

Developing a Transformative Religious Curriculum A Case Study of Adolescents' Cognitive Dissonance and Faith Resilience

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ABSTRACT

Rapid social change has intensified cognitive tension among Indonesian Muslim adolescents when doctrinal Islamic Religious Education (IRE) fails to align with their lived realities. This study explores how adolescents experience and make meaning of such dissonance and how faith resilience emerges within the IRE context. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), three public high school students were selected through purposive criterion sampling. Data were generated through 45 – 60 minutes semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically with NVivo, guided by religious orientation theory, stages of faith, religious coping theory, and cognitive dissonance theory. Findings show that students face significant tension between normative teachings and modern social realities. Those with intrinsic or reflective faith orientations employed active religious coping and reinterpretation of teachings, leading to stronger spiritual resilience. In contrast, extrinsically oriented students tend to suppress doubts, resulting in superficial learning. The study's small sample and single-site context limits transferability but underlines the need for more dialogical and student-centered IRE,

Keywords: *Critical Thinking, IRE Curriculum, Reflective, transformative learning*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Islamic education landscape is undergoing profound transformation under globalization and social change. As Saepudin (2022) observes, the rapid expansion of digital technologies and global connectivity has unleashed secular and materialist currents that often conflict with traditional religious teaching (Saepudin, 2022). Sitti & Rosyalita (2025) similarly note that digitalization and shifting sociocultural norms "Threaten to eradicate the distinctiveness of Islamic pedagogical systems," compelling educators to modernize curricula while preserving core values (Sitti & Rosyalita, 2025). In a globalized society that increasingly prioritizes secular, skill-based learning, Islamic institutions face the dual challenge of upholding their spiritual heritage and remaining relevant. Indeed, researchers warn that if Islamic schooling does not address issues like digital literacy, pluralism, and socioeconomic inequality, it risks marginalization, meanwhile the rising specter of extremism and identity crises among Muslim youth underscores the need for education that fosters a balanced contextually grounded religious understanding.

The pressure is amplified in multicultural context. One of the research describes Western societies, where schools must teach students to navigate heterogeneity and ambivalence (Yagdi, 2025). Yet such societies have also witnessed political narratives

that link "Muslim" with "terrorist" in public discourse (Rahmat, 2022), adding stigma and confusion for young Muslims. In this post-secular milieu, Muslim adolescents regularly encounter conflicting messages. Modern mass media and pluralistic peer environments expose them to diverse worldviews, so that inherited religious norms may clash with the realities of their daily lives, for example secular social norms and alternative moral frameworks) (Chaerodin & Asdiqoh, 2023). This dynamic often places adolescents in a state of cognitive dissonance, tensions between childhood religious inculcation and contemporary experience, prompting many to critically scrutinize and sometimes question their faith.

Recent studies confirm that traditional one-way models of religious socialization are in flux. Babacan (2025) argues that today's youth enjoy greater autonomy and access to information than previous generations, consequently, received religion is frequently brought under critical scrutiny (Babacan, 2025). Many young believers, having been raised under strict conservative norms, later encounter pluralistic and secular influences that lead them to re-evaluate those teachings, sometimes resulting in periods of doubt or even disaffiliation (Beider, 2023). In sum, globalization has produced both challenges and opportunities, while Muslim youth can draw inspiration from a global ummah, they almost have to negotiate the conflicting demands of modern life.

In response to these trends, Islamic educators have begun calling for pedagogical reforms. Rather than rote, teacher-centered instruction, scholars emphasize student-centered and dialogical approaches that actively engage learners. Contemporary educational theories such as self-determination theory hold that student autonomy, relatedness, and competence foster intrinsic motivation. The previous research report that "Innovative and student-centered methods that encourage active participation, reflective thinking, and contextual relevance" significantly improve Muslim students' motivation and learning (Wahyuni et al., 2024) In particular, dialogical pedagogy which emphasizes mutual inquiry, perspective-sharing, and linking religious concepts to real-life context is seen as a way to revitalize Islamic studies. Tambak et al. (2025) highlight that deep, participatory dialogue resonates with the Islamic tradition of *al-hiwar* (constructive debate) and can both sustain students' faith and enhance moral reasoning (Tambak et al., 2025) . By drawing students into discussion and personal reflection, these methods aim to make religious education more meaningful and resilient to secular pressures.

Taken together, the literature suggests that Islamic religious education must adapt to the digital and pluralistic age. Educational frameworks are needed that integrate spiritual values with scientific literacy, that encourage critical engagement, and that support young people in internalizing their beliefs. In light of this background, the present study investigates how early religious socialization, encounters with doubt,

and coping strategies influence adolescents' faith retention. We analyze the phenomenological experiences of Muslim youth to identify which factors promote enduring commitment to Islam, thereby offering insight into pedagogies for nurturing resilient faith in an era of social change.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This study uses an interpretive phenomenological analysis approach to explore the subjective experiences of Muslim adolescents facing cognitive dissonance when religious teachings are perceived as inconsistent with the realities of their lives (Smith et al., 2009). Interpretative phenomenology was chosen because it allows researchers to deeply access the participants' inner meaning-making processes, religious conflicts, and reflective dynamics. This approach aligns with the research objective, which focuses on the essence of personal experience, rather than on evaluating broader systems or institutional contexts.

2.2 Participants of the Study

The research was conducted at a public high school in Indonesia. Participants were selected using purposive criterion sampling, with the following criteria: (1) Muslim; (2) aged 16-18 years; (3) experienced value conflicts and dialectics regarding religious teachings. The small number of participants is not a methodological limitation, because interpretative phenomenological analysis emphasizes in-depth analysis of individuals, not numerical representativeness. In the interpretive phenomenological tradition, 3-5 participants are considered ideal for producing a range of experiential accounts that can be analyzed in depth.

2.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through 50 – 60 minutes in-depth semi-structured interviews. The interviews focused on students' internal experiences, including the conflict between childhood religious experiences and modern life, feelings of dissonance, personal reflection, religious coping strategies, and changes in religious orientation. All interviews were audiotaped with the participants' permission and later transcribed verbatim.

2.4 Data Analysis Techniques

The analysis follows the steps of *interpretative phenomenological analysis*: (1) Familiarization, namely reading the transcript repeatedly to understand the nuances of the experience; (2) Initial noting, making detailed notes related to emotional, linguistic, and conceptual statements; (3) Development of emergent themes, namely identifying patterns of meaning, subjective experiences, and moments of dissonance; (4)

Identification of superordinate themes, connecting initial themes into a broader structure of meaning; (5) Integration between cases, namely identifying similarities and differences in the experiences of the three participants (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

The interpretation process is supported by four theoretical frameworks: (1) Religious Orientation Theory helps categorize participants' religious motivations; (2) Stages of Faith Theory is used to assess the development of faith and changes in adolescents' spiritual orientation; (3) Religious Coping Theory is used to understand the psychological tension that arises when religious teachings are perceived as contradictory to real-life experiences; and (4) Cognitive Dissonance Theory.

2.5 Data Validity

Several strategies were implemented to ensure the credibility of the research, including: (1) Member checking, where participants reviewed a summary of the findings to ensure accuracy of meaning; (2) Triangulation, using three sources, namely interview transcripts, researcher reflection notes, and the dynamics of participant emotions that appeared during the interview; (3) Reflexive journaling, where researchers noted biases, self-positions, and personal assumptions that could influence interpretation; (4) Audit trail, where the entire coding and analysis process was documented using NVivo so that it could be traced back.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

Researchers mapped the findings using NVivo software, edition 14. All three informants stated that they experienced cognitive dissonance between what they had learned about religious values during their childhood and the realities of their daily lives. This was experienced as they became teenagers. Based on Figure 1, the person who experienced the most cognitive dissonance was informant 1 (hereinafter referred to as N1). N1 began comparing the concept of belief in God between Islam and other religions, due to a lack of understanding of the reasons behind her religious commands, one of which was related to the concept of the hijab. N1 felt that the hijab had no impact on women's safety, as cases of harassment against women who wore covering clothing were often encountered. Another concept that made N1 anxious was the conflict between the need for affection from the opposite sex during adolescence and the prohibition on dating in Islam. During her adolescence, this left her confused about what to do. In addition to these two concerns, N1 also experienced turmoil regarding the truth of Islamic teachings, because, for her, there were too many sources with conflicting findings.

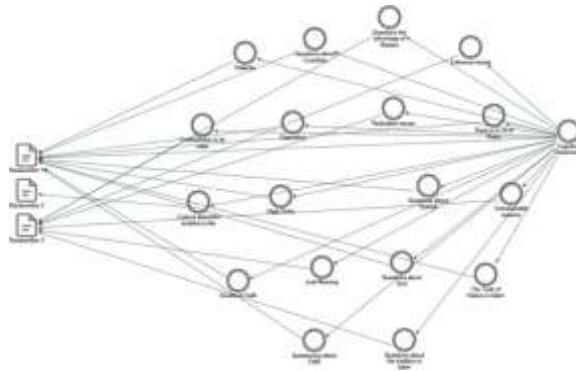


Figure 1. Cognitive Dissonance towards Religious Beliefs

Interviewee 3 (later referred to as N3) also experienced considerable cognitive dissonance. N1 focused more on contradictions within Islamic teachings, such as issues of tolerance within the concept of Islam. N3 highlighted the observed reality of many seemingly radical individuals within the Muslim community. Consequently, he experienced cognitive tension regarding the understanding that Islam is a religion that brings peace, but the reality does not demonstrate a linear relationship. Further dissonance arose regarding the meaning of the purpose of human life on earth. These questions often left him feeling lost, as he did not understand the ultimate outcome of his efforts or hard work.

An interesting point illustrated in Figure 1 is that Interviewee 2 (hereinafter referred to as N2) experienced very little cognitive dissonance. N2 simply asked questions and expressed curiosity about life's problems that could be resolved using the principles of the Quran. N2's responses demonstrate his belief that Islamic teachings can provide solutions to life's problems, a desire he sought to scientifically prove.

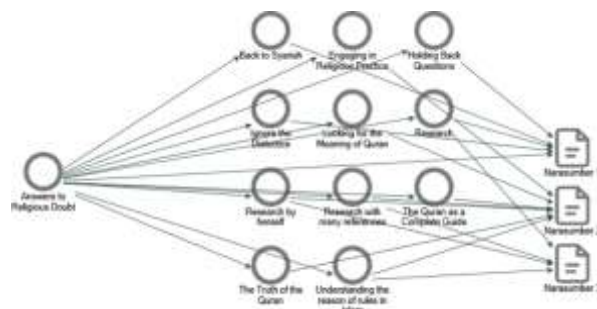


Figure 2. Respondents' Responses to Doubts in Religion

As they entered adolescence, all three informants acknowledged that questions related to their beliefs began to emerge. These questions often gave rise to cognitive dissonance and doubt, as described in Figure 1. These questions were met with a variety of responses by the three informants. N1 tended to refer his anxiety to religious narrative texts. While N1 attempted to explore the dissonance, the intensity was minimal. N1 preferred to suppress his anxiety, ignore it, and return to the established

performed family rituals and those taught in religious schools, but struggled to connect them with personal meaning, often feeling constrained. Conversely, N2 grew with a depth of intrinsic motivation; he actively discussed and explored the Quran and Hadith, and experienced inner peace as a result of his devotions. N3 underwent a transition; initially, he was extrinsically obedient, but then shifted toward an intrinsic orientation after successfully finding a logical explanation that resolved his doubts. In N2, the characteristics of this religious orientation were evident in the way religious values shaped their entire worldview and code of ethics, as well as their earnest efforts to internalize and fully practice their religious beliefs. Even though at first N2 did not know the benefits of the religious practices he was carrying out, he continued to explore the issue until he understood the meaning and found peace.

The first informant has a religious tendency with an extrinsic orientation. Another characteristic that is apparent is a fear of "sin" as a consequence of not following religious commands. This is evident in N1's hesitation regarding the conflict between following God's command not to "*come close to adultery*" and the dilemma of gaining attention from the opposite sex. Although N1 ultimately chooses to adhere to religious teachings, this basis is based on a fear of sin and a fear of being labeled negatively by those around him. The consequence of this religious orientation is a fragility, where he does not hesitate to again violate God's prohibitions when his emotional feelings (lust) dominate. According to Allport, the strength of faith can be assured if an individual orients his religion intrinsically.

Analysis based on Stages of Faith Theory

Fowler's model articulated in *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (1981) emerged from interdisciplinary research that blended theology, psychology, and sociology (Hopson, 2009). Influenced by Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development and Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral development, Fowler postulated that faith follows a predictable trajectory. (Fowler, 2017).

Researchers identified N1 as occupying stage 3 in the Stages of Faith theory, namely the *Conventional Faith stage*. This third stage usually begins when the transition to formal operational thinking, allowing a person to reflect on their thoughts and analyze contradictions in the story (Neuman, 2011). N1 showed in the case of historical narratives, he felt that there were differences between one source and another in Islamic History that raised questions about which of these differences was correct. N1 was able to analyze these differences because, in this stage, he could work through hypothetical situations, work with symbols, be idealistic, and tend to be judgmental.

Individuals in stage 3 can step outside the box, see new connections, and form new relationships. Because adolescence is a time of personal growth and the search for identity (Fowler, 2017). This process of searching for identity is very strong seen in the turmoil that occurs in N1, where he is unable to understand the purpose of his existence in this world. On the other hand, in the conventional faith stage, they really want God to accept them and affirm their identity. That is why in the case of N1 when there is inner turmoil about emotional experiences (feelings of love for the opposite sex) that violate religious rules, he wants to feel that God "understands" his behavior with forgiveness, because he feels the need for love for the opposite sex is part of nature.

In contrast, N2 is at stage 4, namely Individuative-Reflective, within Fowler's (1981) framework. One characteristic of faith development at this fourth stage is demonstrated by a critical examination of previously held beliefs. This is particularly evident in N2, particularly when he practices *voluntary fasting*. Initially, N2 only knew that voluntary fasting was a good recommendation, but then he engaged in critical thinking by exploring the health and psychological benefits of fasting. Thus, N2 not only accepted but also reviewed, compared, and adjusted his understanding of religion within his own rational framework. Meanwhile, N3 also went through a transitional process between the two stages, namely doubting mechanical rituals (such as the tradition of reciting the Yasinan on Friday nights, or other worship practices), which was then followed by a reflective effort that led to a more personal and critical understanding of faith.

Analysis based on Coping Religious Theory

Coping theory can be defined as an individual's attempt to overcome problems by maximizing what is valuable or important to them. In this context, the source of value can be psychological, social, physical, material, or spiritual. In this context, *religious coping* has a significant impact on resilience. *Religious coping* can provide comfort, stimulate personal growth, increase a sense of closeness to God, facilitate closeness with others, or offer meaning and purpose in life.

According to Pargament, religion can provide many ways for its followers to gain control in overcoming life's problems, such as: (1) Self-Directing, (2) Deferring, (3) Collaborative. The *self-directing method* emphasizes personal responsibility and the individual's active role in problem-solving. In this context, God gives individuals the freedom and resources to direct their own lives. *Deferring*, on the other hand, places the responsibility for problem-solving on God. Rather than actively solving their own problems, the person tends to wait for solutions from God. The last method, Collaborative, reflects the shared responsibility for problem-solving by God and the individual.

In a study by Pargament, these three ways of obtaining religious coping have different implications for mental health. Self-directing and collaborative are associated with higher levels of emotional intelligence, while deferring is associated with lower levels of competence (Pargament & Brant, 1998). Thus, based on Pargament's research findings, people who have religious coping through self-directing and collaborative methods are individuals who are better prepared to face the demands and dynamics of life, because they have good emotional control over these problems.

Based on the findings, N1 often shows a deferring style, in the midst of academic and social pressure, he prefers to submit to rituals and surrender rather than actively seeking meaning. (Dein, 2013). Thus, even when he was in difficult times, N1 still had good thoughts about God and believed that what happened to him was the best thing for him, according to God's version of goodness. However, this deferring coping pattern has various challenges when faced with contradictions between teachings and individual desires that have not been successfully reconciled (experiencing cognitive dissonance). Based on research (Pargament & Brant, 1998), people with deferring coping tend to have lower emotional intelligence.

N2 demonstrated a collaborative coping style, reflecting a shared responsibility for problem-solving by God and the individual (Pargament & Brant, 1998). N2 combined prayer, reading, and concrete actions such as researching religious literature to resolve her personal problems (Bone & Dein, 2021). This was demonstrated by her behavior of continually studying the contents of the Quran and interpreting them in a way that was easy for her age to understand. The results of this study process gave rise to a deeper understanding of the compassion and love shown by Allah through the Quran, thus increasing her confidence in her actions to remain steadfast in Islamic values. This aligns with the theory of Religious Coping, which suggests that spiritual coping can provide comfort (Wolkinson & Weinberg, 2023). and stimulate personal growth with God (Koenig, 2018), especially if the process of forming a sense of comfort with God is carried out actively.

N3 went through a transitional process between the two stages, with doubts about rituals followed by a reflective effort that led to a more critical understanding of faith. Within Pargament and Koenig's theoretical framework, N2 progressed through the Self-Directing stage, characterized by an emphasis on personal responsibility (Pargament & Brant, 1998) and the individual's active role in problem-solving (Koenig, 2018). In this context, God grants individuals the freedom and resources to direct their own lives. N3 is a highly active individual who seeks the meaning of every command and ritual he performs. For him, this meaning must be understood logically and scientifically. This awareness stems from N3's logic: the more a person understands the rationale for a command, the more consistent he or she can be in carrying it out. When

faced with failure, N3 does not simply blame God's destiny; he actively seeks to correct his mistakes.

Analysis based on Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Cognitive dissonance, introduced by Leon Festinger in the 1950s, is a psychological phenomenon that occurs when an individual experiences discomfort due to holding conflicting beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors (Kaminska & Sznajd-Weron, 2020). This discomfort often leads to stress, guilt, or anxiety when, for example, these beliefs and actions are inconsistent. In response, individuals may change their beliefs, justify their actions (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019), or avoid conflicting information to reduce tension. People experiencing cognitive dissonance are more likely to change their cognitions, behaviors, or perceptions of their behavior (Arman et al., 2025).

Festinger stated that the inconsistency between beliefs and behavior creates dissonance that triggers balancing efforts (Miller et al., 2015). N1 faced religious dissonance with passive obedience to avoid guilt. N2 hardly experienced serious dissonance because the religious material he studied was always in line with his knowledge experience, facilitating resolution and strengthening his faith. N3, who was doubtful about the tactical rules, resolved the dissonance by asking for rational explanations, a form of cognitive accommodation that deepened his understanding (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019).

N1 and N3 experience the most shock, but each of them resolves it in a different way. N1 tends to act to reduce cognitive dissonance by changing cognitions. from the conflict that occurred in a more positive way (Kaminska & Sznajd-Weron, 2020), while in N3 initially there was a change in perspective on religious teachings themselves, viewing religion as something that can be explained logically. This change in perspective in N3 ultimately changed his behavior towards religion, from initially apathetic and skeptical, to reconciled and increasingly convinced that the religion he adheres to can align with the context of the modern era.

However, when linked to the Stages of Faith theory, cognitive dissonance will indeed occur at the ages of N1, N2, and N3 considering the cognitive development as well (Fowler, 2017). Therefore, the conflict between old knowledge and new knowledge that has been acquired is not something to be afraid of. The occurrence of cognitive dissonance, if followed up in a balanced, appropriate, and objective manner, actually has a positive impact (Yahya & Sukmayadi, 2020). Conversely, when not addressed appropriately, it can build the meaning that religion is restricting one's life (Miller et al., 2015), and has implications for behavioral *output* that is highlighted not in accordance with religious rules.

Efforts to Develop Religious Education Curriculum in Secondary Schools

The phenomenon of the Society 5.0 era, characterized by an abundance of digital information, poses a major challenge to preserving the faith of adolescents. Islamic education must respond to the emergence of this new society with innovative breakthroughs. Adolescents are now often portrayed as easy targets for secular culture, which can erode their faith. A study by Elsaifir (2024) revealed that the negative impact of digital media is quite significant, with many adolescents experiencing a decline in religious understanding, necessitating efforts to internalize a strong religious understanding (Elsaifir, 2024). Similarly, IDN Times (2025) emphasized that the faith of Muslim adolescents is often exposed to social media distractions and foreign values, which, if not anticipated, can erode their religious foundations (IDN, 2025). The findings of this case study indicate that in the context of such pressures, critical reflection on faith, active *coping strategies* (initiatively seeking understanding), and religious motivation that grows from within (an intrinsic approach) play a major role in maintaining adolescent faith.

These findings can be explained by theories of education and developmental psychology. According to Vygotsky's constructivism theory, religious knowledge and values are constructed through social interaction and meaningful discussion. Nurhayani et al. (2024) demonstrated that constructivism-based Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning is conducted collaboratively, with the teacher acting as a mediator, guiding students in understanding religious concepts through discussion and interaction (Nurhayani et al., 2024). With this approach, adolescents are encouraged to develop critical reflection and personal meaning in religious teachings, rather than simply passively accepting dogma.

Meanwhile, the humanistic approach places students at the center of value development. Islamic humanism emphasizes personal integrity, self-actualization, and mutual respect among students. Qoyimah & Hamami (2025) emphasized that humanistic learning in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) can foster strong social attitudes, mutual respect, and togetherness (*ukhuwah Islami*) because teachers focus on students' individual potential, not just cognitive aspects (Qoyimah & Hamami, 2025). Thus, intrinsic religious motivation is more likely to develop in a supportive classroom environment that respects the uniqueness of each student.

Furthermore, Fowler's theory of faith development emphasizes that adolescence is in the synthetic-conventional stage, where beliefs are still heavily influenced by figures in the social environment. For example, a study by Marisa et al. (2023) found that parents, peers, and spiritual mentors are important mentors for adolescents in developing their faith. This means that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum and learning need to provide space for the role of religious facilitators (teachers, parents, friends) to guide students toward a more personal and mature understanding of faith. A dialogical approach, which invites adolescents to analyze spiritual experiences and

religious values in their lives, will facilitate a shift from "conventional faith" to a more independent, "individual-reflective" stage of faith.

Within the framework of the Independent Learning Curriculum, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) transformation must integrate the values of the Pancasila Student Profile, such as faith and piety, and critical thinking. Maulidik et al. (2025) emphasized the importance of a holistic approach in the independent PAI curriculum, developing not only teaching content but also the culture and learning system to align with the values of independent learning and the Pancasila Student Profile. The application of innovative learning methods and digital technology is seen as having great potential in creating contextual and humanistic religious education. Thus, the recommendations for a transformative high school PAI curriculum encompass several aspects, as shown in Figure 7 below:

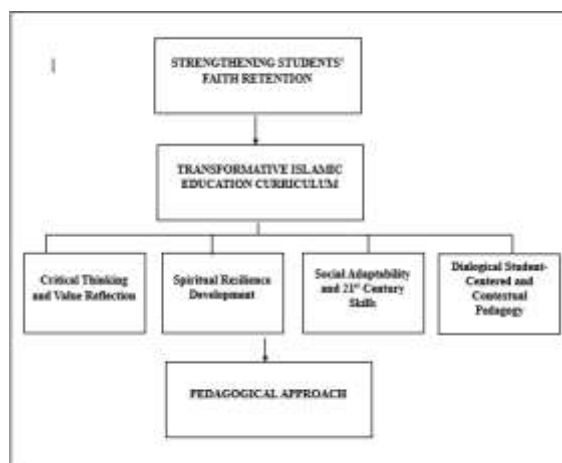


Figure 4. Transformative Curriculum Development at IRE

The curriculum transformation in IRE can be explained as follows: (1) Strengthening critical thinking and value reflection that can encourage students to explore the meaning of Islamic teachings in their personal and social contexts; (2) Developing spiritual resilience through active coping, such as seeking social support in religious communities, engaging in discussions, and utilizing positive Islamic content in digital media to foster intrinsic faith; (3) Social adaptability and 21st-century skills, where the curriculum must equip students with creative and adaptive thinking skills; and (4) A dialogic and student-centered pedagogical approach, which provides space for students to express their questions and experiences of faith. The teacher in this context plays the role of facilitator.

Overall, the urgency of transforming the high school Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum is very high to maintain the relevance of religious education in the digital era. By integrating research findings on factors supporting adolescent faith resilience into curriculum design, transformative PAI programs can produce a generation of young people who are critical thinkers, value-sensitive, spiritually

resilient, and adaptive. Developing a holistic, contextual and dialogical curriculum will equip students with future skills while strengthening their faith foundations amidst ever-changing social dynamics.

4. CONCLUSION

This study found that Muslim adolescents frequently experience cognitive dissonance when the doctrinal content of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) conflicts with their personal and social realities. Many students described tension and doubt as they encountered modern social norms and behaviours that seemed at odds with traditional teachings. Importantly, those with intrinsic or reflective orientations toward faith confront these tensions by actively seeking understanding, engaging in questioning, research, and reinterpretation of teachings, which appear to strengthen their spiritual resilience. In contrast, participants with more extrinsic orientations tended to suppress or ignore their doubts, relying on rote compliance and resulting in a more superficial engagement with religious content. These patterns suggest that active, critical engagement can foster deeper faith resilience, whereas passive acquisition may leave underlying questions unresolved. However, these findings should be interpreted with caution due to the study's limitations. The research involved a very small, purposive sample of three students from a single school, which limits the generalizability of the conclusions. The specific cultural and educational context may have influenced the results, highlighting the need for future research in more diverse settings. Additional studies with larger and more varied samples will be necessary to confirm and extend these insights into how adolescents negotiate dissonance in IRE. Taken together, the results underscore important implications for IRE curriculum development. A more dialogical, student-centered curriculum can explicitly address students' questions and real-life concerns, thus fostering faith resilience through open dialogue. Educators should incorporate critical thinking exercises and opportunities for reflection, helping students to connect religious teachings with contemporary challenges. Practical strategies might include integrating discussions of current social issues from an Islamic perspective or assigning research projects on the relevance of religious principles as ways to deepen understanding. By creating learning environments that value inquiry and multiple perspectives, IRE can help young Muslims internalize their beliefs meaningfully while equipping them to navigate the pluralistic, digital era with confidence

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