

Constructing Critical Religious Knowledge through Multicultural Islamic Religious Education in Elementary Schools

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Abstract: This study analyzes how an elementary school Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam/PAI) teacher constructs critical religious knowledge in multicultural learning using Banks's knowledge construction process as an analytical framework. This qualitative single-case study examined the bounded pedagogical practice of one Islamic Religious Education teacher at SDN Puhti 2, focusing on how the teacher mediated normative religious content through pupils' lived experiences in classroom interactions. Data were collected through classroom observation, interviews, and documentation and analyzed through data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings show that the teacher understood multicultural Islamic Religious Education as integrating Islamic obedience with respect for diversity, acted as a constructor rather than a transmitter of religious knowledge, and developed critical religious knowledge through contextualization, reflective dialogue, simple multiperspectivity, and textual interpretation. School culture, teacher experience, instructional time, textbook characteristics, and assessment practices shaped this process. The study extends Banks's knowledge construction process by conceptualizing the teacher as an epistemic mediator who connects normative religious knowledge with pupils' personal and cultural experiences through developmentally appropriate pedagogical strategies. The findings contribute to the theoretical development of multicultural PAI and provide practical implications for teacher practice, school culture, and curriculum development in elementary religious education.

Keywords: Critical religious knowledge, elementary school, epistemic mediation, Islamic religious education, knowledge construction, multicultural education



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A. Introduction

Islamic Religious Education at the elementary level occupies a strategic position in shaping pupils' religious knowledge, moral orientation, and social conduct. In Indonesia's plural context, Islamic Religious Education is expected to cultivate not only personal piety but also social piety, pupils' capacity to actualize Islamic teachings through respect, cooperation, and non-discriminatory interaction with others (Bassar, Ruswandi,

& Erihadiana, 2021), requiring curriculum development attentive to future competencies (Wahid & Hamami, 2021) and to socially responsive practice (Idris & Mokodenseho, 2021; Yamin & Astutik, 2024). Within this framework, the Islamic Religious Education teacher is not merely a transmitter of textbook content but a pedagogical actor who selects, contextualizes, and negotiates religious knowledge in the classroom a constructor, not a deliverer, of religious knowledge (Purnomo & Solikhah, 2021; R'boul, 2021).

Empirical studies confirm the centrality of this constructor role, examining classroom climate and moderation management (Prasetyo, Pramitha, Yulianto, & Ningsih, 2023), institutional policy and school culture (Huda & Rahim, 2023), inclusive recruitment and evaluation practices (Ma'rifah & Sibawaihi, 2023), moderation strategies across national contexts (Muslih et al., 2024), and assessment beyond cognitive achievement (Latifa, Pratama, Hasan, Kamal, & Zakir, 2024). Nevertheless, these studies converge at the level of policy and program; none traces how a teacher, moment-to-moment in classroom interaction, actually constructs religious knowledge a gap this study addresses.

This empirical gap is compounded by a conceptual one that is, arguably, more fundamental. Banks's (1995, 2019) knowledge construction process, which holds that knowledge is shaped by teachers' perspectives, experiences, and assumptions rather than being neutral, has been developed mainly around general curriculum and civic education; its application within Islamic Religious Education remains limited, particularly at the elementary level. This matters theoretically, not only empirically: studies of religious-education teachers already show that pedagogical choices shape how pupils experience diversity, for instance, through translating multicultural principles into practice (Rissanen & Sai, 2018) or through pedagogical agility in moments of difference (Ackroyd, 2025). Yet none frames the teacher through Banks's specific construct of the epistemic mediator, who filters mainstream content and pupils' personal knowledge into classroom understanding. No prior study has thus linked Banks's theory, the Islamic Religious Education teacher's pedagogical practice, and the formation of critical religious knowledge in young children; developing this linkage is a central conceptual contribution of the present study.

At the elementary level, critical religious knowledge must be interpreted proportionally to children's development: not questioning doctrine or engaging in abstract debate, but pupils' initial capacity to understand religious values reflectively, contextually, and respectfully toward diversity (Aripin, Nurdiansyah, Arief, & Yusof, 2025; Kimanen, 2022) appearing as simple moral reasoning, recognizing others' feelings, and refraining from mocking differences, consistent with an affective approach emphasizing compassion and habituation (Badri & Malik, 2024).

To address these empirical and conceptual gaps, this study analyzes how an elementary school Islamic Religious Education teacher constructs critical religious knowledge in multicultural learning by using Banks's knowledge construction process as an analytical framework. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions: (1) How does the Islamic Religious Education teacher understand and enact

multicultural Islamic Religious Education in classroom practice? (2) How does the teacher function as a constructor of religious knowledge? (3) Through what pedagogical strategies is critical religious knowledge constructed for elementary-age pupils? (4) What factors support or inhibit this construction process?

SDN Puhti 2 was selected as the contextual setting in which the focal pedagogical practice was examined. As a public elementary school, it includes variations in family religious practice, Qur'anic reading ability, learning pace, and socio-economic background. These forms of diversity were treated as contextual conditions shaping classroom interaction rather than as the case's defining feature. The bounded case was the pedagogical practice of one Islamic Religious Education teacher mediating normative religious content with the pupils' lived experiences in one elementary classroom.

This study's novelty lies in shifting the analytical lens to classroom-level teacher practice in elementary Islamic Religious Education through Banks's knowledge construction framework. It contributes by positioning the teacher as a constructor rather than merely a transmitter of religious knowledge, extending Banks's knowledge construction process to multicultural Islamic Religious Education at the elementary level, and conceptualizing critical religious knowledge in ways appropriate to pupils' developmental capacities and distinct from theological critique.

B. Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with a single-case study design. This approach was chosen to examine in depth how the Islamic Religious Education teacher constructs critical religious knowledge in multicultural Islamic Religious Education learning at SDN Puhti 2, a public elementary school. Qualitative research is relevant for exploring learning processes, educational experiences, and contextual meanings in Islamic education (Kurniasih, Sastradiharja, & Syaidah, 2024).

The unit of analysis was the Islamic Religious Education teacher's pedagogical practice in constructing critical religious knowledge within one elementary classroom. The single case was bounded by one teacher's practice within one subject (PAI), in one classroom, during one academic period, and was observable through a delimited set of activities, including lesson delivery, teacher-pupil interaction, and related instructional documents (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). Rather than treating pupil heterogeneity as the case's distinctive feature, the analysis focused on the teacher's bounded pedagogical practice in mediating normative religious content and pupils' lived experiences. This mediation was manifested in the selection of contextual examples, the use of accessible language, reflective dialogue, the introduction of differences in developmentally appropriate ways, and the connection between Islamic teachings and pupils' everyday social experiences. These bounded pedagogical practices constituted the focal case through which the construction of critical religious knowledge could be examined in elementary Islamic Religious Education learning.

The research was conducted at SDN Puhti 2, which was purposively selected as the setting where the focal pedagogical practice occurred. The school provided a heterogeneous classroom context with diverse pupil backgrounds, including differences in learning ability, family habits, Qur'anic reading proficiency, socio-economic background, daily language use, classroom character, and religious experiences at home

(Nasir & Rijal, 2021). These forms of heterogeneity were treated as contextual conditions within which the teacher's pedagogical practice was examined, rather than as the primary basis for claiming the case's distinctiveness.

Informants were selected using purposive sampling with the following criteria: (1) the Islamic Religious Education teacher had a minimum of three years of teaching experience at the school and was directly responsible for Islamic Religious Education instruction in the observed classroom; (2) the principal and classroom teachers had direct involvement in, and knowledge of, the school's habituation culture and classroom dynamics; (3) pupils were selected, upon the classroom teacher's recommendation, to represent variation in Qur'anic reading proficiency, family religious background, and classroom participation, so that responses would not be limited to the most vocal or highest-achieving pupils. The Islamic Religious Education teacher was the primary informant and focal actor. In contrast, the principal, classroom teachers, and selected pupils served as supporting informants who provided contextual and triangulating perspectives on the teacher's pedagogical practice. The Islamic Religious Education teacher was coded as GPAI-1, the principal as KS-1, classroom teachers as WK-1 and WK-2, and pupils as S1 to S12. Using several informant groups was intended to strengthen triangulation and avoid dependence on a single data source (Ilyas, Setyaningrum, & Sumarni, 2022). Table 1 summarizes the code, position, number, and type of data collected from each informant group.

Table 1. Research Informants

Code	Position	Number	Data Collected
GPAI-1	Islamic Religious Education teacher	1	Understanding of multicultural PAI, teaching strategies, reflective dialogue, contextualization, obstacles
KS-1	Principal	1	School policy, character habituation, school culture
WK-1/WK-2	Classroom Teachers	2	Pupils' social behavior, classroom dynamics, collaboration with Islamic Religious Education teacher
S1-S12	Pupils	12	Learning responses, understanding of harmony, respect for differences
DOK-1 etc.	Learning Documents	5 documents	Lesson plans, textbooks, worksheets, assessments, school programs

Source: Field data, 2026.

Data were collected through classroom observation, in-depth interviews, supporting interviews, and document analysis. Observations examined the teacher's practices in opening lessons, presenting material, using examples, asking reflective questions, responding to pupils, introducing differences, and strengthening moral values. Observation focused on Islamic Religious Education materials related to morality, harmonious living, mutual respect, compassion, helping others, and social manners because these themes were relevant to multicultural and critical dimensions of elementary Islamic Religious Education. Observation enabled the researcher to examine pedagogical practices in real classroom situations (Ilyas et al., 2022). In-depth interviews with the Islamic Religious Education teacher explored the teacher's understanding of multicultural Islamic Religious Education, instructional strategies, contextualization, dialogue, assessment, and supporting and inhibiting factors (Kurniasih et al., 2024). The study used

supporting interviews with the principal, classroom teachers, and pupils to obtain broader perspectives on school culture, classroom dynamics, and pupils' responses to Islamic Religious Education learning (Nasir & Rijal, 2021). The documentation study examined lesson plans or teaching modules, Islamic Religious Education textbooks, worksheets, assessment instruments, pupils' assignments, and school habituation programs related to character and social values.

The data consisting of observation notes, interview transcripts, supporting interview excerpts, and relevant learning documents were analyzed following Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña's (2014) framework of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing, operationalized through three coding stages. In the open coding stage, the researcher coded observation notes, interview transcripts, and documents line by line to generate descriptive codes close to the data (e.g., "explains a religious rule through a classroom example," "asks pupils to recall a personal experience before introducing the concept"). In the categorization stage, related open codes were grouped by shared pedagogical function; for instance, codes describing the use of everyday examples were grouped into "contextualization of religious material", while codes describing teacher questions that invited pupils' viewpoints were grouped into "reflective dialogue". In the theme formation stage, categories were compared and consolidated across informants and data sources into the four themes reported in the Results section (the teacher's understanding of multicultural Islamic Religious Education, the teacher as constructor of religious knowledge, strategies of constructing critical religious knowledge, and supporting/inhibiting factors) (Ilyas et al., 2022). Table 2 illustrates this transformation using representative excerpts also reported in the Results section.

Table 2. Example of Data Transformation from Raw Data to Theme

Raw Data Excerpt	Open Code	Category	Theme
"If it is only explained by definition, children forget quickly. Usually, I ask first about examples in the classroom or at home. After that, I connect them with the religious lesson." (GPAI-1)	Begins from pupils' experience before introducing concept	Contextualization of religious material	Teacher as constructor of religious knowledge
"If a friend cannot yet recite a prayer, we should not laugh at them. The friend will be sad. It is better to help them." (S3)	Links prohibited behavior to peer's emotional impact	Reflective dialogue	Strategies of constructing critical religious knowledge

Source: Field data, 2026.

The position of Banks's (1995) knowledge construction process within this analytical procedure was as follows: rather than serving as a coding category in itself, the framework was applied during the conclusion-drawing stage to interpret *why* the categories mattered; that is, to read each category (e.g., contextualization, reflective dialogue) as evidence of how the teacher shaped pupils' access to knowledge through choices of perspective, experience, and social context, rather than transmitting religious content as neutral fact. This distinction between the coding categories (empirically derived from the data) and the theoretical framework (used to interpret the categories' significance) is intended to make the relationship between empirical data and theoretical interpretation transparent.

Banks's knowledge construction process was used as an interpretive lens to analyze how the Islamic Religious Education teacher helped pupils understand religious knowledge as connected to experience, perspective, context, and social practice (Banks, 1995). The framework was not used as a quantitative measurement instrument, but to read how the teacher transformed normative religious material into contextual learning, brought pupils' experiences into classroom discussion, used simple reflective questions, introduced differences safely, and connected Islamic values with respect, empathy, cooperation, and harmonious living. Thus, the pedagogical categories were derived from the empirical data, and Banks's framework was used to interpret their significance for constructing religious knowledge.

The trustworthiness of the data was maintained through source triangulation, technique triangulation, and consistency checking. Triangulation involved comparing data from the Islamic Religious Education teacher, principal, classroom teachers, pupils, observations, interviews, and documents (Ilyas et al., 2022). Beyond triangulation, three additional procedures were used. The researcher conducted member checking by returning summarized interpretations of GPAI-1 statements to the teacher to confirm accuracy before finalization. Peer debriefing involved discussing emerging codes and categories with a colleague experienced in qualitative research on Islamic education, to check for bias in coding decisions. The audit trail documented the progression from raw data to open codes, categories, and themes (as illustrated in Table 2), allowing the analytical process to be traced and reviewed. Ethical principles were also considered because the study involved an elementary school context and child participants. The researchers obtained permission from the school before data collection. Informants were informed about the purpose of the research, and their identities were protected through coding. Interviews with pupils used simple language and a non-pressuring atmosphere, and visual documentation was used only with permission and without revealing pupils' identities (Jallow & Jabbie, 2024; Kurniasih et al., 2024).

C. Results and Discussion

Results

The findings of this study are presented in four main themes to show how critical religious knowledge was constructed in multicultural Islamic Religious Education learning at SDN Puhti 2. These themes include the teacher's understanding of multicultural Islamic Religious Education, the teacher's role in constructing religious knowledge, the pedagogical strategies used to construct critical religious knowledge, and the supporting and inhibiting factors that shaped the learning process. Figure 1 presents a conceptual model of how these four findings relate to one another and to Banks's (1995) knowledge construction process, before each theme is discussed.

Figure 1 summarizes the analytical relationship among the four findings and Banks's (1995) knowledge construction process. At the top, the teacher is positioned as an epistemic mediator between two knowledge sources: mainstream knowledge, represented by the textbook's normative content, and pupils' personal and cultural

knowledge, represented by their family habits and lived experiences. Findings 1–3 are analytically related: the teacher's understanding of multicultural Islamic Religious Education (Finding 1) is reflected in the constructor role (Finding 2), which is enacted through four pedagogical strategies—contextualization, reflective dialogue, simple multiperspectivity, and textual interpretation (Finding 3). Together, these practices characterize the construction of critical religious knowledge as contextual, dialogical, reflective, and pedagogically safe. Finding 4 represents the contextual factors that support or constrain the enactment of these pedagogical practices, including school culture, principal support, teacher experience, instructional time, textbook characteristics, and assessment practices.

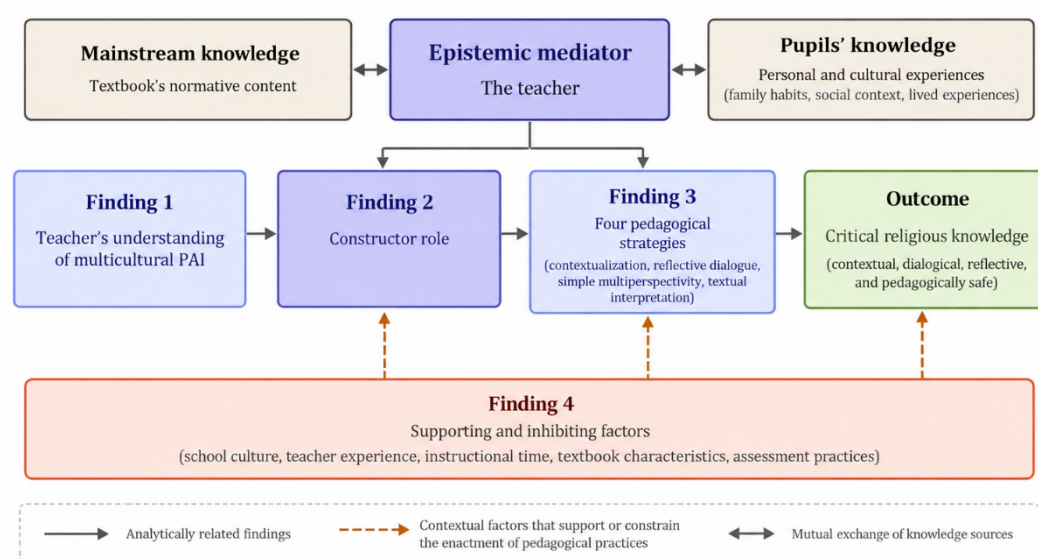


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of the Construction of Critical Religious Knowledge

The Islamic Religious Education Teacher's Understanding of Multicultural PAI

The first finding shows that the Islamic Religious Education teacher understood multicultural Islamic Religious Education as religious learning that combines obedience to Islamic teachings with respect for diversity. For GPAI-1, tolerance, mutual respect, and harmonious living were not concepts outside Islam, but part of Islamic morality that should be introduced from the elementary school level. The teacher did not define multicultural Islamic Religious Education through abstract terms such as multiculturalism, plurality, or knowledge construction. Instead, the teacher translated these ideas into simple classroom language, such as living harmoniously, not mocking friends, helping others, respecting classmates, and being kind to everyone.

This understanding was closely related to the context of SDN Puhti 2 as a public elementary school where diversity appeared in various forms. Diversity did not primarily appear as formal religious difference, but as differences in family habits, Qur'anic reading ability, learning pace, daily language use, socio-economic background, classroom character, and religious experiences at home. In this context, Islamic Religious Education

learning served not only to transmit religious material but also to develop social attitudes such as empathy, cooperation, and respect.

In the interview, GPAI-1 explained that "Elementary school children cannot yet be given heavy terms. Therefore, I explain it with examples: if a friend has different habits at home, do not mock them; if a friend is not yet fluent in reciting the Qur'an, help them." (GPAI-1). This statement indicates that the teacher understood multicultural Islamic Religious Education in practical and developmental terms. The teacher considered that elementary school pupils needed concrete examples rather than theoretical explanations. Therefore, the teacher introduced multicultural values through daily interactions, such as not laughing at friends who made mistakes, helping classmates who had difficulty, respecting different family habits, and maintaining classroom harmony. Consistent with these general observations, preliminary classroom observation showed that lessons on morality and harmonious living were explained through concrete situations such as not mocking friends who were not yet fluent in reciting prayers, helping classmates with different abilities, lending stationery, cooperating in classroom activities, and respecting different family habits. Data from the classroom teacher supported this finding. WK-1 stated that Islamic Religious Education learning often strengthened classroom character habituation, especially in greeting others, speaking politely, apologizing, helping friends, and avoiding mockery. Thus, multicultural Islamic Religious Education at SDN Puhti 2 was integrated into both classroom learning and daily school culture.

Reading through Banks's (1995) knowledge construction process, this understanding indicates that the teacher's starting point for constructing religious knowledge was not the textbook's mainstream academic content, but pupils' personal and cultural knowledge, their everyday family habits and social experiences. This positioning matters analytically because it determines which form of knowledge pupils encounter first: religious knowledge is introduced as continuous with lived experience rather than as an external, doctrinal register to be memorized before being applied.

The Islamic Religious Education teacher as a Constructor of Religious Knowledge

The second finding shows that the Islamic Religious Education teacher acted as a constructor of religious knowledge. The teacher did not merely deliver textbook material; instead, the teacher selected examples, simplified language, connected Islamic teachings with pupils' experiences, and gave social meaning to religious values. This role was evident in how the teacher began by learning from pupils' everyday experiences before explaining the religious concepts.

In one observed lesson on harmonious living and mutual respect, the teacher did not directly ask pupils to read a definition from the textbook. The teacher first asked, "Who has ever helped a friend?" and "What do you do when a friend has a different habit?" These questions encouraged pupils to recall concrete experiences. Pupils then gave examples such as lending a pencil, helping a friend who had fallen, waiting for their turn, not laughing at a friend who made a mistake in reading, and accompanying a friend who did not have a group. The teacher connected these answers with Islamic moral values

and wrote key words on the board, including helping one another, not mocking, respecting, and living harmoniously.

This pattern shows that religious knowledge was constructed through the relationship between experience, value, and social action. First, the teacher elicited pupils' experiences as the initial material for learning. Second, the teacher explained the religious values related to those experiences. Third, the teacher asked pupils to identify examples of applying the values at school and at home. Through this process, religious knowledge did not remain abstract but became meaningful in pupils' social lives.

GPAI-1 explained: "If it is only explained by definition, children forget quickly. Usually, I ask first about examples in the classroom or at home. After that, I connect them with the religious lesson." (GPAI-1). This statement shows the teacher's pedagogical awareness that pupils understand Islamic Religious Education material more easily when it is connected to concrete situations. The teacher did not eliminate the normative dimension of Islamic Religious Education, but presented it through contextual learning. Therefore, the construction of religious knowledge in this study was not one-directional. It involved pupils' experiences as a source of meaning and positioned the teacher as an active mediator between Islamic teachings and classroom realities.

This pattern illustrates, at a concrete pedagogical level, what Banks's (1995) terms the construction of knowledge: the teacher's sequencing of experience before explanation was not incidental but constitutive it determined which version of religious knowledge pupils encountered. Had the lesson opened with the textbook's definition, pupils would likely have encountered religious knowledge as settled, external, mainstream academic content. By instead beginning with pupils' own examples, the teacher constructed religious knowledge as continuous with, and validated by, pupils' lived experience.

Strategies for Constructing Critical Religious Knowledge

The third finding shows that the teacher constructed critical religious knowledge through contextualization, reflective dialogue, simple multiperspectivity, and interpretation of religious texts or stories. These strategies enabled the teacher to transform normative religious material into learning that was understandable, reflective, and relevant to elementary school pupils.

Contextualization became the teacher's main strategy. The teacher connected Islamic Religious Education material with situations close to pupils' lives, such as playing together, queuing, cleaning the classroom, lending stationery, helping friends, and avoiding hurtful words. When discussing harmonious living, the teacher used classroom cleaning activities as an example of shared responsibility. When discussing manners toward friends, the teacher gave examples of speaking politely, not calling friends by bad names, and not laughing at classmates' mistakes. These examples helped pupils understand that Islamic values are related to everyday behavior.

The teacher also used reflective dialogue to develop pupils' simple moral reasoning. The teacher asked questions such as "Why should we not mock our friends?", "How would a friend feel if they were mocked?", "What does Islam teach us about loving others?", and "What is an example in our classroom?" These questions did not require

complex abstract analysis, but encouraged pupils to give reasons and recognize the social consequences of behavior. One pupil stated, "If a friend cannot yet recite a prayer, we should not laugh at them. The friend will be sad. It is better to help them." (S3).

This response shows that pupils began to connect religious values with empathy. The pupil did not merely repeat a religious prohibition, but also understood the emotional impact of mocking others. In this context, critical religious knowledge at the elementary level appeared as simple moral reflection, not as theological debate.

The teacher also introduced simple multiperspectivity in safe and proportional ways. They did not present differences through complex discussions of religious schools of thought or theological issues. Instead, they introduced differences through examples of family habits, Qur'anic learning schedules, prayer memorization ability, and learning pace. The teacher explained that such differences were natural and should not become reasons for mockery. One pupil responded, "If a friend cannot do it yet, teach them. Do not laugh at them." (S1). This response indicates that pupils understood difference through the value of solidarity. They did not yet understand diversity as a theoretical concept, but they began to understand that differences in ability should be responded to with help and respect.

The interpretation of religious texts, prayers, and stories also became part of constructing critical religious knowledge. The teacher not only emphasized memorization, but also asked pupils to identify the moral message of a story or prayer. Questions such as "What is the message of this story?", "What attitude can we imitate?", and "What is an example at school?" helped pupils understand that religious texts are not only to be memorized, but also practiced. For example, after discussing compassion, pupils mentioned helping friends, speaking kindly, lending stationery, and not getting angry when opinions differed. The teacher then reinforced that these actions were part of Islamic morality.

Pupils' responses showed that they gradually understood the teacher's strategies. S1 stated, "Islamic Religious Education lessons teach us not to mock friends, because friends can feel sad." Another pupil stated, "If a friend has a different habit at home, it is okay, as long as we are still kind to friends." (S5). These responses show that pupils began moving from purely normative answers toward reflective understanding. However, some still answered in simple normative forms such as "because it is a sin" or "because religion forbids it". The teacher expanded these answers by asking about how behavior affects friends and classroom harmony.

Considered together, these four strategies indicate that critical religious knowledge at SDN Puhti 2 was not constructed through a single technique but through a layered movement: pupils' personal/cultural knowledge was elicited (contextualization), examined for underlying reasons (reflective dialogue), tested against differences in ability and habit (simple multiperspectivity), and connected back to normative religious sources (textual interpretation). This layering illustrates how Banks's knowledge construction process may be enacted within a lesson cycle through the deliberate sequencing of experience, questioning, and normative anchoring.

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors

The fourth finding shows that both supporting and inhibiting factors shaped the construction of critical religious knowledge. The supporting factors included school culture, principal support, the teacher's pedagogical experience, the character of Islamic Religious Education material, and the closeness between the teacher and pupils. The school culture at SDN Puhti 2 emphasized politeness, cleanliness, cooperation, and harmonious living. This culture helped the teacher connect religious material with actual school practices, such as class duties, helping friends, and maintaining a peaceful classroom environment.

The principal's support also strengthened the implementation of multicultural Islamic Religious Education. KS-1 explained that religious learning should support a harmonious school culture that does not discriminate among pupils. This support appeared through school habituation programs and opportunities for teachers to develop contextual learning. The teacher's experience was another supporting factor. GPAI-1 was accustomed to dealing with pupils with diverse characters and abilities, so the teacher could adjust examples and language to the pupils' developmental level. In addition, moral topics in PAI, such as compassion, stories of the Prophet, mutual help, and harmonious living, were relatively easy to connect with multicultural values. A warm teacher-pupil relationship also encouraged pupils to ask questions, answer, and share experiences.

However, several inhibiting factors were also found. The first was limited instructional time. The teacher had to balance material completion, practice exercises, memorization, and reflective dialogue. In some situations, the pressure to cover material limited opportunities for deeper discussion. The second factor was pupils' limited capacity for abstraction. Concepts such as multiculturalism, tolerance, and critical thinking could not be presented theoretically, so the teacher had to translate them into simple examples.

The third inhibiting factor was the teacher's caution in discussing sensitive religious issues. The teacher tended to avoid in-depth discussion of religious differences or differences in Islamic schools of thought because they were concerned that pupils or parents might misunderstand the topic. As a result, multiperspective learning was mostly limited to safe examples such as differences in family habits and learning abilities. The fourth factor was the limitation of textbooks. Islamic Religious Education textbooks often presented material normatively and did not always provide sufficient case studies for reflective dialogue. Therefore, the teacher had to create examples from classroom life. The fifth factor was assessment that remained predominantly cognitive. If assessment only measured definitions, memorization, and single correct answers, pupils' reflective understanding was difficult to identify. The teacher needed more reflective forms of assessment, such as writing experiences, giving examples, and explaining simple moral reasons.

Overall, the results show that the construction of critical religious knowledge in multicultural Islamic Religious Education learning at SDN Puhti 2 occurred through the teacher's practical understanding of multicultural Islamic Religious Education, the

teacher's role as a constructor of religious knowledge, contextual and reflective learning strategies, and the interaction between supporting and inhibiting factors in the school environment.

These supporting and inhibiting factors indicate that the construction of critical religious knowledge is not solely a matter of individual teacher skill but is conditioned by the school's broader knowledge ecosystem; its culture, materials, and assessment practices function either to open space for the kind of knowledge construction described in Themes 2–3, or to pull practice back toward the reproduction of normative, mainstream academic content.

Discussion

The four findings should not be read as parallel, independent observations, but as an analytically related sequence. The teacher's practical understanding of multicultural Islamic Religious Education as "Islamic obedience combined with respect for diversity" (Finding 1) was reflected in the teacher's role as a constructor, rather than merely a transmitter, of religious knowledge (Finding 2). This role was enacted through contextualization, reflective dialogue, multiperspectivity, and textual interpretation (Finding 3), while supporting and inhibiting factors within the school ecosystem shaped the conditions under which these pedagogical practices were enacted (Finding 4). Read together, these four aspects indicate that multicultural Islamic Religious Education at the elementary school level is not merely a matter of adding tolerance-related content to the curriculum, but a pedagogical process in which the teacher mediates Islamic teachings, pupils' social experiences, school culture, and classroom interaction.

This teacher-mediated process also fits within the wider international literature on culturally responsive and religiously sensitive pedagogy. Lavigne et al. (2022), in their comparative study of elementary classrooms in the United States and the Netherlands, found that culturally responsive instruction involves pedagogical qualities that are not fully captured by conventional notions of "good teaching," particularly teachers' capacity to provide emotional support and respond to pupils' cultural backgrounds. Similarly, Debnam et al. (2023) identify empathy, curriculum adaptation, relational responsiveness, and sensitivity to pupils' experiences as important characteristics of culturally responsive teachers. These findings strengthen the interpretation of the present case as a process of pedagogical mediation in which pupils' lived experiences become legitimate resources for religious learning rather than peripheral classroom information.

This understanding is important because it prevents multicultural Islamic Religious Education from being viewed as separate from Islamic values. In the teacher's view, tolerance, mutual respect, helping others, and harmonious living are part of Islamic morality. This finding aligns with Muhajir et al. (2025) and Rissanen and Sai (2018) who show that multicultural Islamic education can connect interculturality, social cohesion, ethical formation, and religious values without diminishing the significance of religious identity. This study extends that argument by specifying how such principles are translated pedagogically within the context of elementary Islamic Religious Education,

where abstract multicultural values are expressed through concrete, age-appropriate classroom language and everyday social situations.

Recent research also suggests that such translation is not a neutral pedagogical act. Nelson and Yang (2023) show that Religious Education teachers' beliefs and professional judgments influence how religions and religious diversity are represented in classroom practice. Their findings reinforce the argument developed here that the teacher is not simply a conduit for prescribed curriculum content. Rather, teachers make epistemic and pedagogical decisions about which meanings are foregrounded, how difference is framed, and how prescribed religious content is related to pupils' social worlds.

In elementary education, the teacher's practical understanding of multicultural Islamic Religious Education is pedagogically significant. The teacher did not introduce multiculturalism through abstract terms, but translated it into daily actions, such as not mocking friends, helping classmates, respecting family habits, and maintaining classroom harmony. In Banks's (1995) terms, this approach draws primarily on pupils' personal and cultural knowledge rather than mainstream academic definitions, which is developmentally appropriate because elementary pupils tend to understand values through concrete experience rather than theoretical explanation. The finding strengthens the argument that multicultural Islamic Religious Education should be adjusted to pupils' developmental stage and social context. At SDN Puhti 2, diversity was expressed not mainly through formal religious differences, but through differences in family habits, Qur'anic reading ability, learning pace, socio-economic background, language use, and classroom character. Therefore, multicultural Islamic Religious Education was practiced by managing everyday differences in pupils' social interactions.

This contextual orientation is also consistent with Harjatanaya's (2025) multi-case study of religious education in Indonesian schools, which shows that religious education is not simply a direct translation of national policy but is continually negotiated in relation to school context, local culture, actors, and forms of religious diversity. The present study adds a classroom-level dimension to this argument: contextualisation also occurs through teachers' micro-decisions when selecting examples, responding to pupils, and connecting normative religious material to everyday differences.

This finding is closely related to Banks's knowledge construction process, which views knowledge as shaped by perspectives, experiences, contexts, and values rather than as something entirely neutral (Banks, 1995). In this study, the teacher's pedagogical choices shaped how pupils encountered and understood religious concepts. When the teacher connected the prohibition against mockery with the sadness felt by a friend, religious knowledge was no longer presented only as a rule but as a moral value with social consequences.

This mediating role can be conceptually specified as that of an epistemic mediator: the teacher does not simply transfer religious content, nor does she leave pupils to construct meaning entirely on their own. Instead, she occupies a position between school-based normative knowledge represented by textbook definitions and prescribed religious content and pupils' personal and cultural knowledge, including their family habits and

social experiences. She selectively brings these forms of knowledge into contact so that religious understanding is neither purely doctrinal nor purely experiential. This positioning extends Banks's (1995, 2019) knowledge construction process by specifying what epistemic mediation may look like in elementary religious education, where the mediated content includes explicit normative and doctrinal dimensions.

This interpretation is supported by Stones and Fraser-Pearce (2022), who frame Religious Education as a site where questions of knowledge and epistemic justice matter because some forms of knowledge, experience, and voice can be privileged over others. In the present study, the teacher's mediation between textbook knowledge and pupils' lived experience can therefore be read as more than instructional adaptation: it represents an epistemic practice that determines which forms of experience enter the construction of legitimate classroom knowledge.

A closely related issue is evident in Christopher and Revell's (2024) study of Islam as educational knowledge. Their work demonstrates that teachers make consequential decisions about what forms of knowledge about Islam are considered legitimate, teachable, or controversial in school curricula. The present findings extend this insight to confessional elementary Islamic Religious Education: even when normative Islamic content is already institutionally legitimate, teachers still have to decide how that content becomes meaningful educational knowledge for pupils. Epistemic mediation therefore occurs not only through curriculum selection, but also through interpreting and contextualising prescribed content in classroom interaction.

The role of the teacher as a constructor of religious knowledge also confirms that Islamic Religious Education learning is not a one-way transmission process. Pupils' experiences became a source of meaning in the classroom. The teacher began learning by asking pupils about their experiences of helping friends or responding to differences, then connected those experiences with Islamic values. This process shows that religious knowledge was constructed through the relationship between experience, value, and action.

This practice is particularly well explained through Ackroyd's (2025) concept of pedagogical agility. Ackroyd describes pedagogical agility as the teacher's capacity to move responsively between pedagogical approaches when navigating religious difference, conflict, mutual respect, and tolerance. In the present study, such agility appeared in a developmentally specific sequence: the teacher elicited pupils' experiences, selected contextual examples, used reflective questions, introduced manageable forms of difference, and then reconnected discussion to normative Islamic values. Although the context differs from the conflict-oriented situations examined by Ackroyd, the underlying pedagogical mechanism is similar: teachers adapt the route through which pupils approach religious knowledge while maintaining the subject's educational and normative purposes.

These strategies show that critical religious knowledge at the elementary level should not be understood as theological criticism or abstract debate. Rather, it appears in pupils' ability to give simple moral reasons, understand others' feelings, recognize the

social consequences of behavior, and relate Islamic values to daily life. This proportional meaning of criticality is important so that Islamic Religious Education learning remains developmentally appropriate and pedagogically safe for elementary pupils.

Kimanen (2022) also supports the emphasis on empathy, arguing that informed empathy can be an important pathway through which Religious Education contributes to social justice. In the present case, reflective questions such as asking pupils how a mocked friend might feel transformed religious rules into relational and moral understanding. Critical religious knowledge at the elementary level can therefore be interpreted not as scepticism toward doctrine, but as the emerging ability to connect normative values with empathy, consequences, and responsibilities toward others.

Contextualization enabled pupils to understand Islamic values through concrete situations, such as playing together, lending stationery, helping friends, cleaning the classroom, and avoiding hurtful words. In Banks's (1995) framework, this strategy anchors instruction in pupils' *personal and cultural knowledge* before connecting it to normative content. This finding supports Helmy, Kubro, and Ali (2021), who emphasize connecting religious moderation and Islamic values to social relations and everyday practices. It also aligns with Nisa et al. (2022) who show that moderation in the Indonesian Muslim context relates to tolerance, rejection of violence, and accommodation of sociocultural realities. In the classroom context, the teacher's use of daily examples helped pupils understand that Islamic morality is practiced in ordinary social interactions.

Utami's (2022) study of religious education in multireligious Indonesian public schools similarly demonstrates that interreligious competence and tolerance are shaped by how schools and educators respond to diversity in actual educational settings. Although the present study focuses on variation within an elementary Islamic Religious Education classroom rather than formal interreligious differences, both studies suggest that religious education becomes socially meaningful when diversity is addressed through concrete relationships and educational practices rather than through abstract statements of tolerance alone.

Reflective dialogue became a key strategy for developing pupils' moral reasoning. Questions such as "Why should we not mock our friends?" and "How would a friend feel if they were mocked?" encouraged pupils to move beyond memorized answers. When pupils responded that mocking friends could make them sad and that helping was better, they showed an early form of critical religious knowledge. Viewed through Banks's knowledge construction process, this shift from a memorized rule to a reasoned, experience-linked justification illustrates a move from passively receiving school-based religious knowledge to actively constructing understanding informed by pupils' personal experiences.

This finding can also be understood through recent work on social justice in Religious Education. Kimanen (2023) distinguishes between learning about social justice, developing commitment toward it, and negotiating it through classroom practice. The reflective dialogue observed in this study most closely resembles the latter movement:

pupils were not merely informed that respect is an Islamic value, but were invited to reason about its consequences for concrete social relationships.

Simple multiperspectivity also mattered in constructing critical religious knowledge. The teacher introduced differences through safe examples, such as differences in family habits, Qur'anic learning schedules, prayer memorization ability, and learning pace. This strategy avoided complex theological discussion while still helping pupils recognize that differences exist and should be responded to with respect. In this sense, multiperspectivity in elementary Islamic Religious Education does not mean relativizing religious truth; it operationalizes, in a developmentally safe form, the multiple-perspectives principle central to Banks's (1995) knowledge construction process, helping pupils understand that social and religious experiences may vary and that such variation should be approached with adab, empathy, and solidarity. This finding aligns with Nasir and Rijal (2021) who explain that religious moderation in Islamic education must be translated into balanced, contextualised practice.

Recent empirical work on religious diversity reinforces the importance of such calibrated engagement with difference. Riegel et al. (2022), using classroom video data, show that religious diversity can be represented through multiple dimensions, including positional, contextual, stylistic, and biographical differences. Their findings suggest that classroom treatment of diversity can become narrow when it is reduced to formal religious positions alone. The present study similarly shows that multiperspectivity at the elementary level can begin with contextual and biographical differences, such as family habits and learning trajectories, without requiring pupils to engage prematurely in complex theological comparison.

Interpreting religious texts, prayers, and stories further strengthened the development of critical religious knowledge. The teacher did not stop at memorization; instead, the teacher guided pupils to identify moral messages and ways to apply them. This finding matters because memorization remains a significant part of Islamic Religious Education. However, memorization without meaning may separate religious knowledge from social behavior, leaving mainstream academic or school knowledge disconnected from pupils' personal and cultural knowledge.

Christopher and Revell (2024) provide a useful international comparison here because they show that teaching Islam involves decisions about how complex religious knowledge is transformed into educational knowledge. In this study, the transformation occurred through interpretation rather than simple content reduction: the textual material remained normatively Islamic, but the teacher made its moral significance accessible by relating it to situations pupils could recognise and discuss.

Supporting factors included school culture, principal support, teacher experience, moral topics in Islamic Religious Education, and warm teacher–pupil relationships. These factors show that multicultural Islamic Religious Education is not only the responsibility of the Islamic Religious Education teacher as an individual; it is also strengthened by an educational ecosystem that supports politeness, mutual assistance, cooperation, anti-mockery practices, and harmonious living. In Banks's terms, this ecosystem functions as

the enabling condition for epistemic mediation: a supportive school culture and instructional time give the teacher room to draw on both mainstream religious content and pupils' personal and cultural knowledge, rather than defaulting to one at the expense of the other.

Tuna's (2022) study of Islamic Religious Education teachers in Austria strengthens this interpretation by showing that IRE professionalism is shaped by more than individual teacher competence; professional education, institutional recognition, employment conditions, and broader professional structures also influence teachers' capacity to enact their roles. Although the institutional context differs substantially from Indonesia, the comparison underlines a common point: pedagogical quality in Islamic Religious Education depends on the interaction between individual professional judgment and the institutional conditions within which that judgment is exercised.

However, the findings also show several inhibiting factors, including limited instructional time, pupils' limited capacity for abstraction, the sensitivity of religious issues, normative textbooks, and cognitive-oriented assessment. These obstacles indicate that developing multicultural Islamic Religious Education requires more than teacher initiative; it requires adequate time allocation, contextual teaching materials, reflective assessment, and institutional support. Read through Banks's framework, each inhibiting factor narrows the same channel: limited time and caution around sensitive topics reduce opportunities to draw on pupils' personal and cultural knowledge. At the same time, normative textbooks may anchor instruction toward mainstream content, thereby pulling practice back toward transmission rather than construction.

Eliyahu-Levi and Semo (2024) report a comparable pedagogical tension among Bible teachers, who must navigate between disciplinary religious knowledge and moral dialogue concerning tolerance, inclusion, and "otherness." Their findings indicate that teachers vary in whether they remain within the boundaries of prescribed subject discourse or use pedagogical flexibility to engage broader social and moral issues. This comparison helps explain the inhibiting factors identified in the present study: pedagogical agility is not unlimited, but is constrained by time, curricular expectations, sensitivity around religious issues, and teachers' judgments about what forms of discussion are appropriate.

Textbook limitations are particularly important because highly normative materials may offer few cases or prompts through which teachers can connect prescribed religious content with pupils' personal and cultural knowledge. This aligns with Siddik, Qorib, and Lubis (2025) who note that limited contextual materials, teacher understanding, and school support can hinder the integration of multicultural values in Islamic education.

Christopher and Revell (2024) sharpen this point by showing that curriculum materials and prescribed representations of Islam shape what teachers perceive as legitimate educational knowledge. In the Indonesian Islamic Religious Education context examined here, the problem is not the absence of normative Islamic content but the limited availability of pedagogical bridges between that content and pupils' lived

experience. Textbooks may therefore provide the normative knowledge base while leaving teachers to undertake much of the epistemic mediation themselves.

The dominance of cognitive assessment also needs attention. If assessment only measures definitions, memorization, and single correct answers, pupils' reflective religious understanding may remain invisible. The findings show that critical religious knowledge at the elementary level appears in pupils' ability to give simple reasons, narrate experiences, show empathy, and mention concrete examples of moral action. Therefore, assessment in multicultural Islamic Religious Education should include reflective tasks, such as asking pupils to write experiences, explain reasons for helping friends, or describe how to respect differences. This aligns with Latifa et al. (2024) who argue that assessment in Islamic Education can target not only cognitive achievement but also spiritual attitudes, religious practice, and tolerance. From the viewpoint taken in this research, an assessment focused solely on cognitive aspects might measure students' grasp of required religious information but offer little insight into their ability to relate that information to personal experiences, ethical reasoning, and social connections—an integration recognized here as vital to critical religious understanding.

Taken together, these international studies broaden the interpretation of the present findings in three directions. First, culturally responsive research shows that pedagogical responsiveness involves relational, emotional, and contextual dimensions beyond generic instructional effectiveness (Debnam et al., 2023; Lavigne et al., 2022). Second, recent Religious Education research shows that teachers make epistemic decisions about what religious knowledge they select, represent, and connect to pupils' experiences (Christopher & Revell, 2024; Nelson & Yang, 2023; Stones & Fraser-Pearce, 2022). Third, studies of religious diversity and pedagogical flexibility show that effective Religious Education requires teachers to navigate difference, moral dialogue, professional constraints, and institutional contexts rather than simply transmit curriculum content (Ackroyd, 2025; Eliyahu-Levi & Semo, 2024; Harjatanaya, 2025; Tuna, 2022).

These comparisons strengthen the concept of the teacher as an epistemic mediator. Epistemic mediation in elementary Islamic Religious Education involves more than contextualizing examples: it requires the teacher to judge when to begin from experience, when to ask reflective questions, how much difference pupils can productively encounter, and when to reconnect classroom discussion to normative Islamic sources. In this sense, pedagogical agility describes the dynamic capacity through which epistemic mediation is enacted. At the same time, Banks's knowledge construction process explains the relationship between mainstream religious knowledge and pupils' personal and cultural knowledge.

Overall, the discussion confirms that critical religious knowledge in multicultural Islamic Religious Education at SDN Puhti 2 is constructed through the teacher's mediation of Islamic values, pupils' experiences, classroom dialogue, and school culture. The teacher's role is central because the teacher determines how religious knowledge is selected, explained, contextualized, and connected to pupils' social lives, functioning

throughout as an epistemic mediator between normative religious content and pupils' lived experience.

The international literature therefore does not simply confirm the findings; it clarifies the study's theoretical contribution. Whereas culturally responsive pedagogy emphasizes responsiveness to pupils' cultural and relational worlds, recent Religious Education scholarship emphasizes the contested and constructed nature of religious knowledge, and pedagogical agility emphasizes teachers' capacity to respond flexibly to difference. This study brings these strands together in elementary Islamic Religious Education by showing that critical religious knowledge emerges when a teacher deliberately mediates between normative Islamic content and pupils' lived experiences through contextualization, reflective dialogue, developmentally appropriate multiperspectivity, and textual interpretation.

Theoretically, this study extends Banks's knowledge construction process to elementary Islamic Religious Education by showing how teachers enact knowledge construction through concrete, developmentally appropriate pedagogical practices, including contextualization, reflective dialogue, simple multiperspectivity, and textual interpretation.

Accordingly, the theoretical contribution specifies the teacher's role as an epistemic mediator between normative religious content and pupils' personal and cultural knowledge. The concept of pedagogical agility further illuminates how this mediation is enacted as the teacher moves between pupils' experiences, reflective questioning, encounters with difference, and normative religious anchoring.

D. Conclusion

This study analyzed how the Islamic Religious Education teacher constructs critical religious knowledge in multicultural learning at SDN Puhti 2, using James A. Banks's knowledge construction process as an analytical framework. The findings converge on a single conceptual argument: multicultural Islamic Religious Education at the elementary level is constructed through the teacher's practical understanding of Islamic Religious Education as combining religious obedience with respect for diversity, which is reflected in a mediating pedagogical role, while the surrounding school ecosystem shapes the conditions under which that mediation is enacted. This mediation was visible in the sequencing of experience before explanation, the selective connection of textbook content with pupils' lived experiences, and the safe introduction of difference. School culture, principal support, teacher experience, available time, textbook material, and assessment design supported or constrained this mediation. In this sense, critical religious knowledge at the elementary level is not primarily a property of what pupils are taught, but of how the teacher mediates between normative religious content and pupils' everyday social worlds.

Theoretically, this study contributes to Banks's (1995, 2019) knowledge construction process by extending its application to the underexplored context of elementary-level Islamic Religious Education and by specifying the teacher's role within

that context as an epistemic mediator: one who deliberately brings pupils' personal and cultural knowledge into contact with normative religious content rather than treating either as sufficient on its own. This differs from studies that apply the knowledge construction process primarily to curriculum or textbook analysis; here, the process is demonstrated within classroom interaction through the sequencing of experience, questioning, and normative anchoring documented in the findings.

Practically, the findings suggest three implications. For Islamic Religious Education teachers, the findings highlight the importance of disciplined pedagogical practices, including beginning lessons with pupils' experiences, asking reflective questions before supplying answers, and introducing differences through safe, concrete examples. For schools, sustaining this practice requires deliberate ecosystem support, protected instructional time, a culture that normalizes discussing everyday differences, and collegial spaces where teachers can reflect on their pedagogical choices. For curriculum and textbook developers, the findings point to a specific gap: normative textbook material offers teachers few built-in cases for reflective dialogue, so teachers must construct such cases themselves; developing supplementary materials with ready-made contextual scenarios and reflective questions could reduce this burden.

This study has several limitations. It was a single-case study at SDN Puhti 2, so the findings are not intended to generalize statistically to all elementary schools. The study centered on the Islamic Religious Education teacher as the primary actor in constructing religious knowledge, did not measure pupils' long-term attitudinal change or compare practices across schools, and limited critical religious knowledge to simple moral reflection appropriate to elementary school pupils, not theological debate or abstract philosophical critique.

Future research should examine how critical religious knowledge is constructed in different elementary school contexts, including public schools and madrasah ibtidaiyah with varied multicultural characteristics. Comparative and longitudinal studies are needed to understand how pupils' reflective religious understanding develops over time. Further studies may also develop reflective assessment instruments for multicultural Islamic Religious Education learning and analyze how textbooks, teaching modules, school culture, and teacher collaboration support the construction of religious knowledge. Practically, elementary Islamic Religious Education teachers are encouraged to strengthen contextual, dialogical, reflective, and pedagogically safe learning so that Islamic values are not only memorized but also understood and practiced as the basis for respectful, empathetic, and harmonious social life.

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