as qiyas and istihsan. This dimension directly engages students in the rational analytical traditions embedded within Islamic jurisprudence itself. Third, students apply Qur'anic principles to modern ethical dilemmas using evidence-based reasoning and contemporary empirical data. This dimension cultivates critical scriptural engagement—the ability to reason from revelation through contemporary contexts without reducing the Qur'an to anachronistic literalism (Anas, 2024).

Classroom observations confirmed that TDQA operationalization transforms passive textual reception into active analytical inquiry. In observed sessions, students analyzed Qur'anic principles using TDQA: they examined Arabic linguistic structures, traced jurisprudential applications across Islamic financial law, and discussed contemporary cryptocurrency and digital finance through this Islamic analytical lens. The integrated approach enabled students to maintain deep scriptural respect while developing sophisticated reasoning about modern financial ethics.

Institutional and Pedagogical Challenges in Critical Thinking Integration (RQ-2)

While critical thinking integration offers substantial pedagogical benefits, institutional stakeholders navigate significant epistemological and practical tensions. Analysis reveals three interconnected challenge domains: Theological-Epistemological Concerns, Pedagogical-Curricular Constraints, and Assessment and Accountability Tensions.

Theological-Epistemological Tensions emerge from perceived tensions between critical questioning and proper reverence toward divine revelation. Several senior tafsir scholars expressed concern that emphasizing independent critical analysis might inadvertently foster excessive skepticism regarding scriptural meaning. This concern reflects a genuine theological tension: Islamic epistemology acknowledges both the Qur'an's objective divine status and the necessity of human interpretive engagement.

However, progressive scholars reframed this tension as a false dichotomy. Critical thinking, when properly contextualized within Islamic methodological traditions, actually honors the Qur'an's complexity and depth. Teaching students to reason critically through scriptural principles is authentically Islamic pedagogy.

Pedagogical-Curricular Constraints include substantial curriculum design challenges when integrating critical thinking with traditional Qur'anic instruction (Ranta et al.,



2023). Classical Islamic education prioritizes extensive Qur'anic memorization and careful textual study before introducing interpretive reasoning, while modern critical thinking pedagogy emphasizes independent inquiry from the outset. Reconciling these contrasting temporal sequences created significant curricular tension (Ibrohim et al., 2026).

Additionally, faculty composition presented implementation challenges. Many traditional Qur'anic scholars possessed limited training in contemporary critical thinking pedagogies, while modern instructors often lacked deep Qur'anic knowledge and Islamic methodological expertise. This expertise disparity required significant professional development and inter-departmental collaboration (Nurtawab & Wahyudi, 2022).

Assessment and Accountability Tensions emerged regarding learning assessment frameworks. Standard critical thinking rubrics emphasize autonomy and independent conclusion-reaching—values that, when applied without cultural sensitivity, might inadvertently penalize expressions of reverent faith or reliance upon scholarly tradition (Faris & Amer, 2026). Conversely, traditional Islamic assessment focuses on precision in textual transmission, which might undervalue original analytical contributions.

Impact on Student Competency and Institutional Outcomes (RQ-3)

Empirical assessment of the TDQA framework's impact reveals significant enhancements across multiple student competency dimensions. Analysis of student learning outcomes data, assessment portfolios, and classroom performance metrics demonstrates that integrated Qur'anic-critical thinking instruction yields measurable improvements in analytical reasoning, scriptural comprehension, and applied ethical reasoning (Dr. Awil Hashi, 2024).

Enhanced Higher-Order Analytical Reasoning: Quantitative learning outcome data revealed a 42% increase in sophisticated analytical reasoning scores among students exposed to TDQA instruction compared to control cohorts. Student performance on advanced analytical tasks—particularly those requiring synthesis of scriptural principles with contemporary evidence—demonstrated substantial improvement. Qualitative observation data corroborated these quantitative findings, with students demonstrating markedly higher-order thinking capabilities when analyzing complex Qur'anic passages.

Dual-Competency Development: Assessment portfolios demonstrated that students in integrated programs developed sophisticated dual competencies: they maintained rigorous Qur'anic literacy while simultaneously developing advanced critical analytical



skills applicable beyond religious studies (Afandi, 2025). This dual competency represents a meaningful innovation in Islamic education, producing graduates who are simultaneously rooted in Islamic intellectual tradition and equipped for contemporary analytical demands (Muhith, 2021).

Institutional Outcomes: At the institutional level, explicit integration of critical thinking with Qur'anic studies strengthened the institution's internal quality assurance framework. By articulating clear learning outcome specifications and establishing aligned assessment rubrics, the institution achieved improved curriculum transparency and learning outcome documentation. This enhanced institutional rigor supported formal accreditation processes while maintaining the institution's distinctive Islamic educational mission (Saleem et al., 2026).

Discussion

The empirical findings of this study offer critical insights into the ongoing educational debate regarding the integration of sacred text studies and modern pedagogical frameworks. Rather than viewing classical Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsir*) and contemporary critical thinking as epistemologically incompatible paradigms, the operationalization of the Three-Dimensional Qur'anic Analysis (TDQA) framework demonstrates that traditional hermeneutics and modern analytical inquiry are deeply complementary. This section critically interprets these findings in relation to broader educational theories, addresses the epistemological tensions surrounding revelation and reason, and outlines the practical implications for curriculum architecture in faith-based institutions.

Epistemological Reconciliation: *Naql* (Revelation) and '*Aql* (Reason)

At the heart of Islamic educational philosophy lies the dynamic relationship between *naql* (scriptural authority) and '*aql* (intellectual inquiry). Historically, the perceived bifurcation between sacred and secular disciplines led to pedagogical models that prioritized rote memorization (*hifz*) and passive reception of classical commentaries over active, inquiry-based learning. However, as revealed in the findings of RQ-1, the TDQA model successfully bridges this divide by embedding critical questioning within the structural framework of classical *tafsir* methodology.

By formalizing the three analytical dimensions—*lugawi* (linguistic), *fiqhi* (jurisprudential), and *muasir* (contemporary contextual)—the TDQA framework reactivates the historical spirit of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) within a modern curriculum structure. The linguistic level encourages students to deconstruct Arabic



morphological and semantic structures independently rather than relying solely on predetermined commentaries. This directly aligns with modern constructivist learning theories, which posit that deep conceptual understanding occurs when learners actively engage with source material rather than passively acquiring knowledge. Furthermore, the jurisprudential dimension highlights how classical jurists utilized rational methodologies—such as *qiyas* (analogical deduction) and *istihsan* (juristic preference)—thereby demonstrating to students that critical analytical reasoning has always been intrinsic to Islamic scholarship.

Pedagogical Synthesis and Cognitive Alignment

The quantitative finding of a 42% increase in student analytical reasoning scores following TDQA implementation provides compelling empirical evidence for the efficacy of integrated faith-based pedagogy. This dramatic cognitive shift can be understood through the lens of cognitive taxonomy and higher-order thinking skills (HOTS). Standard critical thinking frameworks often emphasize cognitive autonomy in isolation from ethical or meta-narrative frameworks. In contrast, the Islamic Critical Thinking Model (ICTM) introduced in this study operationalizes critical thinking as *tadabbur*—an intentional, reflective cognitive process that connects text to context without stripping the text of its sacred authority.

When students apply Qur'anic principles to contemporary challenges such as digital financial ethics or cryptocurrency (as observed in classroom settings), they move fluidly through the higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy: analyzing complex modern phenomena, evaluating them against normative ethical principles, and synthesizing novel solutions. This synthesis effectively mitigates what many scholars describe as "epistemological dualism" in Muslim learners, wherein students maintain two separate intellectual modes: a reflective, critical mindset for secular academic disciplines, and a passive, uncritical mindset for religious studies. The dual-competency development observed in this study demonstrates that critical scriptural engagement enhances general analytical capabilities, creating transferrable reasoning skills across academic domains.

Navigating Institutional and Theological Resistance

The pedagogical and theological tensions identified in RQ-2 mirror broader systemic challenges documented in international Islamic education literature. The initial apprehension expressed by traditional scholars—that critical questioning might foster



skepticism or undermine spiritual authority (*barakah*) – reflects a valid historical concern regarding the uncritical adoption of Western secular philosophies within Islamic spaces.

However, the findings demonstrate that institutional resistance is minimized when critical thinking frameworks are framed not as foreign imports, but as an authentic restoration of classical Islamic scholarly traditions (*taqalid*). By establishing a dual-framework validation system, curriculum developers demonstrated that rigor in modern learning outcomes can coexist with traditional checks of scriptural fidelity. Reconciling the temporal sequence – balancing the traditional priority of textual memorization with early inquiry-based learning – requires deliberate professional development for faculty. Traditional scholars require exposure to active learning techniques, while modern educators need grounding in classical hermeneutical boundaries. Inter-departmental collaboration thus emerges as a prerequisite for successful curriculum governance.

Comparative Analysis with Global Educational Models

When contextualized within the wider landscape of faith-based higher education, the TDQA framework advances beyond simple curriculum blending or parallel subject insertion (Moreira et al., 2023). While many modern madrasahs adopt a dual-curriculum model – teaching standard national curricula alongside unrevised traditional religious texts – this approach often leaves students to perform the cognitive integration on their own.

The TDQA approach, by contrast, offers structural integration. Similar to progressive communicative and task-based frameworks in language and humanities instruction, TDQA structures classroom interactions around authentic problem-solving scenarios (e.g., evaluating technological advancements through scriptural ethics). By anchoring critical inquiry within authentic textual analysis, Islamic boarding schools can meet stringent national quality accreditation standards (such as Outcome-Based Education requirements) without sacrificing their core institutional identity or spiritual mission.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this qualitative case study offers rich empirical insights into curriculum design and early implementation outcomes, several limitations must be noted. First, the study was conducted within a single progressive Islamic boarding school environment, which may possess organizational culture and faculty readiness levels distinct from more conservative or traditional institutions. Second, while the 42% improvement in analytical reasoning scores is significant, long-term longitudinal research is needed to track whether



these critical competencies persist as graduates transition into university or professional environments.

Future research should explore the scalability of the TDQA model across diverse geographic and cultural contexts, including public Islamic secondary schools and university-level theological faculties. Additionally, comparative studies evaluating how different sub-disciplines within Islamic studies (e.g., *Hadith* studies or Islamic history) adapt critical thinking frameworks will further enrich the field of integrated Islamic pedagogy.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that modern Islamic educational institutions can successfully cultivate sophisticated critical thinking capabilities while maintaining deep commitment to Qur'anic literacy and Islamic intellectual traditions. The Three-Dimensional Qur'anic Analysis framework provides an empirically validated, theoretically grounded model for achieving this integration. For institutional leaders and curriculum developers, this research offers practical guidance regarding curriculum design, faculty professional development, and learning outcome assessment when implementing critical thinking initiatives in faith-based educational contexts. For Islamic educational discourse broadly, this study contributes evidence that contemporary critical thinking pedagogy represents not a threat to Islamic intellectual authenticity, but rather its extension and revitalization. The path forward for modern Islamic education lies not in choosing between traditional scholarship and contemporary analytical rigor, but in recognizing their fundamental compatibility and designing curricula that cultivate both.

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