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Transformation of Islamic Education Learning Models Through a Constructivist Approach

Mohammad Syaifuddin¹, Moh. Muslih²,
 Arif Chasanul Muna³, Nur Khikmah⁴, Arditya Prayogi⁵

^{1,2,3,5} UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan, Indonesia.

⁴ SMPN 1 Pekalongan City, Indonesia.

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Corresponding Author:
 Arditya Prayogi, UIN Pekalongan,
 Email:
arditya.prayogi@uingusdur.ac.id

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Abstract

This study describes the transformation of the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning model through a constructivist approach at SMP Negeri 1 Pekalongan. The study departs from the persistence of lecture-oriented, memorization-based PAI learning, which often limits students' opportunities to construct meaning, discuss religious values, and connect Islamic teachings to daily life as Gen Alpha learners. A qualitative case study design was used, with two PAI teachers as the only informants, purposively selected because they directly design and implement PAI learning. Empirical data were enriched through in-depth interviews with the two teachers, classroom observations, and documentation of teaching modules, learning activities, and student learning products. The data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model through data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing, while validity was strengthened through technique triangulation, member checking, and peer discussion. The findings show three main forms of transformation: a gradual shift from teacher-centered explanations to guided, student-centered learning; the use of cooperative, project-based, and problem-based learning, as well as inquiry, in selected PAI materials; and stronger student participation, collaboration, and reflective understanding of Islamic values. The implementation remains constrained by limited time, heterogeneous student readiness, classroom management demands, and the need for more consistent reflective assessment. This study confirms that constructivism is relevant for contextual and value-oriented PAI learning when guided by clear Islamic educational objectives.

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Introduction

Islamic Religious Education (abbreviated in Bahasa as PAI) in junior high school has a strategic role in shaping students' faith, morals, and social conduct during the transition from childhood to adolescence. At this level, students need more than the transfer of religious information; they need learning experiences that help them interpret Islamic teachings and relate them to personal, social, and digital realities. However, PAI learning is still frequently dominated by lectures, verbal explanations, and memorization-based environments (Ilmaknun et al., 2026). These practices remain useful for building basic religious literacy, but they provide limited space for students to

question, discuss, collaborate, and internalize Islamic values through meaningful experience. This limitation becomes more visible among Gen Alpha students, who are accustomed to interactive, visual, and problem-oriented learning environments (Ilqam and Nursikin, 2024; Taufiqurrahman et al., 2025).

The constructivist paradigm offers a relevant orientation for addressing this problem because it views knowledge as actively constructed by learners through interaction, reflection, and experience. In constructivist learning, teachers do not simply transmit concepts, but design situations that enable students to connect new knowledge with prior understanding and real-life contexts (Astuti et al., 2024; Suparlan, 2019). In PAI, this orientation is important because Islamic values are not only to be memorized but also understood, appreciated, and practiced through dialogue, moral reasoning, collaborative problem-solving, religious projects, and reflection on daily conduct.

Several previous studies have discussed the need to transform PAI learning. Adisel et al. (2022) emphasizing the challenges faced by PAI teachers in responding to globalization and digital change. Ilqam and Nursikin (2024) examined the redesign of PAI learning in the digital era and Harefa et al. (2022) explained the teacher's role as facilitator and catalyst in constructivist learning. Other studies have focused on specific models, such as project-based learning (Pratami, 2024; Istiyantri Sistriyanti, Siti Marpuah, 2025), problem-based learning (Astutik, 2023), and the development of 21st-century skills in daily learning (Pratiwi, 2024). Rasmini (2022) also showed that a gap often appears between the ideal PAI curriculum and its implementation in classrooms.

Although these studies are valuable, they have not sufficiently explained how constructivist principles are empirically enacted in PAI classrooms at the public junior high school level from the perspective of teachers who directly design and implement learning. Previous discussions tend to emphasize theoretical relevance, curriculum demands, or specific learning models, but offer limited explanation of how PAI teachers plan constructivist activities, manage classroom interactions, respond to students' varying abilities, and evaluate the internalization of Islamic values in daily learning. The novelty of this study lies in its case-based analysis of the transformation of PAI learning at Sekolah Menengah Pertama (SMP) Negeri 1 Pekalongan, linking in-depth teacher interview data, classroom observations, learning documents, and implementation constraints within a single empirical framework.

SMP Negeri 1 Pekalongan was selected because it represents a public junior high school context in which PAI teachers are required to adapt religious learning to meet the needs of students familiar with digital culture and diverse learning needs. Preliminary observation indicated that teachers had begun to combine explanation with discussion, group work, contextual cases, and reflective assignments. However, these practices were not consistently implemented due to limited class time, differences in student readiness, and the need for stronger pedagogical design. This context makes the school relevant for examining how constructivist learning is negotiated in actual PAI classroom practice.

Based on this background, this study aims to describe the transformation of the PAI learning model through a constructivist approach at SMP Negeri 1 Pekalongan. The study is guided by three questions: (1) How is the transformation of PAI learning from teacher-centered to student-centered learning practiced in the classroom? (2) What forms of constructivist learning models are applied by PAI teachers? and (3) What are the implications and limitations of this transformation for student engagement and the internalization of Islamic values? Theoretically, this study contributes to the discussion of constructivist pedagogy in Islamic education. In practice, it

provides input for PAI teachers and schools to design contextual, participatory, and value-oriented religious learning.

Method

This research used a qualitative approach with a case study method to understand in depth how the transformation of PAI learning through a constructivist approach was implemented in a real school context (Rosyada, 2020; Anggito & Setiawan, 2018). The study was conducted at SMP Negeri 1 Pekalongan, a public junior high school in Pekalongan that provides a relevant setting for observing the adaptation of PAI learning to the needs of Gen Alpha students. The informants were limited to two PAI teachers, coded as GP1 and GP2, who were selected purposively because both directly planned, implemented, and evaluated PAI learning. No additional human informants were used; empirical enrichment was obtained by deepening the interviews with both teachers and by cross-checking their statements with classroom observations and learning documents. The data of the research informants are presented in the following table.

Table 1. Research Informants

Code	Role of Informant	Technique	Basis of Selection	Brief Information
GP1	PAI teacher 1	In-depth interview	Directly plans and implements PAI learning at SMP Negeri 1 Pekalongan	Provides data on discussion-based, cooperative, and problem-oriented learning practices.
GP2	PAI teacher 2	In-depth interview	Directly plans and implements PAI learning at SMP Negeri 1 Pekalongan	Provides data on project-based, inquiry, reflective, and assessment-oriented PAI practices.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. The in-depth interviews with GP1 and GP2 explored their understanding of constructivist learning, lesson planning, and reasons for using discussion, projects, problem-based tasks, and inquiry, as well as classroom management strategies, assessment practices, and perceived changes in student participation. Observation focused on classroom interaction, teacher stimulus questions, student group activity, teacher scaffolding, and closing reflection activities. Documentation was used to examine teaching modules, lesson plans, assignment sheets, learning media, student learning products, and teacher notes to review the consistency between interview statements and classroom practice.

The data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model, consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing (Umrati and Wijaya, 2024). Data condensation was carried out by coding interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents into themes, including teacher-centered learning problems, student-centered strategies, constructivist models, student participation, value internalization, and implementation constraints. The data were then displayed in narrative descriptions, informant matrices, and tables of field evidence. Conclusions were drawn inductively by comparing patterns from the two teacher interviews with observation and documentation. Data validity was strengthened through technique triangulation, member

checking with GP1 and GP2, and peer discussion to ensure that the interpretation remained grounded in the empirical data.

This study was conducted in accordance with the principles of research ethics, including voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for participants' rights. Prior to data collection, the researcher informed all participants about the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and the intended use of the data. The informants participated voluntarily and were assured that their identities would remain confidential through the use of codes (GP1 and GP2). All interview, observation, and documentation data were used solely for academic purposes and were analyzed without causing harm or disadvantage to any participant or institution.

Findings

This section presents the study's findings from in-depth interviews with key informants, classroom observations, and document analysis. The data are systematically organized into tables to demonstrate the interconnections between data sources, empirical evidence, and analytical interpretations that underpin the discussion of the research findings. The data are presented in the following tables.

Table 2. Matrix of Empirical Findings

Focus	Empirical Finding at SMP Negeri 1 Pekalongan	Data Source	Analytical Meaning
Initial learning condition	PAI learning had not fully abandoned short explanation and memorization, but both teachers had begun to open lessons with contextual questions and student experiences.	GP1, GP2, observation, teaching modules	Transformation occurred gradually through guided constructivism, not through total rejection of teacher explanation.
Constructivist strategies	Teachers used cooperative discussion, short projects, problem-based cases, inquiry questions, and reflective closing activities in selected PAI materials.	GP1, GP2, observation, assignment documents	Constructivism was adapted as a practical classroom strategy adjusted to topic, time, and student readiness.
Student participation	Both teachers reported and observation confirmed that students were more active when learning began with real cases, group tasks, and opportunities to present opinions.	GP1, GP2, observation notes	Participation improved when students were invited to construct meaning before receiving teacher clarification.
Implementation constraints	Limited lesson time, heterogeneous readiness, passive students, unfocused discussion, and difficulty assessing reflection constrained consistent implementation.	GP1, GP2, observation, teacher notes	Constructivist PAI requires careful scaffolding, realistic task design, and clearer reflective assessment.

Table 3. Summary of In-depth Interview Evidence

Theme	Brief Quotation/Empirical Evidence	Source
Need for learning transformation	"If students only listen, some of them quickly lose focus. I usually begin with a question from their daily life so they can connect the material with their own experience."	GP1
Guided student activity	"Students can discuss first, but at the end I still have to guide the conclusion so the Islamic value is not misunderstood."	GP1
Project and reflection	"For material on social care and worship values, I ask students to design a small activity, discuss it, and write what Islamic value they learned from it."	GP2
Implementation limitation	"The difficulty is time. Discussion and reflection take longer, and not all students are ready to be active without step-by-step guidance."	GP2
Observation note	The teacher opened the lesson with a contextual problem, divided students into groups, gave guiding questions, asked groups to present responses, and closed the lesson with reflection on Islamic values.	Observation

Gradual Transformation from Explanation to Guided Student-Centered Learning

The findings show that the transformation of PAI learning at SMP Negeri 1 Pekalongan did not occur through a sudden abandonment of conventional teaching, but rather through a gradual reorientation of classroom practice. Both PAI teachers still used short explanations to introduce basic concepts, verses, hadith, or doctrinal principles. However, the explanation was no longer positioned as the whole learning process. It was used as an initial scaffold before students were invited to discuss, analyze cases, work in groups, ask questions, and formulate reflective conclusions. This pattern shows that the teachers interpreted constructivism as guided meaning-making rather than complete student autonomy.

The in-depth interviews reveal that both teachers considered guidance important because PAI deals with religious values that require careful clarification. GP1 emphasized that students should be allowed to express their understanding first, but the teacher must still guide the final meaning to ensure the lesson remains consistent with Islamic principles. This finding is important because it shows the distinctive character of constructivist PAI. Student-centered learning does not mean leaving students without direction; rather, it requires teachers to create space for exploration while maintaining normative, ethical, and spiritual orientation.

Classroom observation strengthened this pattern. In one observed lesson, the teacher began with a contextual problem related to student behavior, asked students to discuss it in groups, and only afterward connected their responses with Islamic values. The learning process, therefore, moved from experience to concept, and from student opinion to teacher-guided religious interpretation. This structure made the lesson more dialogic without eliminating the teacher's role as a value clarifier.

Constructivist Models Applied in PAI Learning

The constructivist approach was implemented through several models rather than one fixed strategy. Cooperative learning appeared in small-group discussions, peer explanations, and group presentations. Project-based learning was used in simple religious and social tasks, such as planning class-based social care activities, making reflective posters, or preparing short campaigns on Islamic

manners in digital communication. Problem-based learning appeared when teachers presented cases related to bullying, honesty, worship discipline, misuse of social media, or respect for others. Inquiry was used when students were guided to ask questions, compare examples, and infer the value contained in a topic.

The use of these models was selective. The two teachers did not apply cooperative learning, PjBL, PBL, and inquiry in every meeting because each topic had different characteristics and because of limited lesson time. Instead, the teachers chose the model based on the depth of the material, students' readiness, and the possibility of connecting the topic with daily experience. This indicates that the transformation of the learning model was not mechanical. It required pedagogical judgment, especially in deciding when students needed exploration and when they needed direct explanation.

The documents examined, particularly teaching modules and assignment sheets, show that constructivist elements were evident in the formulation of activity steps, including apperception through contextual questions, group work, presentation, and reflection. However, some documents still emphasized cognitive indicators more strongly than affective and reflective indicators. This gap suggests that teachers had begun to transform learning activities, but assessment design still needed further development to more explicitly capture the internalization of Islamic values.

Student Participation and Internalization of Islamic Values

Both teachers stated that students tended to participate more actively when PAI learning began with cases close to their lives. GP2 explained that students found it easier to respond to material on social care, worship discipline, or digital ethics when the lesson was connected with situations they had encountered. Observation also showed that group-based tasks encouraged students to speak, divide roles, and present conclusions. This indicates that constructivist learning strengthened participation by giving students an entry point from experience before they moved to religious concepts.

Nevertheless, the increase in participation should not be interpreted as automatic evidence of deep value internalization. The interviews show that teachers still needed to ask reflective questions at the end of the lesson, such as what Islamic value had been learned, how it could be practiced, and what behavior should be changed. This reflective stage was crucial because it moved learning from activity to meaning. Without reflection, discussion or projects could become merely procedural. Therefore, the internalization of Islamic values depended on the teacher's ability to connect students' activities to moral and spiritual interpretations.

The findings also indicate that student participation was uneven. Some students were active in discussion, while others remained passive and waited for direction. This situation required scaffolding, clearer task distribution, and guiding questions. In this sense, constructivist PAI learning at SMP Negeri 1 Pekalongan was effective when the teacher balanced student freedom with structured guidance. This balance became the key to making learning both active and value oriented.

Constraints in Implementing Constructivist PAI Learning

The implementation of constructivist PAI learning still faced practical constraints. First, limited lesson time made it difficult for teachers to complete all stages of exploration, discussion, presentation, clarification, and reflection. Second, students had heterogeneous readiness. Some

students were able to analyze cases independently, while others needed repeated explanation and more concrete examples. Third, group discussion sometimes became unfocused when roles and time limits were not clearly defined. Fourth, reflective assessment remained a challenge because teachers were more accustomed to assessing written answers than students' reasoning, collaboration, and value practice.

These constraints show that constructivism cannot be reduced to the use of active-learning techniques. It requires a learning ecology that includes well-designed materials, clear classroom procedures, meaningful questions, teacher facilitation, and assessment instruments that value reflection. In the context of SMP Negeri 1 Pekalongan, the success of constructivist PAI learning depended on the teacher's ability to transform classroom activity into religious meaning. Thus, the central issue was not only whether students were active, but whether their activity led to a deeper understanding and practice of Islamic values.

Teacher Scaffolding and Reflective Assessment

A further empirical meaning that emerged from the in-depth interviews is the importance of teacher scaffolding. GP1 and GP2 did not understand constructivism as a method that simply asks students to work independently. Instead, both teachers described the need to prepare guiding questions, define group roles, provide examples, and return to the core religious message at the end of the activity. This finding indicates that the transformation of PAI learning depends strongly on the teacher's ability to design learning stages. Without scaffolding, students may be active verbally but fail to reach a deeper understanding of the Islamic value being studied.

The teachers also described reflection as a decisive stage in constructivist PAI learning. GP2 explained that after discussions or project activities, students were asked to write short reflective notes on the value they learned and how it could be applied in school or family life. This stage is analytically important because it functions as a bridge between learning activity and character formation. In other words, reflection prevents constructivist activities from becoming merely procedural or technical. It helps students move from performing a task to interpreting its meaning within an Islamic moral framework.

Documentation of teaching modules shows that reflective elements had begun to appear but were not yet consistently formulated as assessment indicators. Some modules still emphasized task completion, presentation, or written answers, while the criteria for evaluating reflection, moral reasoning, and value practice were not always clear. This finding suggests that learning transformation had progressed more quickly at the level of classroom activity than at the level of assessment design. Therefore, a constructivist transformation of PAI should include not only learning models, but also assessment instruments capable of capturing understanding, reasoning, attitude, and planned moral action.

From a reflective perspective, this condition shows that constructivist PAI learning requires a careful balance between freedom and formation. Students need space to express ideas, but religious education also requires direction so that freedom of expression leads to ethical awareness rather than relativistic interpretation. The two teachers managed this balance by combining student exploration with teacher clarification. This pattern makes the classroom more participatory while still protecting PAI's identity as a subject that guides faith, worship, morality, and social responsibility.

Discussion

The findings strengthen previous studies that call for the transformation of PAI learning in response to digital culture and 21st-century education (Ilqam and Nursikin, 2024; Pratiwi, 2024). However, this study provides a more empirical and reflective contribution by showing that transformation in PAI classrooms is negotiated rather than absolute. The two teachers did not reject explanation, memorization, or teacher guidance; instead, they repositioned them within a broader learning sequence that included experience, dialogue, problem solving, and reflection. This finding refines the assumption that constructivism always requires minimal teacher intervention. In PAI, teacher intervention remains necessary because learning is directed not only toward conceptual understanding but also toward the formation of religious meaning.

The study is also consistent with Harefa et al. (2022) those who describe the teacher as a facilitator and catalyst. Yet, the field data show that PAI teachers also act as value clarifiers. This role is especially important because students may form different interpretations of moral problems, yet those interpretations must still be grounded in Islamic teachings. Constructivism in PAI, therefore, has a dual orientation that opens space for students to build understanding while ensuring that the constructed meaning remains aligned with Islamic educational objectives. This dual orientation distinguishes constructivist PAI from constructivism in purely cognitive subjects.

Compared with studies on project and problem-based learning (Astutik, 2023; Pratami, 2024; Sistriyanti et al., 2025), this study shows that the effectiveness of these models depends on the authenticity of tasks and the strength of reflection. A project becomes meaningful not because students produce a product, but because they understand the Islamic value represented in the process. Likewise, a problem-based discussion becomes relevant when the problem is close to students' lives and is followed by teacher-guided interpretation. Therefore, the transformation of PAI learning should not stop at naming learning models, but must ensure coherence among objectives, activities, assessment, and value internalization.

Reflectively, the case of SMP Negeri 1 Pekalongan demonstrates that constructivism is promising but not without limits. Limited time, different student abilities, and the difficulty of measuring value internalization indicate that constructivist PAI requires institutional and pedagogical support. Teachers need collaborative lesson planning, examples of reflective assessment instruments, and practice in managing active classes. Without these supports, constructivist learning may remain episodic and dependent on individual teacher initiative. Thus, the transformation of PAI learning should be understood as a sustained pedagogical process, not merely a change of classroom technique (Susmiyati et al., 2023).

The findings also offer a critical note on the relationship between constructivism and Islamic educational authority. In some pedagogical discussions, student-centered learning is sometimes interpreted as reducing the teacher's authority. The case in this study shows a different pattern. Teacher authority does not disappear; it changes form. The teacher is no longer the sole speaker, but remains authoritative as the designer of learning, the guardian of religious meaning, and the evaluator of reflective understanding. This shift is important because PAI learning needs both student agency and theological-moral direction (Hermawan et al., 2026).

Another analytical implication concerns the nature of learning outcomes. The transformation observed in this study cannot be measured solely by student activity or the variety of learning models used. A class can be active but still superficial if students are not guided to interpret the religious significance of their activity. Conversely, a short teacher explanation can still be meaningful when it functions as scaffolding for deeper reflection. Therefore, the quality of

constructivist PAI should be assessed through the coherence between learning objectives, student experience, teacher facilitation, and evidence of value internalization.

The case also indicates that classroom innovation is closely connected with teacher professional capacity. Because the informants were only two PAI teachers, the findings do not claim to represent all junior high schools. However, the depth of the interviews reveals a realistic picture of how teachers negotiate ideals and constraints. They try to make learning active and contextual, but they also face time pressure, uneven student readiness, and limitations in assessment instruments. This tension is precisely where the study's scholarly contribution lies: it presents constructivism as a practical negotiation in real PAI classrooms (Khasanah et al., 2026; Siregar et al., 2025).

This finding also has implications for how schools support PAI teachers. Constructivist learning will be difficult to sustain if it is treated only as an individual teacher initiative. Teachers need institutional space to discuss teaching modules, evaluate classroom experiences, and design reflective assessment tools together. In the context of SMP Negeri 1 Pekalongan, the two teachers showed willingness to innovate, but the continuity of innovation depends on whether the school culture allows experimentation, peer reflection, and improvement of learning devices. Thus, transformation is both a pedagogical and institutional agenda (Purwanto et al., 2023; Siregar et al., 2025).

Analytically, the empirical data suggest that constructivism in PAI should be read through the concept of contextual internalization. Students construct understanding from concrete experiences, but the meaning of those experiences must be interpreted through Islamic values. This process differs from a purely cognitive construction of knowledge because it involves moral orientation, affective awareness, and behavioral implication. Therefore, the success of constructivist PAI is evident not only in how students answer questions but also in how they are encouraged to reflect on worship, manners, responsibility, and social relations.

The study also shows that limitations are not merely technical obstacles. Time constraints, passive students, and uneven readiness reveal the complexity of changing classroom culture. Students who are accustomed to listening may need time to become confident in discussion and inquiry. Teachers accustomed to conventional assessment may also need time to develop rubrics for reflection and value practice. This means that constructivist transformation should be implemented gradually through habituation rather than imposed suddenly as a complete methodological shift (Prihatin & Hamami, 2022; Susmiyati et al., 2023).

In this sense, the contribution of the study is not the claim that constructivism is always superior to other approaches, but the argument that constructivism can make PAI more meaningful when applied proportionally. Lectures, memorization, discussion, projects, and reflection each have a place when they are arranged within a coherent learning design. The important point is that students should not remain passive recipients of religious information; they should be guided to understand, question, connect, and practice Islamic values in ways that are relevant to their lived realities.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that constructivist transformation in PAI learning is most effective when empirical classroom activity is guided by teacher facilitation, reflective questioning, and clear Islamic educational objectives. The study, therefore, positions constructivism not as a replacement for the teacher's religious authority but as a pedagogical framework that helps students construct, test, and internalize Islamic values through meaningful learning experiences.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the transformation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning through a constructivist approach at SMP Negeri 1 Pekalongan is reflected in a gradual shift from teacher-centered explanation toward guided student-centered, contextual, and reflective learning. This transformation is evident in the use of cooperative discussions, project-based tasks, problem-based cases, inquiry questions, and reflective closing activities. Direct explanation is not eliminated but is repositioned as scaffolding that helps students connect experience to Islamic concepts.

The constructivist approach strengthens student participation, collaboration, critical thinking, and the internalization of Islamic values when teachers link classroom activities to religious meaning. However, its implementation still faces limitations related to time allocation, heterogeneous student readiness, classroom management, and reflective assessment. Therefore, constructivist PAI learning should be developed as guided constructivism: students are given space to construct meaning, while teachers continue to provide direction, clarification, and value-based reflection.

Theoretically, this study enriches the discussion of constructivism in Islamic education by showing how learning transformation operates in an empirical public junior high school context with PAI teachers as central informants. In practice, it recommends that schools strengthen teacher training, collaborative lesson design, and assessment instruments that capture not only knowledge mastery but also reflection and value-based practice. Future studies may compare several schools or use mixed methods to examine the broader impact of constructivist PAI learning on students' religious character.

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