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Problem-Based Learning Model to Improve Understanding of Faith in Allah's Books among Grade VIII MTsN Students

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Abstract *This study aims to improve students' understanding of the topic Faith in the Scriptures of Allah through the implementation of the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) model in Grade VIII of MTsN 7 Madiun, Indonesia. The research employed Classroom Action Research (CAR) with two cycles, involving 31 students. Data were collected through observation, tests, and documentation, and analyzed using descriptive quantitative and qualitative approaches. The results indicate an increase in students' understanding: the average score rose from 68.12 (pre-cycle) to 74.35 (cycle I) and 82.58 (cycle II). Learning mastery also improved from 32.25% to 87.09%. Furthermore, students' activeness, quality of discussion, and ability to relate the material to real-life contexts showed significant progress. The research demonstrates practical implications for Islamic education methodology, showing that contextual problem-solving approaches can effectively bridge theoretical religious concepts with contemporary challenges faced by students. It is concluded that PBL is effective in teaching Akidah Akhlak, particularly on the topic of Faith in the Scriptures of Allah, as it enhances understanding, engagement, and the application of Islamic values in daily life.*

Keywords *Problem-Based Learning, Aqidah and Ethics, Student Understanding, Islamic Creed, Classroom Action Research, MTsN 7 Madiun*

1. Introduction

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) is a subject that plays a strategic role in shaping students' character and personality. Through PAI learning, particularly Aqidah Akhlak (Islamic Creed), students are expected to develop strong faith, noble morals, and be able to actualize Islamic values in their daily lives (Hidayat, 2021). Aqidah Akhlak not only provides religious knowledge but also serves to instill faith, foster spiritual attitudes, and shape behavior in accordance with Islamic teachings (Zubaedi, 2021).

In the contemporary digital era, religious education faces unprecedented challenges. Rapid technological advancement and information overload have created what scholars term a "crisis of religious understanding" among young learners (Al-Attas, 2019). Studies indicate that 67% of Muslim students struggle to connect traditional religious concepts with modern life contexts, leading to compartmentalized learning where religious knowledge remains isolated from practical application (Rahman & Hassan, 2023). This global phenomenon particularly affects the teaching of foundational Islamic beliefs, where abstract concepts require meaningful contextualization to achieve deep understanding.

One of the important materials in the Aqidah Akhlak is faith in the books of Allah. This material emphasizes the belief that Allah SWT has sent down His revelations to

the apostles in the form of holy books as a guide to life for humanity (Madjid, 2019). The books of Allah that must be known include the Torah, Zabur, Gospel, and Al-Qur'an, with the Al-Qur'an as a perfection and guide to life for all time (Nasution, 2018). Understanding faith in God's books is not only cognitive (knowing the names and contents of the books), but also affective (growing faith in the heart) and psychomotor (applying the contents in everyday life). Thus, learning to believe in God's books has a broad and profound dimension.

However, in classroom learning practices, it is often found that students have difficulty understanding this material. Based on the results of the initial evaluation in class VIII MTsN 7 Madiun, only 32.25% of students were able to achieve the Minimum Completion Criteria (KKM) of 75. This condition suggests that most students have not fully grasped the concept of faith in God's word, both in terms of its meaning and its application in life. This low understanding is caused by several factors, including: (1) teachers still tend to use lecture methods that position students as passive listeners, (2) learning does not challenge students to think critically, and (3) the lack of connection between the material and fundamental problems in everyday life. In this context, a learning innovation is needed that can activate students, encourage active participation, and improve conceptual understanding. One relevant model is Problem-Based Learning (PBL).

Empirical research has demonstrated the effectiveness of PBL in religious education contexts. A comprehensive study by Mahmoud and Abdullah (2022) involving 240 Islamic studies students across three countries found that PBL implementation resulted in 43% improvement in conceptual understanding and 67% increase in student engagement compared to traditional lecture methods. Similarly, research by Sari et al. (2023) specifically focused on Aqidah learning showed that students exposed to problem-based approaches demonstrated superior ability to connect theological concepts with contemporary issues, with effect sizes of d=0.78 (significant effect). Furthermore, a longitudinal study by Yusuf and Mariam (2024) tracking 156 madrasah students over two academic years revealed that PBL not only improved immediate learning outcomes but also enhanced long-term retention and practical application of Islamic values in daily decision-making.

Problem-Based Learning is a learning model that places contextual problems at the starting point of learning. PBL challenges students to "learn how to learn" by studying, analyzing, and finding solutions to real-world problems (Arends, 2012). The main characteristics of PBL are: (1) learning begins with a problem, (2) students engage in small group work, (3) the teacher acts as a facilitator, and (4) learning outcomes are focused on in-depth understanding and critical thinking skills (Hmelo-Silver, 2004).

Through PBL, students are not only required to memorize concepts of faith in God's books but also to relate them to the realities of life. For example, students are asked to solve problems about the relevance of the Quran as a guide to life in the digital age, or how to distinguish God's book from other non-revelations. In this way, students' understanding becomes more meaningful and contextual.

Understanding is an important aspect that follows knowledge at the second level (Bloom, 1956). Understanding includes the ability to explain, interpret, give

examples, and relate concepts to real situations (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). In learning Aqidah Akhlak, the expected understanding is not just limited to students knowing the names of Allah's books, but rather being able to explain the function of Allah's books and relate them to everyday life. Thus, the success of learning faith in Allah's books is not simply measured by the ability to memorize, but also by the extent to which students understand, appreciate, and practice the values contained therein.

The PBL model is highly suited to the characteristics of the Aqidah Akhlak (Faith and Morals) material, which demands the development of in-depth understanding, appreciation, and practice. Through group discussions, problem-solving, and presentations, students will be more actively involved and responsible in their learning process (Hosnan, 2016). This aligns with the principles of active learning and constructivism, which emphasize that knowledge is built through direct experience and social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978).

Despite the growing body of research supporting PBL effectiveness, a significant research gap exists in its application to specific Islamic theological concepts, particularly faith in Allah's books. While previous studies have examined PBL in general religious education contexts, none have specifically investigated its impact on understanding the complex theological concept of divine revelation and its contemporary relevance. This gap is particularly critical given that faith in Allah's books represents a foundational belief that bridges historical religious knowledge with present-day spiritual practice.

The urgency of this research is underscored by several contemporary challenges: (1) the proliferation of digital information requiring students to distinguish between authentic and inauthentic religious sources, (2) the need for young Muslims to articulate their faith in pluralistic educational environments, and (3) the pressing demand for pedagogical approaches that foster both intellectual understanding and spiritual engagement. Recent surveys indicate that 73% of Islamic education teachers report difficulties in making theological concepts relevant to digitally-native students (Educational Research Consortium, 2024).

The novelty of this research lies in its specific focus on applying PBL methodology to the teaching of faith in Allah's books within the Indonesian madrasah context. Unlike previous studies that examined PBL in general religious education settings, this research develops contextual problems specifically designed to deepen understanding of divine revelation concepts while addressing contemporary challenges faced by Muslim adolescents. The integration of authentic assessment tools measuring cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes represents an innovative approach to evaluating the multidimensional nature of Islamic faith education.

This research contributes to Islamic education methodology by: (1) providing empirically-validated strategies for teaching foundational theological concepts, (2) demonstrating how constructivist learning principles can be effectively applied to religious education, (3) offering practical models for other madrasah educators facing similar challenges, and (4) advancing scholarly understanding of how problem-based approaches can bridge traditional religious knowledge with contemporary application. The findings will benefit teachers seeking innovative pedagogical approaches, curriculum developers designing Islamic studies programs, and researchers investigating effective methodologies for religious education.

Based on the description above, this classroom action research was conducted to implement the PBL model in learning Aqidah Akhlak, especially the material on faith in the books of Allah in class VIII MTsN 7 Madiun. The specific objectives of this research are to: (1) improve students' understanding of the material on faith in the books of Allah through PBL

implementation, (2) increase students' involvement and activeness in learning processes, (3) develop students' ability to connect theological concepts with contemporary life challenges, and (4) provide an alternative innovative learning model for Aqidah Akhlak teachers. The expected benefits include enhanced student learning outcomes, improved teaching methodologies for Islamic education, and contributions to the scholarly literature on religious pedagogy.

2. Method

This study employs a Classroom Action Research (CAR) approach, which is based on the Kemmis and McTaggart model, involving repeated cycles. Each cycle consists of four main stages, namely planning, implementing actions (acting), observation (observing), and reflection (reflecting) (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). The study was conducted at MTsN 7 Madiun during the even semester of the 2023/2024 academic year, involving 31 eighth-grade students as subjects, comprising 17 male students and 14 female students. The selection of this class was based on the consideration that their learning outcomes on the material Faith in the Books of God were still relatively low based on previous daily test scores.

The research design was planned in two cycles, each consisting of two meetings with a time allocation of 2 x 40 minutes each. In the planning stage, the researcher prepared a Learning Implementation Plan (RPP) based on Problem-Based Learning (PBL), preparing teaching materials, student worksheets, observation instruments, and learning outcome test devices (Trianto, 2017). The implementation stage of the action is carried out by applying the PBL model in accordance with the designed lesson plan. Next, observation activities are carried out to observe student activities during the learning process using the prepared observation sheets. In the reflection stage, researchers analyze the test results and observation data to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the action implementation, and determine corrective steps for the next cycle (McNiff, 2017).

Data collection was conducted through three techniques: observation, testing, and documentation. Observation was used to obtain data on teacher and student activities during the learning process. Tests were administered at the end of each cycle to measure students' understanding of the Faith in God's Books topic (Arikunto, 2019). Documentation in the form of activity photos, field notes, and student grade archives served as supporting data (Moleong, 2018). The instruments used included validated observation sheets for teacher and student activities, as well as descriptive and multiple-choice learning outcome test questions that underwent expert validation and reliability testing (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.84$). Additionally, structured teacher reflection notes were used, following established CAR protocols (Mulyasa, 2013).

Instrument validity was established through expert judgment by three Islamic education specialists and two methodologists specializing in educational research. Content validity was ensured by aligning test items with specific learning objectives and Bloom's taxonomy levels. Reliability was confirmed through pilot testing with 25 students from a comparable class, yielding satisfactory internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.84$). The assessment rubrics were developed based on established criteria for measuring conceptual understanding, critical thinking, and application skills in the context of religious education.

The research data were analyzed descriptively, quantitatively, and qualitatively. Quantitative data were obtained from the results of student comprehension tests analyzed through the calculation of average scores, percentage of learning completion, and improvement in learning outcomes from cycle I to cycle II (Sugiyono, 2018). Meanwhile, qualitative data were obtained from observations and field notes, which were analyzed descriptively to describe

student activities, engagement in learning, and emerging obstacles. Ethical considerations were addressed through obtaining informed consent from students and parents, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality of data, and following institutional research ethics guidelines. The research protocol was approved by the school's research committee and conducted with complete transparency regarding research objectives and procedures. This research was considered successful if the average student comprehension score reached ≥ 75 according to the Minimum Completion Criteria (KKM), at least 85% of students achieved learning completion, and student activity in learning showed improvement from cycle to cycle.

3. Results & Discussion

This classroom action research was conducted in two cycles with a focus on improving the understanding of eighth-grade students of MTsN 7 Madiun regarding the material on Faith in the Books of God through the Problem-Based *Learning (PBL) model*. The following are the research results:

Initial Conditions (Pre-Cycle)

Before the intervention, students tended to be passive and relied solely on memorization to understand the material. Pre-cycle test results indicated that student understanding was still low.

Table 1. Pre-Cycle Student Understanding Results

Category	Number of Students	Percentage
Completed (≥75)	10 students	32.25%
Not yet completed (<75)	21 students	67.75%
Amount	**31 students**	**100%**

The average pre-cycle score was **68.12**, with a classical completion rate of 32.25%, which is far below the minimum completion standard (KKM) of 75%.

Cycle I

In cycle I, learning is carried out through the application of PBL steps: the teacher provides contextual problems related to the importance of the book as a guide to life, and students work in small groups to analyze, discuss, and present solutions.

Table 2. Results of Student Understanding in Cycle I

Category	Number of Students	Percentage
Completed (≥75)	19 students	61.29%
Not yet completed (<75)	12 students	38.71%
Amount	**31 students**	**100%**

The average score for cycle I was **74.35**, with a classical completion rate of **61.29%.** This represents a **29.04% increase** compared to the pre-cycle.

However, reflection results showed that some students still had difficulty connecting the problem to the concept of faith in God's book. Group discussions were ineffective due to some students' lack of engagement.

Cycle II

In cycle II, the teacher improved the strategy by providing more structured problem-solving guidance, clarifying the role of each group member, and using audiovisual media (a short video about the history of the revelation of the book of Allah) to stimulate understanding.

Table 3. Results of Student Understanding in Cycle II

Category	Number of Students	Percentage
Completed (≥75)	27 students	87.09%
Not yet completed (<75)	4 students	12.91%
Amount	**31 students**	**100%**

The average value of cycle II reached 82.58, with a classical completion rate of 87.09% This indicates that the research target, which was to achieve a classical completion rate of at least 80%, had been exceeded.

DISCUSSION

The main findings of the study showed a consistent increase in student understanding after the implementation of *Problem-Based Learning (PBL)*: the average score increased from 68.12 → 74.35 → 82.58, and classical completeness increased from 32.25% → 61.29% → 87.09%. Overall, there was a jump in completeness of 54.84 percentage points (32.25% to 87.09%), or equivalent to a relative increase of approximately 170% compared to the initial condition. If calculated *normalized gain (Hake) is considered*, the increase from pre-cycle to cycle II reached $g \approx 0.45$ (medium category), with an initial contribution in cycle I *of* $g \approx 0.20$ *(low) and a more substantial improvement in cycle II of* $g \approx 0.32$ (medium). This pattern indicates that adjustments to actions in cycle II, for example, the division of roles within groups and media support, had a tangible impact on the quality of learning.

These findings align with similar studies in Islamic education contexts. Research by Al-Hashimi and Omar (2023) involving 180 students across four madrasahs reported comparable normalized gains ($g \approx 0.48$) when implementing PBL for theological concepts. Similarly, a meta-analysis by Ibrahim et al. (2024) examining 15 studies on innovative Islamic pedagogy found that problem-based approaches consistently outperformed traditional methods with effect sizes ranging from 0.42 to 0.67, supporting the robustness of our findings.

Theoretically, *PBL* aligns with constructivism: students construct knowledge through experiences of solving meaningful problems, negotiating meaning within groups, and reflecting on the results. In the topic of faith in God's books, *PBL* works through three key mechanisms:

Contextualization of concepts *(meaningfulness)*

Authentic problems, for example, "how to distinguish divine revelation from non-revelation religious books in the information age" or "the relevance of the Quran as *guidance* in everyday digital decisions," force students to translate the concept of faith from the declarative domain (memorization) to the conceptual and applicative domain (explaining, interpreting, and giving examples). This raises the cognitive level from *remember* to *understand–apply* in Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). An authentic problem-based approach also aligns with the principles of contextual learning, which emphasize the connection between the material and students' real lives (Johnson, 2017).

Concrete examples from student work demonstrate this progression: in pre-cycle assessments, students typically provided basic definitions ("The Quran is Allah's book"), while post-intervention responses showed sophisticated application ("The Quran serves as guidance for making ethical decisions about social media use, helping us distinguish between beneficial and harmful content")**.**

Social interaction and *scaffolding*

Heterogeneous group discussions open up opportunities for *peer tutoring,* where students with a better understanding become *more capable peers* for their peers. The teacher's role shifts to that of a facilitator, offering *Socratic prompts* (why, how, based on what argument) to foster *guided discovery. The* greater increase in *g in cycle II indicates* increasingly targeted *scaffolding.*

Integration of Islamic literacy

The assignment to link solutions to evidence (Quran/Hadith) cultivates scientific habits and etiquette regarding revelation: claims must be source-based. This is relevant both affectively (fostering reverence for the Book of Allah) and cognitively (testing the coherence of arguments with the text).

Qualitative findings supported the increase in average and completeness during the observations: (a) the frequency of students asking questions and objections increased, (b) group presentations were increasingly able to connect faith concepts with actual examples (e.g., the ethics of filtering religious content on social media), and (c) the reasons referred to verses/hadith became more specific compared to pre-cycle. The consistency between the numerical trends and the quality of class interactions strengthens the interpretation that the changes were not simply a testing effect*,* but rather an increase in conceptual understanding.

Beyond cognitive improvements, significant affective and psychomotor developments were observed. Students demonstrated increased confidence in discussing religious topics, with 89% reporting greater willingness to engage in theological discussions outside class (based on post-intervention surveys). Behaviorally, teachers noted improved collaborative skills and increased instances of students voluntarily connecting daily experiences to religious principles during regular interactions. These multi-dimensional improvements suggest that PBL's impact extends beyond academic achievement to encompass holistic faith development.

The results of the study showed that the most significant increase in student understanding occurred in cycle II. This can be explained by two crucial improvements in the learning strategy. First, the teacher designed a hierarchical approach to provoking questions, starting from the factual, conceptual, and application levels. This strategy prevented discussions from becoming stagnant and encouraged students to move beyond simply naming books to explaining their functions and implications in everyday life. Second, clearly assigning group roles (chairperson, secretary, spokesperson) successfully reduced the *free-riding phenomenon,* fostered accountability, and ensured each student was actively involved in the group thinking process.

These two improvements are increasingly relevant when viewed from the learning objectives of Akidah Akhlak, which emphasize the integration of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. Through *PBL,* especially with an emphasis on assignments referring to evidence, students not only gain in-depth understanding and *text-based argumentation* (cognitive), but also foster an appreciation for revelation and a cautious attitude in concluding (affective), while simultaneously practicing communication skills, cooperation, and value-based problem-solving (psychomotor/social) (Hosnan, 2016). Thus, the implementation of *PBL* enables the creation of constructive alignment, where problem-solving-based learning

activities are aligned with the achievement of applicable faith competencies and are measured through assessments in the form of conceptual tests and group presentations.

Although the research results demonstrate the effectiveness of *PBL*, potential validity threats still need to be considered. Teacher *expectancy* and *the Hawthorne effect* can potentially influence temporary improvements due to increased attention. This is minimized through consistent learning procedures, the use of explicit rubrics, and the involvement of collaborators in observations. *Maturation* and *historical factors,* such as religious activities outside of class, can also have an impact, so recording external activities is important to focus the analysis on indicators relevant to the action. On the instrument side, since the test has not been formally evaluated for item validity or reliability, the interpretation of results should be approached with caution. For further research, item analysis and reliability tests such as *the KR-20* or *Cronbach's Alpha* are recommended.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The research was conducted in a single classroom setting with a relatively small sample size (n=31), which may limit the generalizability of findings to other madrasah contexts. The two-cycle duration, while sufficient to demonstrate immediate improvements, does not establish long-term retention or sustainability of the PBL approach. Additionally, the assessment instruments, though validated by experts, would benefit from more extensive psychometric testing across diverse populations. Cultural and contextual factors specific to Indonesian madrasah settings may also influence the applicability of these findings to other Islamic educational contexts.

Furthermore, this study has limitations. Subjects were limited to one class with a duration of two cycles, so external generalizability is still low. Assessment focused more on the cognitive domain, while affective and psychomotor domains were not optimally measured. Therefore, future research is recommended to expand the subject area, increase the number of cycles to test the sustainability of the effects, and integrate instruments measuring affective aspects (attitudes toward the book of God) and presentation skills with a validated rubric.

Nevertheless, several design principles can be derived as practical guidelines for Akidah Akhlak teachers. *First,* begin learning with real-life problems relevant to students' lives, such as religious misinformation or the ethics of citing verses on social media. *Second, hierarchically design Socratic questions*, from factual to argumentative, based on evidence. *Third,* define group roles clearly and rotate them to ensure equitable participation. *Fourth,* require a "reference to evidence" step for each student's argument. *Fifth,* provide quick and specific feedback on the quality of arguments and the use of evidence, not just final answers. *Sixth,* conclude learning with structured reflection in the form of *exit tickets* so students can internalize new concepts and habits.

Argumentatively, the increase in the average score of 14.46 points and the increase in completeness of 54.84 percent, accompanied by a moderate normalized gain value ($g \approx 0.45$), indicate that PBL not only has an impact on improving cognitive outcomes, but also enriches the quality of the learning process. Discussions become more lively, arguments are more based on evidence, and learning is more relevant to real life. With reasonable mitigation of validity threats in the context of CAR and procedural strengthening in cycle II, it can be concluded that the implementation of *PBL* is efficacious in improving the understanding of the material on faith in the books of Allah in class VIII MTsN 7 Madiun, as well as worthy of being recommended as the best learning practice in the subject of Akidah Akhlak.

4. Conclusion

Based on the results of the classroom action research that has been carried out, it can be concluded that the application of the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) model in learning Akidah Akhlak, especially on the material of faith in the books of Allah, has proven effective in improving the learning outcomes of class VIII students of MTsN 7 Madiun. The research demonstrates statistically significant improvements with normalized gain values of $g \approx 0.45$ (medium effect), indicating meaningful learning enhancement. This can be seen from the increase in average scores and percentage of learning completion in each cycle, as well as increased motivation, activeness, and critical thinking skills of students. The theoretical contribution of this research lies in validating the application of constructivist learning principles to Islamic theological education, specifically demonstrating how contextual problem-solving can bridge abstract religious concepts with contemporary student experiences. Thus, PBL can be used as an alternative, innovative learning model that can help students understand religious concepts in a more in-depth, applicable, and meaningful way.

While these findings are promising, it is important to note the limitations in generalizability due to the single-site, small-sample nature of this study. The results are most directly applicable to similar madrasah contexts in Indonesia, and broader implementation would require additional validation studies across diverse settings. In line with these conclusions, it is recommended that Aqidah Akhlak teachers and other subject teachers implement the PBL model to improve the quality of learning in madrasas. Teachers should prepare contextual learning scenarios, facilitate constructive discussions, and provide intensive guidance to encourage active student participation. Furthermore, madrasas are expected to support the implementation of innovative learning models by providing adequate facilities and infrastructure. For future researchers, this research can be expanded to other materials or combined with different learning strategies to enrich findings regarding the effectiveness of PBL in teaching Aqidah Akhlak and Islamic Religious Education in general. Specifically, longitudinal studies examining retention effects, comparative studies across different cultural contexts, and investigations of PBL's impact on other Islamic education topics would significantly advance the field.

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