

## EVALUATION OF HOTS-BASED PAI LEARNING (HIGHER ORDER THINKING SKILLS) IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe the form, implementation, as well as obstacles and solutions in the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning evaluation based on *Higher Order Thinking Skills* (HOTS) in secondary schools. The study used a qualitative approach with a case study method involving Islamic Religious Education teachers, students, and the principal as research subjects. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation, then analyzed using the Miles & Huberman model through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions with triangulation of sources and methods. The research results show that HOTS-based Islamic Religious Education (PAI) evaluation methods include open-ended descriptive questions, religious case studies, analysis of Quranic and Hadith texts, and non-test instruments such as projects and portfolios. The evaluation implementation aligns with the principles of the Independent Curriculum, which emphasizes authentic assessment and the development of critical thinking competencies. However, teachers still face competency constraints in developing HOTS questions and limited learning facilities. Solutions identified include ongoing teacher training, collaboration between educators, the development of HOTS question banks, and the use of digital technology. This study concludes that HOTS-based evaluation aligns with the goals of Islamic education, which emphasize the formation of individuals with faith, critical thinking, and noble character. Implementing this evaluation has the potential to strengthen students' Islamic character and provide a new direction for developing a holistic and contextual assessment system for Islamic education.

**Keywords** : *Islamic Religious Education, HOTS, learning evaluation, Independent Curriculum, authentic assessment.*

### A. INTRODUCTION

Education in the 21st century requires students to have high-level thinking skills or *Higher Order Thinking Skills* (HOTS), which encompasses the skills of analyzing, evaluating, and creating. In a dynamic, technology-rich global context, these skills are crucial for students to adapt, think critically, and solve problems creatively. HOTS-based learning evaluation is an important strategy for measuring learning success, not just emphasizing memorization (*lower order thinking skills*), but also on the ability to think reflectively and apply it to real situations.

The results of the study *Implementation of HOTS-Based Learning Evaluation* shows that most students still have difficulty solving questions that require analysis and synthesis because teachers have not been optimal in implementing HOTS-based evaluation (Sholeh et al., 2025).

Islamic Religious Education (PAI), as an integral part of the national education system, plays a strategic role in shaping the character, morals, and spirituality of students, enabling them to become individuals with faith, knowledge, and noble character. However, PAI learning often focuses on lower cognitive aspects, such as memorizing verses, hadiths, and basic Islamic concepts, without guiding students to think critically about contemporary social and moral issues. By integrating HOTS into PAI learning, students can be encouraged to understand Islamic teachings in depth, interpret religious values in the context of modern life, and develop problem-solving skills based on Islamic values (Purnawanto, 2023). This approach makes PAI not only normative and doctrinal, but also contextual and relevant to the challenges of the times.

Learning evaluation is a crucial component in ensuring the achievement of educational goals. In the context of Islamic Religious Education (PAI), evaluation not only measures mastery of religious knowledge but also measures students' higher-order thinking skills in understanding, critiquing, and applying Islamic teachings in real life. Research by Arbani (2025) shows that most PAI evaluation instruments are still at the lower cognitive level (C1–C3) in the revised Bloom's Taxonomy, while questions measuring creative ability (C6) are rarely used. This condition indicates a gap between the demands of 21st-century learning and evaluation practices in the field, so that an in-depth study is needed on the form and implementation of HOTS-based PAI evaluation in secondary schools.

However, implementing HOTS-based evaluations is not without challenges, particularly for Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers. Many teachers face difficulties in designing evaluation instruments that truly demand higher-order thinking skills. Common obstacles include teachers' lack of conceptual understanding of HOTS, limited professional training, and the lack of contextual examples or question banks. Research by Rahma et al. (2024) found that most Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers still use multiple-choice questions that focus on memorization, rather than analysis or application of Islamic values in life contexts. This demonstrates the need for ongoing training for teachers to effectively integrate HOTS into the learning evaluation process.

Based on these conditions, research on *Evaluation of HOTS-Based Islamic Education Learning in Middle Schools* is very relevant and urgent. This study aims to describe the form of evaluation applied, analyze the implementation process, and identify the obstacles and solutions faced by teachers in implementing HOTS in the classroom. Thus, this study can provide a practical contribution to improving the quality of Islamic Religious Education learning while enriching the academic literature related to the integration of HOTS in religious education. The problem formulations raised in this study include: (1) what form of HOTS-based Islamic Religious Education learning evaluation is carried out in secondary schools, (2) how the evaluation is implemented in learning practices, and (3) what are the obstacles and solutions faced in its implementation.

Theoretically, this research is expected to broaden understanding of the design and implementation of HOTS-based Islamic Religious Education evaluations and provide a conceptual framework for developing more effective evaluation instruments. Practically, the

results of this study can serve as recommendations for Islamic Religious Education teachers to develop evaluation instruments that encourage students' critical and creative thinking skills, as well as provide input for educational institutions and policymakers in designing teacher training and curriculum development that adapts to 21st-century needs (Suryatini et al., 2024). Thus, the implementation of HOTS-based Islamic Religious Education evaluations not only supports the improvement of student competencies but also strengthens the role of religious education in shaping the nation's character, which is characterized by critical thinking, moderation, and solutions to the challenges of the times.

## **B. RESEARCH METHODS**

The most appropriate research approach to examine HOTS-based Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning evaluation is a qualitative approach with a case study or descriptive design because the research objective is to explore the meaning, practice, and context of evaluation implementation in depth in one or more secondary schools. Case studies allow researchers to explore real-world practices (PAI teachers, students, principals) and the institutional context that influences the design and implementation of evaluation instruments (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research location was selected in a representative secondary school (SMP/SMA/SMK), while the research subjects were selected purposively: the PAI teachers who developed/assessed the instruments, a sample of students who underwent the evaluation, and the principals as local policymakers. The main data collection techniques in this type of research typically combine classroom observations to record learning practices and evaluation implementation, in-depth interviews with teachers and students to understand perceptions and professional considerations, and documentation (e.g., questions, assessment rubrics, syllabi, exam scripts) to directly analyze the form of the evaluation instrument; this combination of techniques is commonly used in educational case studies because it provides rich triangulation evidence.

Data analysis in qualitative research such as this follows an interactive process: data reduction (sorting, summarizing, coding transcripts and field notes), data presentation (matrices, thematic summaries, diagrams), and conclusion drawing/verification, a model of analysis frequently referenced and applied in educational research (e.g., the Miles & Huberman version adapted/referenced in recent literature). To ensure the validity of the findings, triangulation (data sources and methods) and other steps such as member checking and audit trails were used where possible; triangulation helps strengthen the credibility, transferability, and consistency of the findings by comparing evidence from observations, interviews, and documents. These practices are supported by recent methodological literature and reviews of the use of NVivo/CAQDAS tools that emphasize the importance of the structure of reduction, display, drawing conclusions, and triangulation as validation strategies in educational case studies.

## C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 1. Key Findings

#### a. HOTS-Based PAI Evaluation Form

The results of the study show that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in secondary schools have begun to adopt forms of evaluation that are oriented towards *Higher Order Thinking Skills* (HOTS), although its implementation is not yet evenly distributed across all educational units. This evaluation emerged in response to the demands of the Independent Curriculum and the 21st-century educational paradigm that emphasizes critical, creative, and reflective thinking skills. HOTS-based Islamic Religious Education (PAI) evaluation seeks to assess students' ability to understand and apply Islamic values in complex social contexts, rather than simply memorizing religious texts or concepts. As emphasized by Purnawanto (2023), HOTS-based Islamic Religious Education learning can improve students' reasoning skills in connecting Islamic teachings with the realities of modern life.

The types of questions used by Islamic Religious Education teachers in HOTS-based evaluations include open-ended essay questions that require analysis and reflection. For example, students are asked to explain the relevance of the Quranic verse about trustworthiness to the phenomenon of corruption in society. This type of question model encourages students to interpret Islamic values contextually and critically. This aligns with the research findings of Sholeh et al. (2025), who found that analytical essay questions are more effective in measuring students' higher-order thinking skills than multiple-choice questions.

In addition, Islamic Religious Education teachers also develop case study-based questions based on contemporary religious issues, such as the ethics of social media use, interfaith tolerance, or integrity in the digital world. This form of evaluation is considered relevant because it encourages students to solve real-life problems using Islamic values. According to Rahma et al. (2024), the case study approach can develop students' critical thinking and argumentative skills, while strengthening their religious and social character.

Non-test evaluation instruments are also used as part of HOTS implementation, including Islamic value-based social projects, religious activity portfolios, and religious analysis presentations. Through projects and portfolios, teachers can authentically assess students' affective and psychomotor aspects. Suryatini et al. (2024) emphasized that *authentic assessment* Project-based learning is one indicator of the success of HOTS implementation because it is able to assess the thinking process and real actions of students in applying Islamic values.

Thus, HOTS-based Islamic Religious Education evaluation serves not only to measure learning outcomes but also as an instrument for character development and reflective thinking skills. This type of evaluation enables students to internalize Islamic teachings through analysis, discussion, and practical application in social settings. By expanding assessment methods toward authentic evaluation, Islamic Religious Education teachers play a crucial role in transforming the paradigm of religious learning toward a more contextual and adaptive approach to the challenges of the times.

## **b. Implementation of HOTS Evaluation in Islamic Education Learning**

HOTS evaluation is synergistically integrated with the Independent Curriculum, which emphasizes competency-based formative and summative assessments. Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers design the evaluation process to align with learning outcomes, encompassing the dimensions of knowledge, skills, and spiritual attitudes. Based on observations, teachers implement formative assessment through class discussions and value reflection, while summative assessment is conducted through projects and case analysis-based exams. Research by Nurhidayati and Laili (2023) shows that the integration of the Independent Curriculum and HOTS strengthens students' ability to connect religious knowledge with social issues.

The role of teachers in evaluation is key to the successful implementation of HOTS. Teachers act as facilitators, guiding students through the process of critical and reflective thinking regarding Islamic teachings. In practice, teachers are no longer the sole source of knowledge, but rather guides in exploring the meaning of Islam. Sholeh et al. (2025) found that teachers with high HOTS literacy were able to shift learning patterns from mere memorization to reasoning-based learning and religious problem-solving.

HOTS evaluation instruments were developed by considering the relationship between learning outcomes, indicators, and students' thinking levels. Each instrument was developed based on Bloom's revised Taxonomy at the analysis (C4), evaluation (C5), and creation (C6) levels. This design encourages students to analyze verses, evaluate social issues from an Islamic perspective, and create solutions based on religious values. According to Purnawanto (2023), this model is effective in developing integration between cognitive and affective aspects in Islamic Religious Education learning.

Evaluation is also carried out continuously and holistically through various techniques such as observation, group discussions, individual reflection, and collaborative projects. Continuous evaluation allows teachers to identify the development of students' thinking over time. Research by Suryatini et al. (2024) shows that HOTS-based continuous assessment can increase student engagement in learning and foster practical religious awareness.

However, some teachers still face obstacles in implementing HOTS-based evaluations, particularly related to limited time, resources, and the ability to design questions that align with higher-order thinking indicators. School principals and educational institution policies play a crucial role in providing support, both through teacher training and the provision of learning facilities. Arbani (2025) emphasized that institutional support is an external factor that significantly determines the success of HOTS implementation in secondary schools.

## **c. Obstacles and Solutions to the Implementation of HOTS Evaluation**

Research has found that the implementation of HOTS evaluation in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) subjects still faces various obstacles, both in terms of teachers, students, and supporting facilities. The main obstacle lies in teachers' unequal competence in understanding HOTS concepts and how to apply them in evaluations. Many teachers still focus on questions that measure memory and comprehension (C1–C3). Research by Rahma et al. (2024) confirms

that teachers' limited understanding of HOTS concepts is a significant obstacle to creating valid and contextual evaluation instruments.

Furthermore, students' low critical thinking skills also pose a challenge in implementing HOTS-based evaluations. Some students are still accustomed to traditional learning models that emphasize memorization and knowledge reproduction. Therefore, implementing HOTS evaluations requires a continuous pedagogical adaptation process. Suryatini et al. (2024) recommend that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers instill critical thinking habits through reflective discussion activities and in-depth verse analysis.

Limited learning facilities and resources are also a limiting factor. Some schools lack adequate access to digital technology or learning resources that support project-based and collaborative learning. This limits the variety of evaluation methods teachers can use. Arbani (2025) highlighted that a less conducive learning environment will limit teachers' creativity in designing authentic HOTS assessments.

To overcome these obstacles, several solution strategies can be implemented. First, intensive training for Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in developing HOTS instruments needs to be expanded and implemented on an ongoing basis. Second, the development of *HOTS question bank* Both nationally and locally, it can provide teachers with an alternative way to access relevant and applicable instrument examples. Third, schools need to provide policy support in the form of academic supervision and recognition for HOTS-based assessment innovations. Research by Ediyanto et al. (2025) shows that policy support and professional training can increase teacher motivation in implementing innovative evaluations.

The use of digital technology is a strategic solution for expanding the implementation of HOTS in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) classes. Teachers can utilize online learning platforms to conduct project-based evaluations, collaboration, and reflection. This not only enriches students' learning experiences but also strengthens the relevance of Islamic Religious Education to today's digital world. Therefore, the synergy between teacher competency, school policies, and learning technology is key to the successful implementation of HOTS-based evaluations in Islamic Religious Education (PAI).

## **2. Discussion**

### **a. The Relevance of HOTS Evaluation to the Goals of Islamic Education**

Evaluation based on *Higher Order Thinking Skills* (HOTS) is strongly relevant to the goals of Islamic education, namely to develop individuals with faith, noble character, and critical thinking in the face of changing times. Islamic education emphasizes not only cognitive aspects but also character and moral development based on the values of the Qur'an and Sunnah. According to Syafruddin (2021), HOTS-based evaluation helps students understand Islamic teachings reflectively and contextually so that these values can be implemented in a dynamic social life.

Furthermore, HOTS principles, which emphasize analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, enable students to gain a deeper understanding of religious texts. Thus, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) evaluation goes beyond memorizing verses or hadiths, but also hones critical thinking and problem-solving skills based on Islamic values.

According to Alim & Mutmainnah (2020), this kind of evaluative approach is important so that Islamic education does not become trapped in mere cognitive formalities, but rather becomes a means of forming ethical and spiritual awareness.

In the context of globalization and digital disruption, students are faced with various complex moral and social challenges. HOTS-based evaluations enable teachers to assess students' ability to interpret social phenomena from a humanistic and moderate Islamic perspective. This aligns with Azra's (2019) argument that 21st-century Islamic education must be oriented toward developing critical, social, and moral literacy.

Furthermore, HOTS evaluation plays a role in internalizing the principles *thought* And *contemplation* as taught in the Quran. Students are trained to think, analyze, and learn from the realities of life. According to Rasyid (2020), evaluation activities based on Islamic reflection, such as social case studies and thematic verse analysis, can build students' spiritual and social awareness in a balanced manner.

Thus, HOTS does not contradict the goals of Islamic education, but rather strengthens them. HOTS-based evaluation can be a means of realizing human beings. *ulul albab*, namely, those who think critically and have strong faith. The alignment between HOTS and Islamic values is a crucial foundation for building an education system that is relevant to the challenges of the digital era and globalization (Saepudin, 2022).

#### **b. The Role of Islamic Education Teachers as Agents of Learning Transformation**

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers play a strategic role as agents of transformation in the implementation of HOTS-based evaluations. Teachers serve not only as transmitters of material but also as designers of learning processes that challenge students' higher-order thinking skills. According to Marzuki (2021), teachers must be able to design assessments that stimulate analytical, evaluative, and creative skills, rather than simply testing memorization.

Teachers' pedagogical competence is crucial to the successful implementation of HOTS. Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers must understand the revised Bloom's Taxonomy and integrate it with the spiritual goals of Islamic education. This requires ongoing training and mentoring.

Research by Mulyadi et al. (2022) shows that teachers who receive HOTS training are able to produce more authentic evaluation instruments and assess students' thinking processes more comprehensively.

Beyond technical skills, teachers also play a role in fostering a culture of critical and dialogical thinking in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) classrooms. Reflective discussions, value debates, and Islamic-influenced analyses of social phenomena are effective approaches to honing students' higher-order thinking skills (Rohman & Arif, 2020). In this regard, teachers serve as both facilitators and ethical models for students.

HOTS-based learning transformation demands a change in the teacher's paradigm from *teacher-centered* going to *student-centered learning*. Teachers become guides in the exploration of meaning and values, not simply instructors of dogma. According to Anwar

(2023), this approach helps students develop progressive Islamic reasoning and adapt to social change.

Thus, Islamic Religious Education teachers are not only technical practitioners of evaluation, but also moral and intellectual agents in developing a generation of critical thinkers with noble character. The success of HOTS evaluations depends heavily on the extent to which teachers are able to integrate Islamic values into every aspect of assessment and learning.

### **c. Implementation of HOTS in the Context of the Independent Curriculum**

The application of HOTS evaluation in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) has become increasingly relevant with the advent of the Independent Curriculum, which emphasizes freedom of innovation and competency-based learning. This curriculum encourages authentic assessments that assess not only learning outcomes but also thinking processes and social skills. According to Suharto (2022), this approach provides opportunities for Islamic Religious Education teachers to design evaluations that are more contextual to students' lives.

The implementation of HOTS in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) aligns with the Pancasila Student Profile, which demands critical thinking, creativity, and noble character. Through thematic religious projects and social reflections, students are challenged to interpret Islamic values within the context of societal diversity. Such assessments develop higher-order thinking skills while strengthening national character and religiosity (Hidayat & Rahmawati, 2021).

Furthermore, project and portfolio assessments are effective tools for assessing students' spiritual and social competencies. Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers can assess the extent to which Islamic values are implemented in real-life situations. Research by Fauziah & Nasution (2020) shows that project-based assessments can increase students' social empathy and religious awareness.

The Independent Curriculum also provides a reflective space for students to assess themselves and their peers. This mechanism aligns with Islamic evaluation principles, which emphasize introspection (*reflection*) as part of character formation. Thus, HOTS becomes a medium for actualizing Islamic values through a holistic learning process.

### **d. Strategy for Strengthening HOTS Implementation in Islamic Education**

To strengthen the implementation of HOTS in PAI evaluation, a collaborative and sustainable strategy is needed. One of these is the formation of *community of practice* among Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers to share experiences and best practices. According to Fitria et al. (2021), this type of collaboration can improve teachers' ability to design innovative assessments that are relevant to the local context.

Furthermore, collaboration between teachers, supervisors, and academics needs to be strengthened in the development of HOTS instruments. This synergy will enrich the theoretical and practical dimensions of evaluation. The government is also expected to provide support in the form of training modules and ongoing supervision (Kusumawati, 2022).

Utilizing digital technology is an effective strategy to expand the reach and efficiency of assessment. E-learning platforms can be used to manage project assessments, reflections, and online discussions, fostering students' critical thinking (Rahman, 2021). With digital

support, HOTS evaluation in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) can be more transparent, adaptive, and engaging for Generation Z students.

#### **e. Theoretical and Practical Implications**

Theoretically, the results of this study reinforce the view that HOTS can be integrated into values-based subjects such as Islamic Religious Education (PAI). HOTS is relevant not only in science or mathematics, but also in moral and spiritual learning that requires reflection and argumentation about values.

According to Marzuki & Santosa (2020), this approach enriches the theory of Islamic education evaluation which has tended to be normative.

In practice, the application of HOTS evaluation provides concrete guidance for teachers and schools in improving assessment quality. Project-based, portfolio-based, and case study-based evaluation models can serve as examples of school policies for comprehensively assessing the success of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning. With policy support and training, these models can be implemented sustainably at various levels of education.

Finally, HOTS-based evaluation can be an integrative Islamic assessment model that assesses three main domains of education: *knowledge, faith, and good deeds*. Thus, evaluation no longer only measures academic intelligence, but also spiritual and social intelligence, in accordance with the comprehensive vision of Islamic education (Zainuddin, 2021).

### **D. CONCLUSION**

Based on the results of the research and discussion, it can be concluded that the application of evaluation based on *Higher Order Thinking Skills* (HOTS) in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning is strongly relevant to the goals of Islamic education, namely to develop students who think critically, have noble morals, and are adaptive to current developments. The evaluation methods used include analytical essay questions, religious case studies, analysis of Quranic and Hadith texts, as well as non-test instruments such as projects, portfolios, and presentations that focus on authentic assessment.

HOTS evaluation in secondary schools has been integrated with the Independent Curriculum, which emphasizes competency- and character-based learning. Teachers play a crucial role as facilitators in designing contextual assessments, despite challenges related to competency and supporting resources. Implementation is being strengthened through teacher training, the development of HOTS question banks, collaboration between educators, and the use of digital technology in assessments.

Theoretically, this research strengthens the conceptual foundation that HOTS can be adapted in values-based learning such as Islamic Religious Education (PAI). Practically, it contributes to the development of an integrative evaluation model that assesses aspects of knowledge, faith, and good deeds. Thus, HOTS-based evaluation in PAI not only improves higher-order thinking skills but also strengthens students' Islamic character development in accordance with the vision of holistic Islamic education.

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