WOMEN, EDUCATION, AND SOCIAL WELFARE
VOL. 3 NO. 2 (2026)

ISSN: 3064-2469

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To cite this article: Roslaini, Y. Afifah, I. Fahri, M. Thontawi, and Husarida, "Structured Questioning for Equitable Classroom Participation and Higher-Order Moral Reasoning in Aqidah Akhlak Education," *Women, Educ. Soc. Welf.*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 363–382, 2026. https://doi.org/10.70211/wesw.v3i2.573

Published online: June 15, 2026

OPEN ACCESS

https://doi.org/10.70211/wesw.v3i2.573

Women, Education, and Social Welfare Vol 3 No 2 (2026)

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Research Article

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Received: March 24, 2026	Revised: April 13, 2026	Accepted: June 12, 2026	Online: June 15, 2026

Abstract

Aqidah Akhlak learning in madrasahs often emphasizes memorization and teacher-centered instruction, limiting students' opportunities to engage in analytical, evaluative, and creative moral reasoning. This study aimed to enhance students' higher-order thinking skills through structured questioning techniques in Aqidah Akhlak learning. Using Classroom Action Research, the study was conducted in two cycles involving 26 eleventh-grade science students at an Islamic senior high school in Jambi, Indonesia. Each cycle consisted of planning, action, observation, and reflection. Data were collected through HOTS-based written tests, classroom observation sheets, teacher interviews, field notes, and documentation. The intervention used open-ended, probing, evaluative, and reflective questions supported by scaffolding, wait time, peer discussion, and constructive feedback. The findings showed a substantial improvement in students' classroom participation and HOTS achievement. Active participation increased from 38.5% in Cycle I to 73.1% in Cycle II, while the mean HOTS score rose from 68.4 to 82.7. The proportion of students achieving the minimum mastery criterion also increased from 57.7% to 84.6%. Improvements were observed across analysis, evaluation, and creation dimensions. These findings indicate that structured questioning techniques can transform Aqidah Akhlak learning into a more dialogic, reflective, and inclusive process that supports students' moral reasoning and higher-order thinking.

Keywords: Aqidah Akhlak; Higher-Order Thinking Skills; Moral Education; Dialogic Learning.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary educational discourse, the development of higher-order thinking skills has become a central concern because schooling is no longer expected merely to transmit knowledge, but also to cultivate learners' capacity to interpret complex realities, evaluate competing perspectives, construct reasoned arguments, and make ethically responsible decisions. Higher-order thinking skills are commonly associated with the upper cognitive processes in the revised Bloom's taxonomy, namely analyzing, evaluating, and creating, which enable learners to move beyond factual recall toward critical, reflective, and generative forms of understanding [1], [2], [3]. These competencies are increasingly relevant in the twenty-first century, where students encounter diverse social, technological, religious, and moral challenges that require not only knowledge acquisition but also judgment, empathy, dialogue, and responsible action [4], [5], [6]. In this sense, higher-order thinking is not simply a cognitive achievement, but a broader educational capability that supports learners' participation in social life, moral deliberation, and lifelong learning.

The importance of higher-order thinking becomes even more significant in values-based education, including Islamic education, because religious learning is expected to shape not only students' doctrinal knowledge but also their ethical awareness, reflective judgment, and capacity to apply religious values in real-life situations. Aqidah Akhlak education in madrasahs occupies a strategic position in this regard because it integrates the formation of faith, moral character, and ethical conduct. Ideally, students who learn Aqidah Akhlak should not only remember concepts related to belief, morality, and Islamic virtues, but should also be able to analyze moral problems, evaluate human actions based on Islamic ethical principles, and formulate responsible solutions to everyday dilemmas [7], [8], [9]. Therefore, strengthening higher-order thinking in Aqidah Akhlak learning is essential for transforming religious education from a predominantly transmissive process into a reflective and dialogic pedagogical space.

However, the implementation of higher-order thinking in Islamic education remains uneven. In many classroom contexts, Islamic religious education is still frequently delivered through teacher-centered instruction, where students are positioned as recipients of information rather than active participants in meaning-making. Such practices tend to privilege memorization, repetition, and textual reproduction, while providing limited opportunities for students to question, argue, interpret, and connect Islamic values with contemporary moral issues [10], [11], [12]. This condition creates a pedagogical gap between the normative aims of Islamic education, which emphasize moral reasoning and character formation, and classroom realities that often remain dominated by lower-order cognitive activities. When students are rarely invited to analyze ethical cases or justify their moral positions, Aqidah Akhlak learning risks becoming conceptually shallow and disconnected from students' lived experiences.

This issue is not only pedagogical but also related to educational equity. A classroom dominated by lecturing and recall-based questioning tends to benefit students who are already confident, verbally active, or familiar with the expected answers, while quieter students may remain cognitively and socially marginalized. In this situation, unequal participation may emerge, not necessarily because some students lack ability, but because classroom interaction

does not provide sufficient scaffolding, wait time, dialogic opportunity, and psychological safety for all learners to express their reasoning [13], [14], [15]. From the perspective of inclusive education and social welfare, learning quality should be assessed not only by average test scores but also by whether classroom practices create fair opportunities for all students to participate, think, and develop confidence. Thus, improving questioning techniques in Aqidah Akhlak learning can be viewed as part of a broader effort to promote equitable cognitive participation and student well-being.

Questioning is one of the most powerful yet often underdeveloped pedagogical strategies for cultivating higher-order thinking. Effective questioning can stimulate curiosity, elicit prior knowledge, challenge assumptions, encourage justification, and guide learners toward deeper reasoning [16], [17], [18]. Unlike closed questions that merely require factual answers, higher-order questions invite students to compare, infer, evaluate, predict, defend, and create responses. In dialogic classrooms, questions function not only as tools for checking comprehension but also as instruments for opening intellectual space, distributing participation, and sustaining collective inquiry [19]. Therefore, questioning techniques are particularly relevant for Aqidah Akhlak education because they allow students to examine moral values, relate religious concepts to social realities, and develop ethical reasoning through classroom dialogue.

The theoretical foundation of questioning techniques is closely connected to constructivist and sociocultural perspectives on learning. Constructivist learning theory views knowledge as actively constructed by learners through interaction with ideas, experiences, and social contexts rather than passively received from teachers [20], [21]. From this perspective, questioning serves as a mediating tool that helps students reorganize their understanding, confront cognitive conflict, and articulate emerging ideas. Meanwhile, sociocultural theory emphasizes the role of scaffolding, dialogue, and the zone of proximal development in supporting learners to perform beyond their current independent ability [22]. In classroom practice, teachers can use guiding questions, probing questions, follow-up prompts, and reflective questions to move students gradually from simple recall to analysis, evaluation, and creation. This process is highly relevant to Islamic moral education, where students need guided opportunities to interpret values, examine ethical tensions, and construct reasoned moral responses.

In the context of Aqidah Akhlak learning, questioning techniques can also support the internalization of moral values. Moral learning requires more than the ability to state what is right or wrong; it requires learners to understand why a particular action is morally acceptable, how religious values apply to complex situations, and what consequences may arise from different choices [23], [24], [25]. Through well-designed questions, students can be encouraged to examine moral cases, evaluate intentions and consequences, compare ethical alternatives, and reflect on their own responsibilities as Muslim learners. For example, questions such as "Why should honesty be maintained even when it causes personal loss?" or "How can Islamic moral values guide students in responding to peer pressure?" require learners to move beyond memorizing religious rules toward reflective moral reasoning. This type of learning is essential for making Aqidah Akhlak education meaningful, contextual, and transformative.

Nevertheless, studies focusing specifically on questioning techniques in Aqidah Akhlak education remain limited. Much of the existing literature on higher-order thinking in Islamic

education has focused on curriculum analysis, assessment instruments, textbook evaluation, or the distribution of HOTS and LOTS items in examinations [26], [27], [28]. While these studies are important for mapping the presence of higher-order thinking in instructional materials and assessment practices, they do not sufficiently explain how teachers can cultivate HOTS during classroom interaction. In other words, the literature has paid considerable attention to measuring higher-order thinking, but less attention to the pedagogical process through which higher-order thinking is developed in real classrooms. This gap is particularly important because HOTS cannot be achieved merely by adding difficult questions to tests; it requires sustained instructional practices that train students to reason, evaluate, and reflect.

Another gap lies in the limited integration between higher-order thinking, Islamic moral learning, and inclusive classroom participation. Existing studies often frame HOTS as a cognitive outcome, while insufficiently discussing how questioning techniques may also redistribute classroom participation and support students who are initially passive, hesitant, or less confident. In Islamic education classrooms, this issue is important because moral dialogue requires students to listen, respond, negotiate meanings, and express personal judgments in respectful ways. When classroom questioning is structured inclusively, it can reduce domination by a few active students and provide broader opportunities for all learners to contribute to moral reasoning. Thus, questioning techniques may contribute not only to cognitive improvement but also to classroom equity, dialogic participation, and learner confidence [29], [30].

Based on these considerations, this study investigates the use of questioning techniques as a pedagogical strategy to enhance students' higher-order thinking skills in Aqidah Akhlak education. The study is situated within a classroom action research design because the aim is not merely to measure learning outcomes but to improve instructional practice through cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection. By examining students' participation, HOTS performance, and classroom interaction across two cycles, this study seeks to provide empirical evidence on how structured questioning can transform Aqidah Akhlak learning into a more dialogic, reflective, and inclusive process. The novelty of this study lies in its attempt to connect questioning techniques, higher-order thinking, Islamic moral education, and equitable classroom participation within a single pedagogical framework.

The contribution of this study is threefold. Theoretically, it extends the discussion of higher-order thinking by emphasizing that HOTS in Islamic education should be understood not only as a cognitive taxonomy but also as a dialogic and moral process. Pedagogically, it offers an evidence-based classroom strategy for teachers who seek to move Aqidah Akhlak learning beyond memorization toward analytical, evaluative, and creative moral reasoning. Practically, it provides insights into how structured questioning can improve student participation and confidence, particularly in classrooms where learners may initially be passive or dependent on teacher explanation. Therefore, this study is relevant not only to Islamic education scholarship but also to broader discussions on inclusive learning, educational quality, and student welfare in values-based schooling.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed Classroom Action Research (CAR) to improve students' higher-order thinking skills through structured questioning techniques in Aqidah Akhlak learning. CAR was selected because the study aimed not only to examine students' learning outcomes but also to improve instructional practice through iterative cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection. This design is appropriate for classroom-based pedagogical innovation because it enables teachers and researchers to identify learning problems, implement instructional strategies, observe their effects, and refine the intervention based on empirical classroom evidence [31].

The study followed the spiral model of Kemmis and McTaggart, consisting of two action cycles. Each cycle included four stages: planning, action, observation, and reflection. The first cycle was used to introduce structured questioning techniques and identify students' initial responses to higher-order questions. The second cycle refined the intervention by adding scaffolding strategies, extended wait time, peer discussion, and more explicit modeling of analytical and evaluative responses. This cyclical process allowed the instructional strategy to be adjusted according to students' needs and classroom dynamics.

Table 1. Classroom Action Research Design and Cycle Activities

Cycle	Stage	Main Activities	Expected Output
Cycle I	Planning	Designing lesson plans, preparing HOTS-oriented questions, developing observation sheets, and preparing assessment rubrics	Initial instructional scenario for questioning-based Aqidah Akhlak learning
Cycle I	Action	Implementing questioning techniques during Aqidah Akhlak lessons	Students begin responding to analytical, evaluative, and reflective questions
Cycle I	Observation	Observing student participation, classroom interaction, teacher questioning, and students' reasoning patterns	Evidence of student engagement and difficulties in answering HOTS-based questions
Cycle I	Reflection	Reviewing observation results, HOTS test scores, teacher reflections, and classroom constraints	Identification of weaknesses and improvement plans for Cycle II
Cycle II	Planning	Revising questions, adding scaffolding prompts, preparing examples of analytical answers, and improving classroom discussion strategies	Improved intervention design
Cycle II	Action	Applying refined questioning techniques with scaffolding, peer discussion, and feedback	More active, dialogic, and reflective classroom interaction

Cycle	Stage	Main Activities	Expected Output
Cycle II	Observation	Recording changes in student participation, reasoning quality, and HOTS performance	Evidence of improvement in learning engagement and higher-order thinking
Cycle II	Reflection	Comparing results across cycles and interpreting the effectiveness of the intervention	Final evaluation of questioning techniques in enhancing HOTS

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in an Aqidah Akhlak classroom at MAN 5 Batanghari, Jambi, Indonesia. The participants consisted of 26 eleventh-grade science students who were enrolled in the Aqidah Akhlak subject during the semester in which the research was conducted. The class was selected purposively because preliminary classroom observations indicated that students' participation in analytical discussion was still limited and that learning activities were largely dominated by teacher explanations and factual questioning.

Purposive sampling was considered appropriate because Classroom Action Research focuses on improving instructional practice in a specific classroom context rather than producing statistical generalization to a wider population [32]. The selected class represented a relevant context for investigating how structured questioning techniques could support students' higher-order thinking in Islamic moral education.

Research Instruments

This study used multiple instruments to collect quantitative and qualitative data. The use of multiple instruments was intended to obtain a comprehensive understanding of students' higher-order thinking development and classroom participation. Quantitative data were obtained through HOTS-based written tests, while qualitative data were collected through classroom observations, teacher interviews, field notes, and documentation.

The HOTS-based test consisted of essay and problem-solving questions designed to measure students' ability to analyze, evaluate, and create responses related to Aqidah Akhlak concepts. The observation sheet was used to record students' participation, responsiveness, argumentation, and interaction during classroom activities. The interview guide was used to explore the teacher's reflection on the implementation of questioning techniques, students' engagement, and challenges encountered during the intervention.

HOTS Assessment Rubric

Students' written responses were assessed using a rubric adapted from the higher cognitive processes in the revised Bloom's taxonomy. The rubric focused on three main dimensions: analysis, evaluation, and creation. Each dimension was scored based on the depth of reasoning, relevance of explanation, use of Aqidah Akhlak concepts, and ability to connect moral values with contextual situations. The use of a rubric was intended to improve scoring consistency and provide clearer criteria for assessing students' higher-order thinking.

Table 2. HOTS Assessment Rubric

Score Range	Category	Description of Student Response
85–100	Very High	Response demonstrates strong analysis, clear moral evaluation, logical reasoning, contextual application, and original solution based on Aqidah Akhlak values
75–84	High	Response shows adequate analysis and evaluation, relevant reasoning, and appropriate application of Aqidah Akhlak concepts
60–74	Moderate	Response contains partial analysis but remains limited in justification, depth of reasoning, or contextual application
40–59	Low	Response is mostly descriptive, factual, or repetitive, with limited connection to moral reasoning
0–39	Very Low	Response is incomplete, irrelevant, or does not show higher-order thinking

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted during two classroom action research cycles. Before the intervention, the researcher and teacher reviewed the learning problems, prepared the lesson plans, and developed HOTS-oriented questions. During the implementation stage, the teacher applied structured questioning techniques in Aqidah Akhlak learning, while the researcher observed classroom interaction and student participation.

At the end of each cycle, students completed a HOTS-based written test. The researcher also collected observation sheets, field notes, teacher reflections, and relevant documents. After Cycle I, the data were analyzed to identify weaknesses in the implementation. The reflection results were then used to improve the intervention in Cycle II. This procedure ensured that each stage of the research was evidence-based and responsive to classroom conditions.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Quantitative data from HOTS-based written tests were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including mean scores, percentages, and mastery learning rates. The mean score of each cycle was compared to determine improvement in students' higher-order thinking skills. The percentage of students who reached the minimum mastery criterion was also calculated to evaluate learning achievement.

To strengthen the quantitative interpretation, a paired-sample comparison was used to examine the difference between students' HOTS scores in Cycle I and Cycle II. This analysis was applied because the same group of students participated in both cycles. The statistical result was interpreted as supplementary evidence to support the classroom action research findings, not as the sole basis for evaluating the intervention.

Qualitative data from observations, interviews, field notes, and documentation were analyzed thematically. The analysis followed several stages: reading the data repeatedly, identifying meaningful units, coding recurring patterns, grouping codes into themes, and interpreting the relationship between questioning techniques, classroom participation, and higher-order thinking.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Changes in Students' Classroom Participation Across the Action Cycles

The implementation of structured questioning techniques produced observable changes in students' classroom participation across the two cycles of Classroom Action Research. In Cycle I, classroom interaction was still relatively uneven. Although several students were willing to respond to the teacher's questions, participation tended to be dominated by a small number of confident students. Some students remained hesitant to express their opinions, particularly when the questions required them to analyze moral situations, justify ethical judgments, or connect Aqidah Akhlak concepts with real-life experiences. As a result, the questioning process in Cycle I functioned mainly as a teacher-led activity rather than a fully dialogic classroom interaction.

The observation data show that only 10 students, or 38.5% of the class, were categorized as active in Cycle I. Nine students, or 34.6%, were categorized as moderately active, while seven students, or 26.9%, were still passive. These findings indicate that the initial implementation of questioning techniques had not yet created equal opportunities for all students to participate in classroom dialogue. Passive students tended to answer only when directly appointed by the teacher and often gave short factual responses without further elaboration.

After reflection on Cycle I, several instructional refinements were introduced in Cycle II. The teacher provided clearer prompts, modeled examples of analytical answers, allowed longer wait time, encouraged peer discussion, and used follow-up questions to help students elaborate their reasoning. These improvements changed the classroom atmosphere. Students became more willing to answer questions, respond to their peers, and explain their views using moral reasoning. The number of active students increased from 10 students in Cycle I to 19 students in Cycle II. Meanwhile, the number of passive students decreased substantially from seven students to only one student.

Table 3. Changes in Students' Classroom Participation Across the Action Cycles

Participation Category	Cycle I, n (%)	Cycle II, n (%)	Change
Active	10 (38.5%)	19 (73.1%)	+9 students / +34.6 percentage points
Moderately active	9 (34.6%)	6 (23.1%)	−3 students / −11.5 percentage points
Passive	7 (26.9%)	1 (3.8%)	−6 students / −23.1 percentage points
Total	26 (100%)	26 (100%)	—

The most notable change was the increase in active participation. The proportion of active students almost doubled, from 38.5% in Cycle I to 73.1% in Cycle II. At the same time, passive participation decreased from 26.9% to 3.8%. This pattern indicates that questioning techniques became more effective when they were supported by scaffolding, peer interaction, and positive classroom reinforcement. The findings also suggest that structured questioning

did not merely increase the number of students who answered questions, but also helped create a more inclusive classroom environment where students had more opportunities to take part in moral dialogue.

In Cycle I, most students still relied on the teacher to validate their answers. They tended to wait for confirmation before expressing opinions, particularly when responding to questions involving moral evaluation. In Cycle II, however, students showed greater confidence in explaining their ideas. They were more willing to compare different viewpoints, provide reasons for their answers, and relate Aqidah Akhlak values to daily school life. This improvement demonstrates that questioning techniques can gradually shift classroom interaction from teacher-centered recitation to student-centered dialogue.

Improvement in Students' HOTS Achievement and Mastery Learning

The improvement in classroom participation was accompanied by measurable gains in students' higher-order thinking skills. Students' HOTS achievement was assessed at the end of each cycle using written tests designed to measure analysis, evaluation, and creation. The minimum mastery criterion was set at 75. The results show a clear increase in students' average HOTS score from Cycle I to Cycle II.

In Cycle I, the average HOTS score was 68.4, which was still below the minimum mastery criterion. Only 15 out of 26 students, or 57.7%, achieved the mastery criterion. This indicates that although students had started to engage with higher-order questions, many of them were not yet able to produce sufficiently analytical, evaluative, or creative responses. Several responses remained descriptive and focused mainly on recalling definitions or examples from the lesson.

In Cycle II, the average score increased to 82.7. The number of students who achieved mastery also increased to 22 students, or 84.6% of the class. Only four students, or 15.4%, remained below the minimum mastery criterion. This improvement indicates that the refined questioning intervention in Cycle II had a positive effect on students' ability to construct higher-quality responses. The mean score increased by 14.3 points, while mastery learning increased by seven students, equivalent to 26.9 percentage points.

Table 4. Students' HOTS Achievement and Mastery Learning Across Cycles

Indicator	Cycle I	Cycle II	Improvement
Mean HOTS score	68.4	82.7	+14.3 points
Students achieving mastery	15 students (57.7%)	22 students (84.6%)	+7 students / +26.9 percentage points
Students not achieving mastery	11 students (42.3%)	4 students (15.4%)	−7 students / −26.9 percentage points
Minimum mastery criterion	≥75	≥75	—

The increase in the mean HOTS score indicates that students' written responses became more developed after the intervention was refined. In Cycle I, many students were able to identify moral concepts but had difficulty explaining relationships between concepts and real-life moral problems. In Cycle II, students' answers showed more explicit reasoning. They were

better able to explain why certain actions were morally appropriate, evaluate alternative responses to ethical situations, and propose practical solutions based on Aqidah Akhlak values.

A paired-sample comparison also indicated a statistically significant difference between Cycle I and Cycle II HOTS scores, $t(25) = 5.63$, $p < .001$. Based on the t value and sample size, the estimated effect size was large, $dz = 1.10$. This result strengthens the descriptive findings by showing that the improvement in students' HOTS performance was not merely a small classroom fluctuation, but reflected a meaningful increase across the two action cycles.

Table 5. Statistical Summary of HOTS Score Improvement

Statistical Indicator	Value
Number of participants	26
Mean score in Cycle I	68.4
Mean score in Cycle II	82.7
Mean difference	14.3
Paired-sample t value	5.63
Degrees of freedom	25
Significance level	$p < .001$
Estimated effect size, dz	1.10
Interpretation	Large improvement

These results demonstrate that structured questioning techniques contributed to the improvement of students' higher-order thinking achievement. However, the improvement should be interpreted within the classroom action research context. The findings indicate strong classroom-level improvement, but they do not imply broad statistical generalization beyond the observed class. The results are best understood as evidence that structured questioning, when combined with scaffolding and reflective classroom interaction, can support HOTS development in Aqidah Akhlak learning.

Development of HOTS Subdimensions and Qualitative Learning Patterns

Further analysis was conducted by examining students' performance across three HOTS subdimensions: analysis, evaluation, and creation. To ensure numerical transparency, the percentage in each subdimension was recalculated based on the actual number of students who demonstrated the expected skill level in each cycle. The results show improvement in all HOTS subdimensions, with the largest increase found in the creation dimension.

In Cycle I, nine students, or 34.6%, demonstrated analytical ability. These students were able to identify relationships between Aqidah Akhlak concepts and moral situations. However, only seven students, or 26.9%, showed evaluative ability, and only two students, or 7.7%, demonstrated creative ability. This means that most students were still at an early stage of higher-order thinking. They could recognize moral values but had difficulty evaluating ethical situations and formulating original responses or action plans.

In Cycle II, improvement was evident across all three subdimensions. Twenty-one students, or 80.8%, demonstrated analytical ability. Twenty students, or 76.9%, demonstrated evaluative ability. Sixteen students, or 61.5%, demonstrated creative ability. The greatest improvement occurred in the creation dimension, which increased from 7.7% to 61.5%. This

finding indicates that students became more capable of proposing solutions, formulating moral action plans, and applying Aqidah Akhlak values to practical situations.

Table 6. Development of HOTS Subdimensions Across Cycles

HOTS Subdimension	Cycle I, n (%)	Cycle II, n (%)	Improvement
Analysis	9 students (34.6%)	21 students (80.8%)	+12 students / +46.2 percentage points
Evaluation	7 students (26.9%)	20 students (76.9%)	+13 students / +50.0 percentage points
Creation	2 students (7.7%)	16 students (61.5%)	+14 students / +53.8 percentage points

The improvement in the analysis dimension shows that students became more capable of explaining the relationship between Islamic moral values and contextual problems. For example, in Cycle I, several students could mention the importance of honesty, responsibility, or respect, but their explanations were still general. In Cycle II, students began to explain how these values could guide specific actions in school life, such as responding to peer pressure, maintaining trust, or resolving conflict among classmates.

The improvement in the evaluation dimension suggests that students were increasingly able to make moral judgments and justify their answers. In Cycle I, students often gave normative responses, such as stating that an action was good or bad without explaining the reason. In Cycle II, their responses became more evaluative. Students were able to compare alternative actions, explain the consequences of certain choices, and connect their judgments with Aqidah Akhlak principles.

The improvement in the creation dimension is particularly important because this dimension was the weakest area in Cycle I. Initially, students had difficulty generating original solutions or action plans. After the teacher introduced scaffolding questions and examples of reflective reasoning in Cycle II, students became more capable of proposing practical moral responses. For instance, students were able to design simple strategies for promoting honesty, respectful communication, and responsible behavior in the classroom. This indicates that structured questioning can support not only analytical and evaluative reasoning but also creative moral problem-solving.

Qualitative data from classroom observations, teacher reflections, and field notes also confirmed the quantitative findings. The learning pattern changed across the two cycles. In Cycle I, students' responses were often short, factual, and dependent on teacher confirmation. In Cycle II, students' responses became longer, more reasoned, and more dialogic. Students did not only answer the teacher's questions but also responded to their peers' ideas, asked clarification questions, and provided examples from daily life.

Overall, the findings show that the use of structured questioning techniques improved students' classroom participation, HOTS achievement, and moral reasoning in Aqidah Akhlak learning. The results across the three data sources observation, written test, and teacher reflection consistently indicate that the intervention became more effective after refinement in

Cycle II. The improvement was not limited to test scores but was also reflected in classroom behavior, students' willingness to participate, and the quality of their moral reasoning.

The results suggest that questioning techniques are most effective when implemented as a structured and scaffolded pedagogical process. Simply asking higher-order questions was not sufficient in Cycle I because several students still lacked confidence and reasoning habits. However, when questions were combined with modeling, probing, peer discussion, wait time, and constructive feedback in Cycle II, students were better able to participate and demonstrate higher-order thinking. Therefore, the findings support the use of structured questioning as a classroom-based strategy for enhancing analytical, evaluative, and creative thinking in Islamic moral education.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that structured questioning techniques can substantially improve students' classroom participation and higher-order thinking skills in Aqidah Akhlak learning. The increase in active participation from 38.5% in Cycle I to 73.1% in Cycle II indicates that questioning, when implemented systematically, can transform classroom interaction from a teacher-dominated pattern into a more dialogic and participatory learning process. This finding is consistent with the argument that classroom questioning is not merely a technique for checking students' comprehension but a pedagogical mechanism for stimulating reasoning, encouraging interaction, and distributing opportunities for students to contribute to classroom discourse [33], [34], [35]. In the context of Aqidah Akhlak learning, this shift is particularly important because students are expected not only to understand Islamic moral concepts but also to articulate, justify, and apply those values in daily moral situations.

The improvement in students' participation also confirms the importance of classroom dialogue in supporting meaningful learning. In Cycle I, several students were still hesitant to answer open-ended questions and tended to provide short, descriptive, or factual responses. This indicates that students were not yet accustomed to expressing moral reasoning in an open classroom setting. However, after the teacher introduced scaffolding, longer wait time, probing questions, peer discussion, and positive feedback in Cycle II, students became more confident in expressing their opinions and responding to their peers. This finding supports sociocultural perspectives on learning, which emphasize that students' cognitive development is mediated through social interaction, guided participation, and language-based engagement [22]. In this study, questioning served as a mediating tool that helped students gradually move from passive reception to active moral reasoning.

The increase in students' HOTS achievement further strengthens the evidence that questioning techniques can support deeper cognitive engagement. The mean HOTS score increased from 68.4 in Cycle I to 82.7 in Cycle II, while the proportion of students achieving the minimum mastery criterion increased from 57.7% to 84.6%. This result suggests that structured questioning can guide students toward more complex cognitive processes, particularly analysis, evaluation, and creation. These findings align with the revised Bloom's taxonomy, which positions higher-order thinking as the ability to break down information, make judgments based on criteria, and generate new ideas or solutions. The result is also consistent with Ceballos [36] view that HOTS develops when students are given opportunities

to explain reasoning, solve problems, make decisions, and construct arguments rather than merely recall information.

The findings are also in line with previous studies showing that higher-order questioning can promote students' critical thinking and conceptual understanding. Salmon [37] argues that teacher questions can stimulate productive thinking when they invite students to clarify ideas, justify claims, and examine relationships between concepts. Similarly, Ghafar [38] emphasize that effective questioning encourages students to elaborate responses, analyze problems, and become active participants in learning. In this study, the transition from Cycle I to Cycle II shows that students' responses became more elaborate and reflective after questioning was accompanied by scaffolding. This suggests that the effectiveness of questioning depends not only on the cognitive level of the questions but also on how teachers facilitate students' responses, provide follow-up prompts, and create a safe environment for reasoning.

The development of HOTS subdimensions provides more specific evidence of students' cognitive progress. The analysis dimension increased from 34.6% in Cycle I to 80.8% in Cycle II, indicating that students became more capable of identifying relationships between Aqidah Akhlak values and real-life moral situations. The evaluation dimension increased from 26.9% to 76.9%, showing that students became more able to justify moral judgments and compare alternative actions based on Islamic ethical principles. The creation dimension showed the most substantial improvement, increasing from 7.7% to 61.5%. This finding is particularly meaningful because creation is often the most difficult dimension of HOTS to develop in classroom practice. Students initially struggled to formulate original solutions, but after receiving guiding questions and examples of reflective reasoning, they became more capable of proposing practical moral action plans. This supports the view that students' creative thinking can be strengthened when teachers provide structured opportunities for problem-solving, reflection, and contextual application [39].

In the context of Islamic education, these findings are significant because Aqidah Akhlak learning is often associated with the transmission of religious values, moral norms, and doctrinal understanding. While such knowledge remains important, the findings of this study suggest that moral education becomes more meaningful when students are invited to engage in reflective and evaluative thinking. Students need to understand not only what Islamic values are, but also why they matter, how they should be applied, and how they can guide ethical decision-making in complex situations [40]. This is consistent with the broader literature on moral and character education, which argues that effective moral learning should involve moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action, rather than simple memorization of moral rules . Through questioning, students were encouraged to connect Aqidah Akhlak concepts with concrete experiences, such as honesty, responsibility, respect, peer pressure, and classroom behavior.

The findings also contribute to current discussions on HOTS implementation in Islamic education. Previous studies have reported that Islamic education classrooms often face challenges in integrating HOTS because instructional practices remain dominated by lectures, factual questions, and assessment items that emphasize recall or comprehension . Other studies have focused on developing HOTS-based instruments or analyzing the distribution of HOTS items in Islamic education assessments [41]. However, such studies tend to emphasize the

measurement of HOTS rather than the instructional process through which HOTS is cultivated. The present study extends this body of literature by showing how questioning techniques can be used as an instructional pathway to develop HOTS during actual classroom interaction. In other words, HOTS is not treated merely as an assessment target but as a learning process that can be developed through dialogic and scaffolded questioning.

Another important finding is that questioning techniques contributed to more equitable classroom participation. In Cycle I, the classroom was still dominated by several confident students, while others remained passive. After the intervention was refined in Cycle II, participation became more distributed. This suggests that structured questioning can reduce the gap between active and passive students when it is supported by scaffolding, wait time, and peer discussion. This finding is relevant to inclusive pedagogy because equitable learning does not only refer to access to schooling but also to access to meaningful participation within the classroom. Students who are hesitant, less confident, or accustomed to passive learning need instructional support that allows them to enter classroom dialogue gradually. This aligns with Kwon [42] view that structured interaction and teacher facilitation can enhance students' engagement and collaborative reasoning.

The classroom action research design also helps explain why the intervention became more effective in Cycle II. In Cycle I, the teacher's use of higher-order questions was not sufficient to generate deep reasoning among all students. Some students still required additional support to understand how to analyze, evaluate, and formulate responses. Through reflection, the teacher modified the intervention by adding modeling, prompts, wait time, and peer interaction. This process reflects the strength of Classroom Action Research as a practical and reflective methodology for improving classroom practice [43]. Rather than assuming that one instructional strategy will automatically produce improvement, CAR allows teachers to adapt pedagogy based on observed student responses. In this study, the improvement from Cycle I to Cycle II shows that questioning techniques become more powerful when they are embedded in a reflective cycle of instructional refinement.

The findings also indicate that questioning techniques can function as a bridge between cognitive development and moral education. In many contexts, HOTS is discussed mainly as a cognitive construct related to academic achievement. However, in Aqidah Akhlak learning, higher-order thinking is inseparable from moral reasoning. When students analyze a moral case, evaluate alternative actions, or create an action plan based on Islamic values, they are not only performing cognitive tasks but also engaging in ethical reflection. Therefore, the development of HOTS in this subject should be understood as both intellectual and moral development. This interpretation broadens the meaning of HOTS in Islamic education by positioning it as a tool for strengthening reflective faith, ethical judgment, and responsible action.

Despite these positive findings, the results should be interpreted carefully. This study was conducted in one classroom involving 26 students, so the findings cannot be generalized statistically to all Aqidah Akhlak classrooms or Islamic education contexts. The intervention was also implemented in only two action cycles, which means that the study captured short-term improvement rather than long-term retention of HOTS or moral behavior. In addition, although the study measured students' written responses and classroom participation, it did not examine whether improved moral reasoning translated into sustained moral conduct outside

the classroom. These limitations suggest that future studies should involve larger samples, multiple schools, longer intervention periods, and follow-up assessments to examine the durability of students' HOTS development and moral application.

The novelty of this study lies in its integration of structured questioning techniques, higher-order thinking skills, and Aqidah Akhlak education within an inclusive classroom participation framework. Previous studies have commonly examined HOTS in Islamic education through assessment analysis, curriculum evaluation, or instrument development. This study offers a different contribution by showing how HOTS can be developed through classroom dialogue and teacher-guided questioning. It also highlights that questioning techniques do not only improve test performance but also reshape classroom participation, increase students' confidence, and support moral reasoning. Thus, the study contributes to Islamic education scholarship by positioning questioning as a dialogic, cognitive, and moral pedagogical strategy.

Theoretically, this study implies that HOTS in Islamic education should not be understood only through a cognitive taxonomy, but also through sociocultural and dialogic learning perspectives. Students' analytical, evaluative, and creative thinking developed more effectively when they interacted with teachers and peers, received scaffolding, and participated in guided moral dialogue. Pedagogically, the findings imply that Aqidah Akhlak teachers need to design questions that go beyond factual recall and intentionally guide students toward reasoning, justification, and contextual application. Teachers should also provide sufficient wait time, use probing questions, encourage peer response, and create a supportive classroom climate so that all students have opportunities to participate. Practically, the study suggests that structured questioning can be used as an accessible and low-cost strategy for improving the quality of Islamic moral education, particularly in classrooms where students are accustomed to passive learning. In relation to broader educational welfare, the study implies that meaningful learning is achieved not only when students obtain higher scores, but also when they gain confidence, voice, and equitable opportunities to engage in reflective moral reasoning.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that structured questioning techniques can improve students' higher-order thinking skills and classroom participation in Aqidah Akhlak learning. Through two cycles of Classroom Action Research, students became more active in classroom discussions and showed better ability to analyze moral issues, evaluate ethical choices, and formulate solutions based on Islamic values. The mean HOTS score increased from 68.4 in Cycle I to 82.7 in Cycle II, while the number of students who reached the minimum mastery criterion increased from 57.7% to 84.6%. These findings indicate that questioning techniques help shift Aqidah Akhlak learning from a teacher-centered approach to a more dialogic and reflective process. The study suggests that teachers should use open-ended, probing, and reflective questions to encourage students to think critically and participate confidently. Although limited to one classroom and two action cycles, this study provides evidence that structured questioning is a practical strategy for strengthening moral reasoning, student participation, and the quality of Islamic moral education.

LIMITATIONS

This section provides a critical reflection on the study's constraints, helping readers assess the scope and boundaries of the findings. Limitations may arise from methodological issues such as sample size, data collection instruments, or context-specific variables that restrict the generalizability of the results. Authors should also acknowledge temporal and technological limitations, particularly when studying evolving platforms such as social media or emerging AI-based tools. Self-reported data, for example, may be subject to bias or misinterpretation, while digital analytics might be influenced by algorithmic changes beyond the researchers' control. Rather than undermining the study, a well-articulated limitations section reinforces the integrity of the research process. Authors are encouraged to suggest how future research can address these limitations by adopting alternative methods, expanding populations, or exploring comparative studies in other contexts.

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R. conceptualized the study, developed the research design, coordinated the overall research process, and prepared the initial manuscript draft. Y. A. contributed to the refinement of the research framework, instrument development, data collection, and data management. I. F.

supported the methodological design, data analysis, and interpretation of the findings. M. T. contributed to the theoretical strengthening of the manuscript, validation of the analysis, and critical revision for important intellectual content. H. contributed to manuscript refinement, academic editing, and final review of the article. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

"The authors declare no conflict of interest."

DECLARATION OF USE OF AI IN SCIENTIFIC WRITING

The authors used ChatGPT for word refinement during the preparation of this work. After utilizing the tool, the authors thoroughly reviewed and edited the content as necessary, assuming full responsibility for the publication's content.

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