

TRANSFORMING EARLY CHILDHOOD RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN GAYO LUES: TOWARD CRITICAL AND CONTEXTUAL LEARNING

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the transformation of early childhood religious education in Gayo Lues toward a critical and contextual learning model. Early childhood religious education in Gayo Lues remains predominantly conventional and memorization-oriented, with limited attention to children's developmental reasoning and contextual understanding of religious values. This condition reduces the responsiveness of religious learning to contemporary challenges that require creativity, reflection, social empathy, and adaptive religious character. Employing a qualitative field study, this research investigates religious-based early childhood education institutions in Gayo Lues through observations, interviews, and documentation involving teachers, parents, and educational managers. The findings indicate that the transformation of religious learning occurs through the integration of Islamic values with Gayo local culture, active and dialogical learning strategies, interactive media, and habituation of religious values in children's everyday lives. This model enhances children's participation, age-appropriate reasoning, social empathy, and practical understanding of religious values. The study concludes that early childhood religious education should move beyond knowledge transmission toward a critical, contextual, and humanistic pedagogical model that accommodates children's developmental needs while responding to the challenges of contemporary life.

Keywords: transformation of religious education, early childhood education, critical learning, contextual learning, Gayo Lues culture

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis transformasi pendidikan agama pada anak usia dini di Gayo Lues menuju model pembelajaran yang kritis dan kontekstual. Pendidikan agama anak usia dini di Gayo Lues masih cenderung berlangsung secara konvensional dan berorientasi pada hafalan, sehingga belum sepenuhnya mengembangkan kemampuan bernalar sesuai tahap perkembangan anak serta pemahaman kontekstual terhadap nilai-nilai agama. Kondisi tersebut menjadikan pembelajaran agama kurang responsif terhadap tantangan kehidupan kontemporer yang membutuhkan kreativitas, kemampuan reflektif, empati sosial, dan karakter keagamaan yang adaptif. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan studi lapangan pada lembaga pendidikan anak usia dini berbasis keagamaan di Gayo Lues. Data diperoleh melalui observasi, wawancara, dan dokumentasi dengan melibatkan guru, orang tua, dan pengelola lembaga pendidikan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa transformasi pembelajaran agama dilakukan melalui integrasi nilai-nilai Islam dengan budaya lokal Gayo, penerapan pembelajaran aktif dan dialogis, penggunaan media interaktif, serta pembiasaan nilai agama dalam kehidupan sehari-hari anak. Model ini meningkatkan partisipasi, kemampuan bernalar, empati sosial, dan pemahaman praktis anak terhadap nilai-nilai agama. Penelitian menegaskan perlunya pergeseran pendidikan agama anak usia dini dari transfer pengetahuan menuju pembelajaran kritis, kontekstual, dan humanis.

Kata kunci: transformasi pendidikan agama, pendidikan anak usia dini, pembelajaran kritis, pembelajaran kontekstual, budaya Gayo Lues

Background

The development of technology and social changes in the modern era bring new challenges in the world of education, including early childhood religious education. So far, religious learning in early childhood in various regions, including in Gayo Lues Regency, still tends to use conventional methods oriented to memorization and lectures.

This learning pattern causes children to receive more information passively without being given space to think critically, ask questions, and understand religious values in the context of daily life. As a result, religious education has not been fully able to form the character of children who are



creative, reflective, and adaptive to the development of the times.¹

On the other hand, the Gayo Lues community has a rich local culture and strong religious values so that it has the potential to be a contextual source of learning for early childhood. The integration of Islamic values with local culture can be an effective strategy in building religious learning that is closer to children's social experiences. However, in practice, religious learning still emphasizes theoretical aspects rather than applicative and participatory approaches. This condition shows the need to transform the religious learning model that focuses not only on knowledge transfer, but also on character development, critical thinking skills, social empathy, and children's creativity from an early age.²

Based on these conditions, the transformation of early childhood religious education in Gayo Lues is important to be studied in order to present a critical and contextual learning model. This study aims to analyze how the integration of local culture, active learning methods, interactive media, and religious habits can support character development and critical thinking skills in early childhood. Through this approach, religious education is expected to be able to be a means of forming a generation that is religious, humanist, and able to face the challenges of modern life without losing the cultural identity and Islamic values owned by the Gayo Lues community.

Research on early childhood religious and value education indicates that learning at this stage needs to move beyond symbolic instruction, memorization, and teacher-centered practices

toward meaningful experiences that enable children to internalize values in their everyday lives. Sahrono Harahap et al.,³ in their study entitled *Pancasila and Early Childhood Education: Ideological Discourse or Contextual Needs of the 21st Century?*, found that many early childhood education institutions still rely on symbolic approaches, such as memorizing Pancasila principles and participating in ceremonies, while contextual learning based on children's concrete experiences remains limited. Nevertheless, the study identified positive practices through narrative methods, social games, and simple reflection that can support the internalization of values. Similarly, Nisna Nursarofah's study,⁴ *Improving the Quality of Early Childhood Education through Contextual Learning with an Independent Learning Approach*, emphasizes the importance of connecting learning materials with children's real-life experiences while providing opportunities for independence and creativity. These studies demonstrate that value education in early childhood becomes more meaningful when children are actively involved in experiences rather than positioned merely as recipients of information. However, both studies focus primarily on Pancasila or general educational values and do not specifically examine the transformation of Islamic religious education through children's everyday religious and cultural experiences

The second theme concerns critical learning and its alignment with children's developmental characteristics. Critical thinking in early childhood should not be equated with the abstract reasoning or complex argumentation expected of older

¹ Suryanti Suryanti et al., "Development of Snake and Ladder Media Based on Local Wisdom to Improve the Introduction of Concepts of Numbers 1-20 and Gross Motor of State Kindergarten Children of Pembina, Pecalongan District, Batang Regency," *Educational Research Media: Research Journal in the Field of Education and Teaching* 19, no. 2 (2025): 337–63, <https://doi.org/10.26877/mpp.v19i2.22665>.

² Eliyil; AKBAR, *International Early Childhood Islamic Education: integration of local, national and international values in Yogyakarta and Magetan* (Postgraduate UIN Sunan Kalijaga, 2022), Yogyakarta, https://lib.pps.uin-suka.ac.id/index.php?p=show_detail&id=15753&keywords=pendidikan+anak+usia+dini; Mardiyana Faridhatul

Anawaty, *EARLY CHILDHOOD STEAM EXPLORATION* (Bayfa Cendekia Indonesia, 2025).

³ Sahrona Harahap dkk., "Pancasila Dan Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini: Wacana Ideologis Atau Kebutuhan Kontekstual Abad 21?," *Journal of Early Childhood Education Studies* 5, no. 1 (2025): 27–40, <https://doi.org/10.54180/joeces.v5i1.475>.

⁴ Nisna Nursarofah, "Meningkatkan Kualitas Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini Melalui Pembelajaran Kontekstual Dengan Pendekatan Merdeka Belajar," *Journal Ashil: Jurnal Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini* 2, no. 1 (2022): 38–51, <https://doi.org/10.33367/piaud.v2i1.2492>.



learners. Rather, it can be developed through age-appropriate reasoning activities, including asking questions, observing, comparing, identifying simple cause-and-effect relationships, expressing opinions, making choices, providing simple explanations, and reflecting on concrete experiences. Siti Nurdiani's study⁵, *Improving Early Childhood Critical Thinking Skills through Contextual Science Learning at RA Al-Hidayah*, demonstrates that contextual science learning can improve children's ability to observe, reason, and draw simple conclusions. Likewise, Uswatun et al., in *Descriptive Analysis of the Application of the BCCT Learning Model in Developing Critical Thinking Skills in Early Childhood*,⁶ found that play-based learning through learning centers can stimulate children's cognitive and critical thinking development. These findings suggest that critical learning for young children is most appropriate when it is experiential, dialogical, play-based, and connected with concrete situations. Nevertheless, the existing studies primarily examine critical thinking within science, cognitive, or general learning contexts, leaving the development of age-appropriate reasoning through Islamic religious learning insufficiently explored

A third body of literature highlights contextual learning based on children's social, environmental, and cultural surroundings. Aris Kusmiran Winandar et al., in their study *Local Culture-Based Contextual Learning Model in Early Childhood Education in Papua*,⁷ demonstrate that integrating local culture into early childhood learning can increase children's participation and strengthen cultural identity. Their findings indicate that the mismatch between educational content and children's everyday environment can reduce

learning interest and active involvement, whereas culturally relevant learning provides more meaningful experiences. A similar finding is reported by Ilil Munadhifah et al. in *Application of Contextual Learning Methods through Gardening Activities to Improve Cognitive and Social Abilities of Early Childhood at RA Nurul Huda Bulusari Gempol Pasuruan*.⁸ The study shows that practical activities connected with children's immediate environment can support cognitive development, problem-solving, communication, cooperation, and empathy. Collectively, these studies establish that contextual learning can connect educational content with children's real-life experiences and social environments. However, contextual approaches have predominantly been applied to general early childhood education, science, environmental activities, or cultural learning, rather than to Islamic religious education integrated with a specific local religious culture

The fourth theme concerns the relationship between Islamic education and local cultural contexts, particularly the cultural setting of Gayo Lues. The Gayo Lues community possesses rich cultural traditions and strong religious values that provide potential resources for contextualizing Islamic education from an early age. Within this context, religious values can be introduced not only through formal instruction but also through storytelling, family habituation, social interaction, communal practices, local traditions, and everyday expressions of moral behavior. Such integration is consistent with the developmental characteristics of young children, who construct understanding through concrete experiences, imitation, interaction, habituation, and meaningful

⁵ Siti Nur Lela, "Meningkatkan Kualitas Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini Melalui Pembelajaran Kontekstual Dengan Pendekatan Merdeka Belajar," *TARBIYAH JURNAL: Jurnal Keguruan Dan Ilmu Pendidikan* 1, no. 02 (2023): 111–20, <https://journal.an-nur.ac.id/index.php/demo3/article/view/1677>.

⁶ Uswatun Uswatun dkk., "ANALISIS DESKRIPTIF PENERAPAN MODEL PEMBELAJARAN BCCT DALAM MENGENGEMBANGKAN KEMAMPUAN BERPIKIR KRITIS PADA ANAK USIA DINI," *Atthufulah: Jurnal Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini* 3, no. 1 (2022): 26–36, <https://doi.org/10.35316/atthufulah.v3i1.2425>.

⁷ Aris Kusmiran Winandar dkk., "Model Pembelajaran Kontekstual Berbasis Budaya Lokal Dalam Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini Di Papua," *Jurnal Ilmiah Wahana Pendidikan* 9, no. 4 (2023): 627–37, <https://jurnal.peneliti.net/index.php/JIWP/article/view/12755>.

⁸ Ilil Munadhifah dkk., "Penerapan Metode Pembelajaran Kontekstual Melalui Aktivitas Berkebun Untuk Meningkatkan Kemampuan Kognitif Dan Sosial Anak Usia Dini Di RA Nurul Huda Bulusari Gempol Pasuruan," *Jurnal Pendidikan Kritis Dan Kolaboratif* 1, no. 2 (2025): 412–16, <https://ojs.jurnalstuditindakan.id/jpkk/article/view/191>.



communication. Nevertheless, the existing studies reviewed above have not specifically examined how Gayo cultural experiences can become pedagogical resources for Islamic religious education in early childhood. While Winandar et al. demonstrate the importance of local culture in contextual early childhood education in Papua, the socio-religious context of Gayo Lues presents a different cultural setting in which Islamic values and local traditions are closely intertwined. Therefore, integrating Islamic values with Gayo culture provides an important basis for developing religious learning that strengthens children's religious identity while remaining connected to their social and cultural environment

Based on the thematic review, several research gaps can be identified. First, studies on early childhood value education have largely focused on Pancasila or general character education, while Islamic religious education has received less attention as a context for developing children's age-appropriate reasoning, reflection, creativity, and social empathy. Second, research on critical learning in early childhood has mainly been conducted in science, cognitive, or general learning contexts rather than religious education. Third, studies on contextual learning have demonstrated the benefits of connecting learning with children's environment and local culture, but the integration of such approaches into Islamic religious education remains limited. Fourth, although local culture-based learning has been studied in regions such as Papua, the cultural and religious context of Gayo Lues remains underexplored in early childhood Islamic education research. This study therefore offers novelty by examining the transformation of early childhood Islamic religious education through the integration of critical and contextual learning with Gayo local culture. The proposed transformation combines dialogical approaches,

active learning, interactive media, religious habituation, and children's everyday cultural experiences to develop age-appropriate reasoning, communication, creativity, social empathy, and practical understanding of religious values. Thus, this study positions early childhood Islamic religious education not merely as a process of transmitting religious knowledge, but as a contextual and participatory process of developing humanistic, religious, and adaptive character while maintaining the cultural identity of the Gayo Lues community

This study employed a qualitative research method with a field research approach to examine the transformation of early childhood religious education in Gayo Lues Regency toward a critical and contextual learning model. The choice of Gayo Lues is significant because early childhood education is increasingly expected to develop not only religious and moral values but also cognitive, language, social-emotional, and other developmental capacities. The current national standards for early childhood education explicitly position religious and moral values alongside cognitive and social-emotional development as core areas of child development.⁹ Nationally, the 2025 Gross Enrollment Rate for early childhood education was 36.19%, while Aceh reached 29.39%, indicating that access and quality of early childhood education remain important educational concerns.¹⁰ In this context, the study focuses on religious-based PAUD institutions in Gayo Lues and examines how Islamic values are translated into learning practices that are dialogical, active, contextual, and connected with Gayo local culture. The research was conducted from [month and year] to [month and year] in several purposively selected PAUD institutions characterized by the implementation of religious education, active

⁹ Pusat Standar &. Kebijakan Pendidikan, "Standar Nasional Pendidikan Pada Jenjang PAUD, Pendidikan Dasar, Dan Pendidikan Menengah | Pusat Standar & Kebijakan Pendidikan," diakses 2 September 2026, https://pskp.kemendikdasmen.go.id/standar-nasional-pendidikan-a/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

¹⁰ Badan Pusat Statistik Indonesia, "Angka Partisipasi Kasar (APK) Anak Yang Mengikuti Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini (PAUD) Menurut Provinsi - Tabel Statistik," diakses 2 September 2026, <https://www.bps.go.id/id/statistics-table/2/MTQzOSMy/rough-participation-rate-of-early-childhood-education-programs-by-province.html>.



learning, and contextualization of local cultural values.

Primary data were obtained through observations, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and documentation. The participants consisted of [number] teachers, [number] principals or institutional managers, [number] parents, [number] children, and [number] relevant education officials. Observations were conducted [number] times and focused on religious learning activities, teacher–child interactions, children’s participation, dialogical practices, interactive learning media, integration of Gayo cultural values, and religious habituation in daily activities. Interviews explored learning planning, teaching strategies, curriculum implementation, institutional policies, teacher development, children’s religious practices, parental involvement, and the relationship between Islamic values and Gayo cultural traditions. Documentary data included school profiles, curriculum documents, learning plans, activity records, photographs or videos, institutional policies, and other materials related to religious education and local culture. This design enabled the research to compare perspectives across teachers, institutional managers, parents, children, and education officials rather than relying on a single source of information. Such contextualization is consistent with the direction of contemporary PAUD curriculum development, which emphasizes holistic, competency-based, contextualized, and personalized learning.¹¹

The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, involving data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification.¹² Data condensation was undertaken by coding and categorizing empirical findings into themes concerning conventional religious learning, active and dialogical pedagogy,

contextual learning, integration of Gayo cultural values, religious habituation, children’s participation, and developmentally appropriate reasoning. The data were subsequently displayed thematically to identify similarities, differences, and patterns across institutions and participant groups, while emerging conclusions were continuously verified against the field evidence. Data credibility was strengthened through source triangulation, technique triangulation, and member checking. Source triangulation compared information from teachers, principals, parents, children, and education officials; technique triangulation compared observation, interview, and documentary evidence; and member checking involved confirming selected interpretations with relevant participants. This methodological framework was used to ensure that the resulting account represented the actual transformation of religious learning practices in Gayo Lues and not merely the normative expectations of religious or early childhood education.

Discussion of The Transformation of Early Childhood Religious Learning In Gayo Lues

The transformation of early childhood religious education in Gayo Lues is one of the important efforts in dealing with social changes and technological developments in the modern era. So far, religious learning in early childhood is still dominated by memorization and lecture methods that place children as passive learning objects.¹³ These learning patterns are considered to be less able to develop children's critical thinking skills, creativity, and contextual understanding of religious values in daily life. Therefore, early childhood education institutions in Gayo Lues have begun to update a more participatory and child-oriented learning model.¹⁴

¹¹ “Program Prioritas - Implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka,” diakses 2 September 2026, https://paudpedia.kemendikdasmen.go.id/program-prioritas/implementasi-kurikulum-merdeka?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

¹² Matthew B. Miles dkk., *Qualitative Data Analysis* (SAGE, 2014).

¹³ Sayyidah Ulul Nabila et al., "Habituation of Environmental Concern Values in Early Childhood Through Learning Principles," *Journal of Obsession : Journal of Early Childhood Education* 7, no. 1 (2023): 1105–18, <https://doi.org/10.31004/obsesi.v7i1.3859>.

¹⁴ Nabila et al., "Habituation of Environmental Concern Values in Early Childhood through Learning Principles."



The transformation of religious learning is carried out by integrating Islamic values with the local culture of the Gayo people.¹⁵ Religious values are not only taught through theory and memorization, but also through social traditions, behavioral habituation, and cultural activities that are close to the child's life. This approach makes it easier for children to understand the meaning of religious teachings because learning takes place according to the context of their social environment. In addition to strengthening religious understanding, the integration of local culture is also a means of preserving Gayo cultural identity from an early age.¹⁶

The integration of Islamic values with Gayo local culture is reflected in several cultural practices and moral concepts that can be transformed into developmentally appropriate learning experiences for young children. One important example is *Sumang*, a Gayo social norm that regulates appropriate behavior and interpersonal relationships and contains values such as respect, modesty, responsibility, honesty, self-control, social concern, and peace. Another cultural framework is *Sarakopat*, which represents a traditional system of social organization and collective responsibility within Gayo society. These cultural values can be introduced through simple stories, role-playing, daily habituation, and teacher-child dialogue, allowing children to understand religious values through concrete social situations rather than abstract explanations. Previous studies have shown that Gayo local wisdom has significant potential to support Islamic and character education because many of its social

norms have developed in close interaction with Islamic values¹⁷

In addition, Gayo cultural expressions such as *didong* and *melengkan* provide potential pedagogical resources through storytelling, oral expression, rhythm, language, and communal interaction. Research on Gayo educational traditions indicates that children's education historically involved listening to chants and folk narratives as well as learning religious values from local religious figures, demonstrating that oral and cultural traditions have long functioned as informal educational media. In the context of early childhood education, these cultural forms can be adapted into age-appropriate activities, such as Islamic stories delivered through Gayo-style oral narratives, simple songs or rhythmic expressions containing moral messages, role-playing based on *Sumang*, and classroom activities that encourage children to practice respect, cooperation, honesty, and care for others. Such integration positions Gayo culture not merely as cultural decoration but as a pedagogical context through which children construct an understanding of Islamic values from experiences that are familiar within their social environment. Research on the integration of Gayo cultural wisdom into Islamic education likewise indicates that local cultural values can provide a foundation for developing contextual and adaptive Islamic learning models.¹⁸

In practice, teachers begin to apply dialogical and active learning methods that involve children directly in the learning process. Children are given the opportunity to ask questions, express opinions, and engage in educational games based on religious values.¹⁹ Learning is no longer teacher-centered,

¹⁵ Siti Nur Lela, "Improving the Quality of Early Childhood Education Through Contextual Learning with an Independent Learning Approach," *TARBIYAH JOURNAL: Journal of Teacher Training and Education* 1, no. 02 (2023): 111–20, <https://journal.an-nur.ac.id/index.php/demo3/article/view/1677>.

¹⁶ Lela, "Improving the Quality of Early Childhood Education through Contextual Learning with an Independent Learning Approach."

¹⁷ Zulkarnain Zulkarnain dkk., "SUMANG: Norm of Gayo Community Within The Framework of Islamic

Education," *Al-Tahrir: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 19, no. 1 (2019): 53–69, <https://doi.org/10.21154/altahrir.v19i1.1550>.

¹⁸ Andika Hariyanto Surbakti, "PENDIDIKAN AKHLAK DALAM BINGKAI KEARIFAN LOKAL: STUDI PADA ADAT GAYO ACEH TENGAH," *TALIM: Jurnal Studi Pendidikan Islam* 4, no. 2 (2021): 202–21, <https://doi.org/10.52166/talim.v4i2.2654>.

¹⁹ Uswatun Uswatun et al., "DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF THE APPLICATION OF THE BCCT LEARNING MODEL IN DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD,"



but directed at exploratory activities that encourage children's curiosity. Through this approach, children learn to understand religious values simply and applicatively according to their developmental stage.²⁰

Field findings from one of the kindergartens in Gayo Lues City indicate that the implementation of dialogical learning has begun to transform the pattern of interaction between teachers and children. Based on observations of religious learning activities conducted by Silvi, the teacher did not merely deliver the material verbally but encouraged children to connect religious values with their everyday experiences. During the activity, Silvi²¹ asked simple questions such as, "Why should we share with our friends?" and "What should we do if our friend does not have any food?" One of the children, Andi,²² responded that food should be shared because "our friend also needs to eat." The teacher then followed up with guiding questions and asked Andi to provide an example from his experience of playing with his friends. This interaction indicates that religious learning was not limited to memorizing answers but was directed toward enabling children to provide simple reasons and connect religious values with concrete experiences.

Observation notes also showed differences in children's responses when learning was conducted through conversation and direct experience compared with one-way teacher explanations. During dialogical activities, Andi and several other children appeared more actively engaged by responding to questions, raising their hands, and sharing their experiences when asked to explain examples of sharing and helping others. Silvi gave the children opportunities to answer in their own words and did not immediately judge their

responses as correct or incorrect. Instead, she provided follow-up questions to help the children clarify their thoughts. This finding indicates that a dialogical approach to religious education can provide opportunities for the development of reasoning appropriate to children's developmental stages. However, the observation also showed that not all children responded spontaneously; some children still required prompting questions, repeated instructions, and teacher assistance before they were willing to express their opinions.²³

These findings also demonstrate that the transformation of religious learning does not occur uniformly and continues to face several implementation challenges. Teachers need to adjust their questions to children's individual language abilities and attention spans, while limited learning time means that not every child receives an equal opportunity to speak. From the family perspective, the continuity of religious habituation also depends on parental involvement at home. Thus, the experience observed at this kindergarten indicates that dialogical and contextual religious learning has the potential to develop children's age-appropriate reasoning, communication, and practical understanding of religious values. However, its effectiveness is strongly influenced by teachers' ability to manage classroom interactions, children's individual characteristics, available learning time, and the continuity of religious habituation between school and home.²⁴

The use of interactive learning media is also an important part of the transformation of religious education in Gayo Lues. Teachers use pictures, educational videos, Islamic stories, children's songs, and educational game tools to increase interest in early childhood learning.²⁵ The media helps children understand religious material in a

Atthufulah: Journal of Early Childhood Education 3, no. 1 (2022): 26–36, <https://doi.org/10.35316/atthufulah.v3i1.2425>.

²⁰ Uswatun et al., "DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF THE APPLICATION OF THE BCCT LEARNING MODEL IN DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD," 2022.

²¹ "wawancara dengan silvi salah satu Guru TK di Kota Gayo Lues pada tanggal 21 Juni 2026 pukul 10:00 WIB."

²² "mendengar pengakuan Andi salah satu murid silvi di TK tersebut."

²³ "wawancara dengan silvi salah satu Guru TK di Kota Gayo Lues pada tanggal 21 Juni 2026 pukul 10:00 WIB."

²⁴ "wawancara dengan silvi salah satu Guru TK di Kota Gayo Lues pada tanggal 21 Juni 2026 pukul 10:00 WIB."

²⁵ Silfi Nurdiani, *Improving Early Childhood Critical Thinking Skills Through Contextual Science Learning at RA Al-*



fun and not boring way. The presence of interactive media also shows that religious education is able to adapt to technological developments without eliminating the religious values that are the basis of learning.²⁶

In addition, religious learning is developed through the habituation of religious behavior in children's daily lives. Children are accustomed to praying together, sharing with friends, maintaining cleanliness, respecting parents and teachers, and applying the values of honesty and discipline.²⁷ This habit is an important part in shaping children's religious and social character from an early age. Thus, religious education not only functions as a transfer of knowledge, but also as a process of forming humanist morals and character.²⁸

The transformation of religious learning in Gayo Lues also has an impact on increasing the ability to think critically simply in early childhood. Children begin to be able to relate religious values to the situations they encounter in their daily lives. For example, children understand the importance of sharing through the experience of playing with friends or understanding the meaning of protecting the environment as part of religious teachings. This contextual approach makes learning more meaningful and easy for children to understand.²⁹

On the other hand, the involvement of parents and the community environment is also an important factor in supporting the successful transformation of early childhood religious education. Parents not only play the role of learning companions at home, but also instill religious values through daily examples. Collaboration between schools, families, and the community creates an educational environment

that is more conducive to the development of children's character as a whole.³⁰

Based on the results of an interview with SALID, S.Pd., M.M., who previously served as Acting Head of the Service and Head of Institutional Facilities and Infrastructure, it was explained that the transformation of early childhood religious education in Gayo Lues must be directed to learning that is adaptive to the development of the times without abandoning local cultural values and community religiosity. According to him, religious learning that emphasizes memorization is no longer enough to face the challenges of the current digital generation. Therefore, PAUD institutions need to develop creative, dialogical, and real-experience-based learning methods so that children are able to understand religious values more contextually and applicatively in daily life.³¹

Character Development And Critical Thinking Skills Of Children

The application of critical and contextual religious learning in early childhood in Gayo Lues was perceived by teachers and parents as contributing positively to children's character development. Rather than claiming a statistically significant effect, the findings indicate observable changes in children's participation, communication, social interaction, and application of religious values in everyday activities. Previously, religious learning tended to emphasize memorizing prayers, short Qur'anic chapters, and formal worship practices, with limited opportunities for children to explore the meaning behind the values they learned. Following the implementation of more dialogical and experience-based activities, teachers observed that some

Hidayah | AS-SABIQUN, June 28, 2024, <https://ejournal.stitpn.ac.id/index.php/assabiqun/article/view/4818>.

²⁶ Nurdiani, *Improving Early Childhood Critical Thinking Skills Through Contextual Science Learning at RA Al-Hidayah* | AS-SABIQUN, June 28, 2024.

²⁷ Winandar et al., "Contextual Learning Model Based on Local Culture in Early Childhood Education in Papua."

²⁸ Nurdiani, *Improving Early Childhood Critical Thinking Skills Through Contextual Science Learning at RA Al-Hidayah* | AS-SABIQUN, June 28, 2024.

²⁹ "Interview with SALID, S.Pd., M.M.Pl. Head of Service and Head of Institutional Facilities and Infrastructure). On April 20, 2026 at 16:00 WIB."

³⁰ Nurdiani, *Improving Early Childhood Critical Thinking Skills Through Contextual Science Learning at RA Al-Hidayah* | AS-SABIQUN, June 28, 2024.

³¹ "Interview with SALID, S.Pd., M.M.Pl. Head of Service and Head of Institutional Facilities and Infrastructure). On April 20, 2026 at 16:00 WIB."

children became more willing to ask questions, express simple reasons, participate in discussions, and relate religious values to situations encountered in their daily lives. These changes were also reflected in observable behaviors, such as sharing with friends, helping others, maintaining cleanliness, respecting teachers and parents, and demonstrating honesty during play activities. Thus, the findings suggest that critical and contextual religious learning provides children with opportunities to develop age-appropriate reasoning and a more practice-oriented understanding of religious values, although the extent of these changes varies according to children's individual characteristics and the consistency of religious habituation between school and home.³²

The development of children's critical thinking skills is carried out through learning activities that encourage children's curiosity and courage to ask questions. The teacher is no longer the only information center, but rather acts as a facilitator who directs children to find simple understanding through learning experiences.³³ Children are invited to discuss good behavior, social care, protecting the environment, and mutual respect as part of the implementation of religious values in daily life. In this way, children begin to get used to thinking simply about the causes and effects and meaning of an action³⁴

In addition, contextual learning helps to increase early childhood creativity through educational play methods, storytelling, social simulations, and interactive visual media. Children

are more active in expressing their ideas and feelings when the learning process is carried out in a fun way and close to their world.³⁵ These activities not only improve children's communication skills, but also build confidence in expressing opinions in the school and family environment. Creativity that develops from an early age is an important capital for children in facing social changes and technological developments in the future³⁶

Gayo's local culture-based religious learning also plays a role in shaping children's social empathy. Children are taught the values of helping, togetherness, respect for parents, and caring for others through social traditions that live in the Gayo society.³⁷ This habituation makes children understand that religious teachings are not only related to the relationship to God, but also the social relationship with the surrounding environment. Thus, religious education is a means of forming a humanist character that is relevant to the life of modern society³⁸

On the other hand, the habituation of religious activities in daily life is an important strategy in strengthening the character of early childhood. Children are accustomed to praying before studying, sharing food with friends, maintaining class cleanliness, and applying discipline and honesty in school activities.³⁹ The habituation is carried out repeatedly so that religious values are naturally embedded in children's behavior. Religious education is no longer understood only

³² Majid and Amir, *Early Childhood Critical Thinking Skills Development Through Contextual Mathematics Learning | AS-SABIQUN*.

³³ Nur Anisyah M.Pd.I et al., *Basic Concepts of Early Childhood Education* (CV. RA-Media Publishing, 2025).

³⁴ M.Pd.I et al., *Basic Concepts of Early Childhood Education*.

³⁵ Fatima Devi Rakhmasari et al., "The Effectiveness of Science Experiments in Improving the Critical Thinking Skills of Children Aged 5-6 Years," *Murhum : Journal of Early Childhood Education* 7, no. 1 (2026): 1600–1612, <https://doi.org/10.37985/murhum.v7i1.1845>.

³⁶ Rakhmasari et al., "The Effectiveness of Science Experiments in Improving the Critical Thinking Skills of Children Aged 5-6 Years."

³⁷ "Interview with SALID, S.Pd., M.M.Plt. Head of Service and Head of Institutional Facilities and Infrastructure). On April 20, 2026 at 16:00 WIB."

³⁸ "Interview with SALID, S.Pd., M.M.Plt. Head of Service and Head of Institutional Facilities and Infrastructure). On April 20, 2026 at 16:00 WIB."

³⁹ Tri Ayu Gutiawati and Betty Yulia Wulansari, "Development of Ponoragan Local Cultural Themes to Form the Character of Love for the Homeland in the Early Childhood Education Curriculum," *Journal of Education and Learning Dimensions* 10, no. 2 (2022): 167–81, <http://journal.umpo.ac.id/index.php/dimensi/article/view/4050>.



as a subject, but as a process of forming sustainable good habits.⁴⁰

The transformation of religious learning also has an impact on increasing children's reflective ability to understand their own behavior. Children begin to be able to distinguish between good and bad actions based on the experiences they have in the learning process. When children make mistakes, teachers do not immediately give punishments, but invite children to dialogue and understand the consequences of the behavior. This approach helps children learn to make simple decisions independently and take responsibility for their actions.⁴¹

The success of children's character development and critical thinking skills is also influenced by parental involvement in the educational process. Parents are important partners in the school in instilling religious and social values in the family environment.⁴² Parents' example in worship, being polite, and respecting others strengthens the learning that children receive at school. The synergy between family, school, and community creates a more effective educational environment in shaping the character of early childhood as a whole.⁴³

Based on the results of the interview with SALID, S.Pd., M.M., it was explained that the development of early childhood character in Gayo Lues is not enough to be done through a rote approach and formal discipline alone. According to him, religious education must be able to train children to think simply, understand moral values, and habit good social behavior from an early age. He also emphasized that religious learning based on local culture and children's real experiences is more effective in forming a generation that is

religious, humanist, and adaptive to the development of the times and modern technology.⁴⁴

Analysis

The transformation of early childhood religious learning in Gayo Lues indicates a shift from a predominantly traditional approach toward a more critical, contextual, and participatory model. Previously, religious learning was largely oriented toward memorization and one-way knowledge transfer, creating a tension between mechanical mastery of prayers and religious texts and children's understanding of the meaning behind them. The findings suggest that memorization is not necessarily ineffective, particularly for introducing short prayers, Qur'anic verses, and basic religious vocabulary, but it becomes less effective when used as the dominant learning strategy without opportunities for dialogue, experience, and reflection. Practices involving children's real-life experiences, questioning, storytelling, play, and simple reflection appear more appropriate for young children's developmental characteristics because they allow children to construct meaning from concrete situations rather than abstract explanations. Thus, the transformation does not require eliminating memorization, but repositioning it as one component within a broader pedagogical process that emphasizes understanding, habituation, and practice.

The integration of Islamic values with Gayo local culture further demonstrates that culture does not merely provide additional learning content but actively shapes the format of religious pedagogy. Gayo social values emphasizing togetherness,

⁴⁰ Aip Saripudin, *EDUTAINMENT MODEL IN EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING - Rajawali Press* (PT. RajaGrafindo Persada, 2021).

⁴¹ Ade Siti Fatimah et al., "TEACHERS' STRATEGIES IN PREVENTING BULLYING BEHAVIOR FROM AN EARLY AGE IN PAUD BAHROL IHSAN KAWASEN," *Intisabi Journal* 1, no. 2 (2024): 90–102, <https://doi.org/10.61580/itsb.v1i2.11>.

⁴² Saripudin, *EDUTAINMENT MODEL IN EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING - Rajawali Press*; Gutiawati and Wulansari, "Development of the Ponoragan

Local Cultural Theme to Form the Character of Love for the Homeland in the Early Childhood Education Curriculum."

⁴³ Sunarti Suly Eraku et al., "The Urgency of Natural Disaster Mitigation Learning through Local Wisdom in Early Childhood Education Teachers," *Journal of Obsession : Journal of Early Childhood Education* 7, no. 6 (2023): 7097–108, <https://doi.org/10.31004/obsesi.v7i6.5556>.

⁴⁴ "Interview with SALID, S.Pd., M.M.PlT. Head of Service and Head of Institutional Facilities and Infrastructure). On April 20, 2026 at 16:00 WIB."

mutual respect, responsibility, and social concern provide concrete situations through which religious concepts can be introduced to children. Local cultural practices and concepts such as *Sumang* and communal traditions can be translated into age-appropriate activities involving respect, sharing, cooperation, self-control, and caring for others. In this sense, Gayo culture provides the social vocabulary, examples, narratives, and behavioral contexts through which Islamic values become understandable to children. This finding extends previous research on local culture-based contextual learning by showing that cultural integration can function not only to strengthen children's cultural identity but also to mediate religious meaning-making. However, the effectiveness of this approach depends on whether teachers understand the local cultural values being used and are able to distinguish authentic cultural practices from merely symbolic cultural decoration.

The application of critical learning also needs to be understood in accordance with the cognitive development of early childhood. The findings do not indicate that young children engage in critical thinking in the same manner as adolescents or adults; rather, the critical dimension appears through developmentally appropriate reasoning, such as asking questions, comparing situations, identifying simple cause-and-effect relationships, expressing preferences, providing simple reasons, and relating religious values to personal experiences. Interactive stories, educational games, pictures, videos, and exploratory activities become effective when they are accompanied by teacher questioning and dialogue rather than being used merely as entertainment or passive visual media. The findings therefore support previous studies showing that contextual and play-based learning can stimulate children's reasoning and participation, while extending them by demonstrating how these approaches can be applied specifically to Islamic religious education. At the same time, the findings challenge a purely doctrinal model in which children's religious achievement is primarily measured through

memorization, because the ability to recite a prayer does not necessarily demonstrate that children understand when, why, or how the value contained in that prayer should be practiced.

The transformation also influences the development of children's humanistic and social character through religious habituation. Activities such as sharing with friends, maintaining cleanliness, respecting parents and teachers, helping others, and caring for the environment provide opportunities for children to translate religious concepts into observable behavior. The effectiveness of these practices appears to depend on repetition, concrete modeling by teachers, opportunities for direct practice, and consistency between school and home. Conversely, the model becomes less effective when teachers have limited time, when children receive unequal opportunities to participate, when interactive media are used without pedagogical guidance, or when religious habituation at school is not reinforced by parents. These conditions demonstrate that the transformation is not simply a matter of introducing new teaching techniques but requires teacher competence, culturally relevant learning resources, institutional support, parental involvement, and sufficient opportunities for experiential learning. Therefore, although the model is rooted in Gayo Lues, its broader application is possible in other regions if its core principles developmentally appropriate dialogue, contextual learning, active participation, religious habituation, and integration of locally meaningful cultural values are maintained while the specific cultural content is adapted to the social and religious context of each community

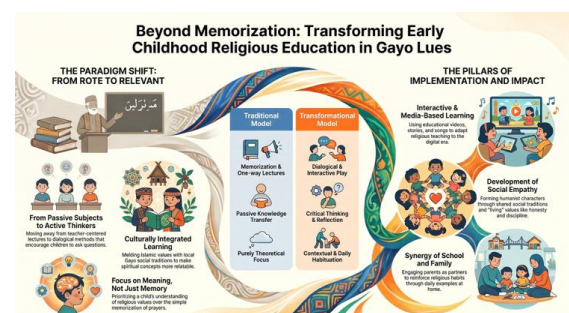


Figure 1. Process of Understanding, Discussion, and Analysis



Conclusion

The transformation of early childhood religious learning in Gayo Lues demonstrates a shift from a predominantly memorization-oriented model toward a more critical, contextual, and participatory approach. The integration of Islamic values with Gayo local culture, dialogical learning, interactive media, and religious habituation provides a theoretical contribution by extending the understanding of contextual religious education: religious learning for young children can be conceptualized not merely as the transmission of religious knowledge, but as a developmentally appropriate process of meaning-making through concrete experiences, social interaction, cultural practices, and habituation. The findings also reinforce the view that critical learning in early childhood should be understood through age-appropriate reasoning, such as asking questions, expressing simple opinions, identifying relationships between actions and consequences, and connecting religious values with everyday experiences.

Practically, the findings suggest several specific implications for early childhood education institutions. Teachers can integrate Gayo cultural values, such as respect, cooperation, responsibility, and social concern, into stories, role-playing, games, classroom dialogue, and daily religious habituation rather than treating local culture merely as supplementary material. School managers can support teachers through culturally relevant learning resources, training in dialogical and developmentally appropriate pedagogy, and the provision of interactive learning media. Parents can reinforce religious habituation through consistent practices at home, while education authorities can support the development of locally contextualized learning guidelines and teacher professional development. However, this study has several limitations. It was conducted in several religious-based PAUD institutions in Gayo Lues and relied primarily on qualitative observations, interviews, and documentation; therefore, the findings describe experiences and patterns within the specific research context rather than establishing

statistical effects or universal causal relationships. The transferability of the findings is consequently limited: the model may be relevant to other regions with similar characteristics, but its specific cultural components should not be directly replicated without adaptation to the local social, religious, and cultural context.

Future research should examine the implementation of this model across a wider range of early childhood institutions and different socio-cultural settings to determine which principles are transferable and which components require local adaptation. Further studies could also employ longitudinal or mixed-method designs to examine changes in children's developmentally appropriate reasoning, social-emotional competencies, religious practices, and character over a longer period. Comparative research between Gayo Lues and other culturally diverse regions would be particularly valuable for identifying how local culture shapes religious pedagogy. In addition, future research should investigate the role of parents, digital learning media, teacher competence, and institutional policy in sustaining contextual religious education, as well as developing and empirically testing a structured model of culturally responsive Islamic religious education for early childhood.

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Declarations

Author Contribution Statement

For the study entitled "*Transforming Early Childhood Religious Education in Gayo Lues: Toward Critical and Contextual Learning*," Author 1 contributed to the conceptualization of the study, formulation of the research objectives, research design, field data collection, data analysis and interpretation, and initial drafting of the manuscript. Author 2 contributed to the development of the research methodology, field data



collection involving teachers, parents, educational managers, and early childhood education institutions in Gayo Lues, as well as data analysis and interpretation. Author 3 contributed to the analysis of the integration of Islamic religious values with Gayo local culture and the critical and contextual learning model, and assisted in interpreting the research findings. All authors contributed to the critical revision of the manuscript, reviewed the final version, approved it for publication, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work, ensuring that questions related to the accuracy and integrity of the research are appropriately investigated and resolved.

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Data Availability Statement

The qualitative data generated and analyzed in this study, entitled “*Transforming Early Childhood Religious Education in Gayo Lues: Toward Critical and Contextual Learning*,” are not publicly available because the research involves early childhood participants, teachers, parents, and educational institutions, and the interview and observation data may contain confidential or potentially identifiable information. To protect participant privacy and comply with ethical considerations, the complete dataset is therefore not deposited in a public repository. Relevant supporting data may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request, provided that the request is academically justified and does not compromise participant confidentiality, privacy, or institutional requirements. Access to any shared data will be subject to appropriate ethical and confidentiality conditions.

Declaration of Interests Statement

The authors declare that there are no competing financial or non-financial interests associated with the study entitled “*Transforming Early Childhood Religious Education in Gayo Lues: Toward Critical and Contextual Learning*.” The authors have no financial relationships, consultancy arrangements, honoraria, stock ownership, patents, organizational affiliations, or personal or professional relationships that could reasonably be perceived as influencing the study design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of findings, manuscript preparation, or the decision to publish. The authors confirm that the research was conducted independently and that the interpretation of the findings reflects the evidence obtained from the study.

AI Use Statement

During the preparation of the manuscript entitled “*Transforming Early Childhood Religious Education in Gayo Lues: Toward Critical and Contextual Learning*,” the authors used **manual** solely to support language editing, including

grammar, clarity, academic phrasing, and readability. The authors independently reviewed, revised, and verified all AI-assisted text against the original research data, field findings, and cited sources. AI was not used to generate, analyze, or interpret the research data, nor to determine the study’s findings or conclusions. The authors remain fully accountable for the accuracy, originality, ethical integrity, and scholarly content of the manuscript.

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