Vol. 15, No. 04, pp. 2781-2801, 2025 DOI: 10.23960/jpp.v15i4.pp2781-2801

Jurnal Pendidikan Progresif

e-ISSN: 2550-1313 | p-ISSN: 2087-9849

http://jpp.fkip.unila.ac.id/index.php/jpp/

Enhancing Moral Reasoning and Engagement in Islamic Education: A Constructivist Intervention in Aqidah and Akhlak

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Received: 08 November 2025 *Accepted: 17 December 2025* *Published: 29 December 2025*

Abstract: Enhancing Moral Reasoning and Engagement in Islamic Education: A Constructivist Intervention in Aqidah and Akhlak. Objectives: This study aimed to investigate the effects of constructivist teaching approaches on students' engagement and moral reasoning in Aqidah and Akhlak (Islamic creed and morality). It sought to determine whether constructivist-based learning could foster active participation, critical reflection, and ethical awareness among students compared to conventional teacher-centered instruction. **Methods:** The research employed a quasi-experimental design involving two classes of 30 students each. The experimental group was taught using constructivist methods, including collaborative learning, inquiry-based instruction, and moral case studies. In contrast, the control group received traditional instruction focused on direct explanation and memorization. Data were collected through pre- and posttests using the Student Engagement Scale and the Moral Reasoning Test. Statistical analysis, including paired and independent t-tests and ANCOVA, was conducted using SPSS version 27. **Findings**: The study results revealed that the experimental group experienced a significant improvement in engagement and moral reasoning compared to the control group. Posttest scores indicated increased student engagement and moral reasoning, demonstrating that constructivist approaches effectively enhanced students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement, as well as their ability to reason about moral dilemmas grounded in Islamic values. **Conclusion**: Constructivist teaching strategies significantly improved both student engagement and moral reasoning in Islamic education. This study highlights the importance of integrating modern pedagogical approaches with Islamic educational principles to promote active learning and spiritual and moral development.

Keywords: constructivist learning, aqidah and akhlak, student engagement, moral reasoning, islamic education.

To cite this article:

Marzuki, Hatta, M., & Connaidi. (2025). Enhancing Moral Reasoning and Engagement in Islamic Education: A Constructivist Intervention in Aqidah and Akhlak. *Jurnal Pendidikan Progresif*, *15*(4), 2781-2801. doi: 10.23960/jpp.v15i4.pp2781-2801.

INTRODUCTION

The teaching of Aqidah and Akhlak (Islamic Creed and Morality) plays a crucial role in the framework of Islamic education. These two areas aim to shape beliefs, instill an understanding of Islamic concepts and principles in students, and serve as tools for cultivating ethical and moral values in accordance with divine laws (Zamsiswaya et al., 2024). Islamic Education, as a whole, seeks to harmonize intellectual, spiritual, and moral growth, creating individuals who remain true to the teachings of Islam. Therefore, the teaching of both Aqidah and Akhlak serves to convey religious truths to students and, more importantly, to shape their character and worldview for the future (Reeves et al., 2021).

Teaching techniques have often focused on rote memorization, lectures, and passive learning. It was assumed that students would memorize creed formulations or moral codes without deeply processing what it means for them to consider something important in their own lives.

Although this approach succeeded in maintaining doctrinal correctness, it often did not support students' critical, analytical, and moral thinking, as well as their personal spiritual experiences(Ahmedi et al., 2023). Consequently, learning was often confined to the cognitive level, while the affective and behavioral learning processes central to Islamic pedagogy were neglected. Educational paradigms have undergone significant changes over the past few decades. For example, the shift from a traditional teacher-centered model to learner-centered pedagogies reflects a growing awareness of fostering active, reflective, and self-directed learners (Ningsih et al., 2025). Among these pedagogical innovations, the constructivist approach has gained considerable attention.

Constructivism posits that learning is a dynamic, active process in which individuals construct their own understanding from prior experiences and social interactions (Thoha et al., 2025). Mohammed et al. (2020) emphasize that constructivism focuses on students' experiences, interactions, and inquiry, so students are not passive recipients of content but active agents in creating meaning. This method encourages students to "examine and investigate" material critically, question their perspectives, and apply it in real-life contexts, in line with the objectives that Aqidah and Akhlak education share (Sanderse, 2024). In constructivist teaching, knowledge is not transferred but built up. It is learned through active exploration, discourse, and reflection. Teachers act as scaffolding participants who help students find and absorb ideas, providing learners with access to questions, analysis, and connections between knowledge and their own lives(Amin & Lakhani, 2024). This pedagogical framework profoundly impacts Islamic Education.

By enabling learners to relate religious theory to lived experience, constructivism can play a significant role in developing faith, fostering personal reflection, and enhancing faith for personal development and morality by guiding moral decisions based on Islamic values (Mu'ti, 2023). In the process, it connects religious teaching with lived experience to encourage personal reflection and self-understanding, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of faith and informing moral decisions grounded in Islamic ethical standards (Sarangi & Ramachandran, 2024). Empirical studies in various educational contexts provide evidence that constructivist theories are more effective. Research suggests that project-based learning, problem-solving tasks, and inquiry-based instruction improve student engagement, creativity, and higher-order thinking skills, among other benefits. Reeves et al. (2021) and Ahmedi et al. (2023) stated that collaborative learning spaces foster conversations that contribute to the co-construction of knowledge, which is fundamental for developing social and moral understanding. In the fields of science and social studies, constructivist methods of instruction have been shown to lead to a deeper understanding of concepts and greater motivation to learn than traditional methods.

In Islamic education, recent research papers have examined the integration of constructivist theory with a faith-based education approach. Usman et al. (2025) showed that cooperative learning reinforced with Islamic ethical values not only enhances students' intellectual performance but also instills in them a sense of ukhuwah (brotherhood), empathy, and social responsibility. Similarly, Zamsiswaya et al. (2024) found that project-based learning strategies strengthen teacher identity, promote

Islamic behavior, and enhance students' active engagement with the material and their moral reflection. The findings of this study suggest that constructivist pedagogy is an appropriate complement to the moral and spiritual goals of Islamic education, enabling the development of both cognitive and practical ethical constructs.

Despite the initial findings being promising, the literature presents considerable research gaps. Many academic studies on constructivist learning have been undertaken in secular or general education environments, and most have focused on subjects such as mathematics, science, and social studies (Thoha et al., 2025). Empirical investigations that apply constructivist pedagogy to Islamic religious education, particularly in the domains of Aqidah and Akhlak, remain scarce. In particular, few studies have investigated how constructivist methods affect students' behavioral, emotional, or cognitive engagement in moral and faith-based learning environments. Furthermore, work on the influence of constructivist approaches on student moral reasoning, ethical judgment, and decision-making has been weak, fragmented, and insufficient (Wienmeister, 2025). On the other hand, the theoretical issues concerning the adaptation of constructivist perspectives in Islamic pedagogy have been well researched. However, concrete classroom information regarding the implementation of constructivist principles in the design of instruction, teacher/student relations, and student assessment is very limited (Agbaria, 2024). Moreover, this gap highlights that much of the discussion is still theoretical rather than data-based and conceptual rather than empirical. Mu'ti (2023) also noted that although Islamic pedagogy has long focused on moral formation, empirical studies examining the mechanisms by which instructional strategies affect the development of moral cognition and ethical reasoning among students are absent. Therefore, it is pertinent to conduct empirical studies that integrate constructivist theory with the challenges of Islamic moral education in practice to uncover how learner-centered approaches can foster learner engagement and develop students' moral understanding.

As mentioned earlier, constructivist approaches rooted in dialogue, reflection, and an understanding of context may foster moral cognition grounded in Islamic ethics (Sanderse, 2024). However, empirically, we know very little about the connections between constructivist pedagogy and measurable signs of students' moral and spiritual development. Studies such as Zamsiswaya et al. (2024) have largely examined constructivist approaches to enhancing learners' cognitive appreciation of Qur'anic ideas; however, how these strategies affect moral reasoning processes has not been investigated. Similarly, Usman et al. (2025) examined classroom engagement through collaborative learning but did not analyze its ethical and reflective aspects in the context of Islamic education. The originality of the current study lies in its theoretical integration with constructivist theory specific to Aqidah and Akhlak, linking pedagogical practice with moral and spiritual imperatives at the heart of Islamic education. Building on earlier research on constructivism as an abstract instructional approach, this study situates the method within the philosophical and theological contexts of Muslim education, exploring how inquiry-based learning, collaborative dialogue, and reflective moral case studies work together to foster student engagement and moral reflection. This twofold direction, connecting constructivist learning styles with the ethical aims of Islamic education, marks the study's significant contributions by addressing the pressing need for progressive yet tradition-guided pedagogical approaches appropriate to modern Islamic schools.

The study also offers practical implications for educators and curriculum planners. It also suggests ways in which it can be used constructivist ways into Aqidah and Akhlak

classrooms whilst keeping it firmly Islamic. The integration could mean a shift from lecture-based education to experiential learning and interactive, group discussion, including reflection on ethical quandaries, reflective journaling, the exchange of faith and social responsibility through a community project. In this way, students can not only acquire Islamic moral values in a deeper sense but also develop ethical reasoning that is both principled and grounded in a contextually appropriate context. In line with this rationale, the study is guided by the following research objectives:

1. To analyze how constructivist approaches influence student engagement in the teaching of Aqidah and Akhlak.
2. To examine the implications of constructivist teaching strategies for students' moral reasoning and ethical development.

By exploring these questions, this study aims to make theoretical and practical contributions. In theory, it links constructivist learning theory and Islamic educational philosophy, highlighting their shared focus on reflection, experience, and moral development. On a practical level, it offers teachers, as practitioners, evidence-based perspectives on improving teaching quality and learning outcomes in religious education. Thus, this study seeks to lend its voice to this broader trend, one towards modernizing Islamic education, not by softening its spirit but by enriching its pedagogical practices so that they meet the intellectual and moral demands of young people in their time.

This study highlights the need to re-evaluate historical pedagogical paradigms in the context of Aqidah and Akhlak education. Its discussion of these elements, how constructivist methods encourage deeper engagement, moral reasoning, and spiritual growth, helps inform the ongoing conversation in education around its innovations in Islamic contexts. We expect that the findings will assist educators, policymakers, and scholars alike in designing learning experiences that holistically cultivate and nurture the mind, heart, and soul of the learner, which is the true mission of Islamic education.

METHOD

Type and Design of Research

The study was conducted in the second semester at Madrasah Aliyah Al-Kifayah Riau in Pekanbaru, Indonesia, for two months. This school was selected for its commitment to pedagogical innovation and its preparedness to participate in classroom-based education research. Data collection spanned 6 months and consisted of planning, pretesting, intervention, and posttesting phases.

Population and Sample

For this study, the population consisted of all students enrolled in Aqidah Akhlak classes at Madrasah Aliyah Al-Kifayah Riau, an Islamic High School in Indonesia. The sample consisted of two classes, each of 30 students, for a total of 60 participants. One class (30 students) was assigned to the experimental group, and the other (30 students) to the control group. Teachers with similar credentials and teaching experience taught both classes to minimize instructor bias. The students selected for the experimental group were required to have the same level of ability as those chosen for the control group.

The sampling method utilized was purposive sampling, in which the researcher intentionally chose the two classes that fulfilled certain characteristics: Both classes were in the same grade level (Class XI).

1. Both had comparable academic performance in Aqidah Akhlak during the previous semester.
2. Both teachers agreed to follow the lesson plans provided by the researcher.
3. The classes had a manageable size (30 students), allowing effective implementation of constructivist learning strategies such as group discussion and moral reflection.

This quasi-experimental study uses purposive sampling, which is methodologically justified but susceptible to selection bias. This strategy was intentionally used to make the selection of the two classes based on their initial abilities more similar, so that differences in outcomes could be better linked to the treatment rather than prior disparities. Since classes had already been established at Madrasah Aliyah Al-Kifayah Riau, random assignment was not possible; thus, purposive sampling was an effective and ethical solution. By selecting classes taught by teachers with equivalent qualifications and teaching experience, the researcher was able to adjust confounders, thereby reducing instructor bias and increasing the study's internal validity.

However, purposive sampling has significant limitations for the generalizability of the results. Due to the purposive selection of participants, it is unknown whether the subjects are representative of the larger student population at Aqidah Akhlak, or, by extension, of students in other madrasahs and other contexts with diverse social influences. This presents a potential for selection bias, with unmeasured variables, such as students' motivation, socio-economic status, or learning habits, potentially affecting the findings. Thus, although the evidence for the constructivist approach's effectiveness in this study was extensive, the applicability of those results should be limited to other comparable settings. In general, purposive sampling strengthens the internal validity and contextual relevance of a quasi-experimental design, but it also limits the external validity and generalizability of the results.

Research Procedure

The research was conducted through several systematic stages to ensure methodological rigor and reproducibility.

Preparation Stage

The researcher received official permission from the school principal and ethical clearance from the institutional review board to conduct the study. Following this, lesson plans and teaching materials were prepared based on constructivist principles, including group problem-solving, reflective moral case studies, and peer dialogue. A training session was conducted only for the teacher assigned to the experimental class to ensure the constructivist approach was consistently followed. Although providing such training to only one teacher can introduce a teacher effect, it may affect results if differences in instructional delivery, enthusiasm, or classroom management affect students' attainment. To reduce this bias, two teachers were appointed based on similar academic qualifications, teaching experience, and subject knowledge. Additionally, the researcher observed classroom sessions to ensure that instruction was replicable and of consistent quality across the two groups. However, the influence of teacher-related variables cannot be eliminated and is thus recognized as a limitation of the study, potentially affecting the generalizability of the findings.

Pre-test and Post-test

Prior to the intervention, pretests were administered to both the experimental and control groups to assess student engagement and moral reasoning, serving as each group's baseline. The pretest data helped confirm that all groups were similar prior to treatment. Both groups completed the intervention and immediately took a posttest identical to the pretest in structure and content. The results revealed the effects of the constructivist approach on students' engagement and moral reasoning compared with the traditional approach.

Implementation of Intervention

The experimental treatment lasted 8 weeks and consisted of 16 learning sessions (2 per week, each lasting 90 minutes). The procedure for each group was as follows:

Table 1. Implementation of the intervention

Aspect	Experimental Group (Constructivist Approach)	Control Group (Conventional Approach)
Learning Philosophy	Student-centered learning emphasizes the active construction of knowledge from prior experience and reflection.	Teacher-centered learning focuses on knowledge transmission and rote memorization.
Learning Objectives	To enhance understanding of Aqidah and Akhlak concepts through exploration, collaboration, and moral reflection.	To ensure students can recall and restate Aqidah and Akhlak concepts accurately.
Instructional Activities	- Group collaboration to analyze and solve real-life moral dilemmas related to Aqidah and Akhlak.	- Direct instruction and explanation of Aqidah and Akhlak concepts by the teacher.
	- Inquiry-based learning, where students posed questions and explored Islamic teachings through guided discovery.	- Drill and memorization exercises emphasizing factual knowledge.
	- Reflective discussions connecting religious values with daily experiences.	- Teacher-led questioning with limited student participation.
	- Moral case studies and project-based assignments promoting ethical reasoning and social responsibility.	- Individual written exercises focused on reproducing textbook content.
	- Use of peer dialogue and cooperative learning to strengthen engagement and communication.	- Minimal peer interaction or discussion.
Teacher's Role	Facilitator, guide, and motivator who supports student inquiry and reflection.	Primary knowledge source and evaluator who directs classroom activities.
Student's Role	Active participants who construct meaning through dialogue, exploration, and moral reasoning.	Passive recipients of knowledge who listen, take notes, and reproduce learned material.
Learning Environment	An interactive and collaborative classroom emphasizing critical thinking and personal moral reflection.	Structured and formal classroom emphasizing discipline, accuracy, and content mastery.

Research Instruments

To generate quantitative and qualitative data, the research utilized four general instruments. The Student Engagement Scale, adapted from Fredricks et al. (2004), consisted of 20 items using a five-point Likert scale from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). This instrument assessed three dimensions of engagement: behavioral engagement, which indicated participation, effort, and attention; emotional engagement, which included students' interest, enjoyment, and enthusiasm; and cognitive engagement, which evaluated whether learning strategies were used and students' reflective thinking. The problem presented in the Moral Reasoning Test was created by the scholar and included five ethical questions based on Islamic moral principles. For each item, students had to select the best course of action and explain their choice. Responses were assessed descriptively using a three-tiered pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional reasoning framework aligned with Islamic moral standards. The three-level framework of moral reasoning used in our study, pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional, is conceptually derived

from Kohlberg's moral development framework. However, this adaptation is not meant to take Kohlberg's theory as a normative or value-based ethical model. In contrast, Kohlberg's framework serves as developmental scaffolding to organize moral reasoning, whereas the substantive moral standards and evaluative criteria are firmly rooted in Islamic ethical principles. As such, the framework does structural and analytical work rather than serving as a secular ethical reference. The application of Kohlberg's explanation to an Islamic moral world is that it is not interested in moral values, but in the pattern of moral belief. Kohlberg's stages account for how people justify a moral decision. At the same time, Islamic morality concerns what is right and wrong from a moral perspective, as defined by the Qur'an, Sunnah, and the objectives of Islamic law (maqâcid al-sharî¿ah) (Asfiyah, 2023).

The moral dilemmas, indicators, and assessment rubrics provided in this study were therefore developed using a method that reflects the teachings of Islam and the prophetic example of ethics, thereby ensuring theological and cultural soundness. In this framework, pre-conventional reasoning is seen as moral reasoning based around obedience, reward, or punishment avoidance, corresponding to the early phases of moral development, often emphasized in Islamic pedagogy via targhîb and tarhîb. Conventional thinking supports a social, collective, and religious obligation to adhere to collective or ritual behaviors, social norms, and practices within the Muslim community that are in accord with established religious beliefs and moral norms. Post-conventional reasoning, on the other hand, is not moral relativism nor self-guided individualism, but principled reasoning derived from ethical higher orders in Islam, such as justice (¿adl), public welfare (*macla%ah*), moral intention (*niyyah*), and accountability before God (*taqwâ*).

By integrating developmental psychology and Islamic moral epistemological approaches, our study presents Kohlberg's model as a descriptive hierarchy of reasoning development rather than a universal ethical doctrine. This method offers a culturally and theologically appropriate index of moral reasoning, while also preserving the methodological strength. Hence, the three-tier model applied in the present study is both appropriate and validated for examining the evolution of moral reasoning in Islamic Religious Education, as it maintains the relevance of Islamic moral norms while being underpinned by a robust analytical framework.

An Observation Sheet was also used during learning to observe and analyze teaching practices, student involvement, and interaction quality. Group cooperation, questioning behavior, and moral reflection were included in the checklist, enabling the researcher to systematically assess classroom dynamics and engagement in both experimental and control sessions.

As a counterpoint to the quantitative results, this research used an observation checklist to gather the classroom interactions during the learning process. Observational data highlighted distinct interactional patterns in the experimental group compared to the control group. Students frequently participated in dialogic exchanges in the experimental classrooms. For instance, they questioned their peers' moral justifications, extended one another's arguments, and collectively appraised alternative moral stances. Instead, interactions in the control group were mostly unidirectional, focusing primarily on teacher-led explanations and concise student responses that recalled moral rules rather than articulating moral reasoning. As part of the students' exploration of moral dilemmas in the experiment, students in the experimental group engaged with the subject's concepts and actively negotiated meaning through clarification, disagreement, and reinterpretation of Islamic moral principles. Such negotiation was evident when students compared the consequences of actions and the underlying intentions (*niyyah*), weighed individual benefits against collective welfare (*macla%ah*), and used Qur'anic or

prophetic values as both support and revision of positions. Such interactions reflect higher-order moral reasoning, since students are not only stating moral conclusions but also describing how they arrived at them.

Prior to use, the Student Engagement Scale and Moral Reasoning Test were adapted to the Indonesian Islamic education context, ensuring linguistic, cultural, and conceptual equivalence. The adaptation process was applied in accordance with international best-practice procedures, including translation, back-translation, expert validation, and pilot testing. This method was used to retain the meaning of each item and ensure its relevance to the target population in the Madrasah Aliyah Al-Kifayah Riau study group. The specific steps of the adaptation process and the construct validity results from the CFA testing are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Instrument adaptation and construct validity

Stage / Procedure	Description of Process	Outcome / Result
Initial Translation	The original *Student Engagement Scale* and *Moral Reasoning Test* were translated from English into Bahasa Indonesia by two bilingual experts in Islamic education and educational psychology.	Preliminary Indonesian version developed with accurate linguistic equivalence.
Back-Translation	The Indonesian versions were independently back-translated into English by a third bilingual expert not involved in the initial translation.	The comparison of the original and back-translated versions confirmed semantic consistency.
Expert Review (Content Validation)	Three experts (two in Islamic moral education and one in educational measurement) reviewed all items for clarity, cultural relevance, and alignment with content.	All items achieved a Content Validity Index (CVI) ≥ 0.80; minor wording adjustments were applied.
Pilot Testing	The adapted instruments were piloted on320 students from a similar madrasah to assess clarity, comprehension, and response consistency.	Feedback confirmed the instruments were understandable and contextually appropriate.
Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)	Conducted research on the sample (N = 60) to examine construct validity.	**Student Engagement Scale:** χ^2/df = 1.84, CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.052, SRMR = 0.041.
		Moral Reasoning Test: χ^2/df = 1.91, CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.055, SRMR = 0.046. All factor loadings = 0.61–0.82 ($p < .001$).
Finalization	Items confirmed through CFA and expert judgment were retained to ensure the validity and reliability of both instruments.	The final Indonesian versions of the Student Engagement Scale and the Moral Reasoning Test have been established as valid and reliable research tools for Islamic moral education.

As also observed in Table 2, adaptations successfully defined both instruments as linguistically and conceptually identical to their antecedents. We found that all fit indices of our CFA were acceptable (CFI > 0.90, TLI > 0.90, RMSEA < 0.08, SRMR < 0.08), and all factor loadings were significant ($p < .001$). Results further confirmed that the revised Student Engagement Scale and Moral Reasoning Test have high construct validity and can efficiently measure students' engagement and moral reasoning in Islamic moral education.

All research instruments were validated by experts in Islamic education and educational psychology to ensure content and construct validity. The reliability of the instruments was also considered in this study, with Cronbach's Alpha coefficients of 0.88 for the Student Engagement Scale and 0.85 for the Moral Reasoning Test, indicating good internal consistency.

Table 3. Validity and reliability of the research instruments

Instrument / Indicator (n items)	**Sub-Indicator / Item**	**r item–total**	**Validity**	**Cronbach's α (indicator)**
Student Engagement Scale (20 items)	Behavioral engagement (active participation, attention, and task completion)	0.56 0.74	Valid	0.88
	Emotional engagement (interest, motivation, and enjoyment in learning Aqidah Akhlak)	0.57 0.75	Valid	
	Cognitive engagement (critical thinking and connection between concepts and real-life moral values)	0.58 0.77	Valid	
	Social engagement (peer collaboration, respect, and group problem-solving)	0.59 0.78	Valid	
	Reflective engagement (self-evaluation and application of Islamic moral teachings)	0.60 0.79	Valid	
Moral Reasoning Test (20 items)	Moral awareness (identifying right and wrong based on Islamic values)	0.55 0.72	Valid	0.85
	Moral interpretation (understanding the reasoning behind ethical decisions)	0.56 0.73	Valid	
	Moral evaluation (assessing consequences and intentions in moral dilemmas)	0.57 0.75	Valid	
	Moral decision-making (choosing actions aligned with Qur'anic and prophetic values)	0.59 0.77	Valid	
	Moral reflection (linking personal experiences with religious moral principles)	0.60 0.78	Valid	
Overall Instrument	Combined total of 40 items	0.55 0.79	All valid	**0.88 (High Reliability)** for Student Engagement

	0.85 (High Reliability) for Moral Reasoning

Data Collection Technique

The data collection process in this study used multiple techniques to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the findings. First, the use of pretests and posttests in the experimental and control groups provided the main data for the study, measuring students' engagement and moral reasoning. Baseline scores from the pretest were obtained before implementing the constructivist learning approach, and the posttest was administered after the learning sessions to evaluate improvement and the approach's impact. In addition to the tests, classroom observation was conducted to assess the use of constructivist teaching strategies and to evaluate student participation, interaction quality, and overall engagement in the learning process during the lesson. This observational data served as supporting evidence for validating the quantitative results.

Data Analysis Techniques

For data processing, quantitative data were analysed using SPSS version 27, and several statistical procedures were performed. Descriptive statistics, such as mean and standard deviation, were computed first to summarize students' pretest and posttest results across both groups. After that, normality and homogeneity tests were made to ensure the data met parametric testing assumptions. Paired sample t-tests were run to compare pretest and posttest scores for the groups to assess within-group improvements. Independent-samples t-tests were subsequently conducted to compare posttest performance between the groups and to test whether a constructivist approach improved performance relative to traditional methods. Effect size (Cohen's d) was also computed to estimate the magnitude of improvement from the constructivist learning intervention. Lastly, Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was used to adjust for groups' existing differences to better estimate the treatment effect. This amalgamation of statistical methods not only confirmed the results but also established their veracity and the actual effects of constructivist teaching on students' involvement and moral reasoning.

■ RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings are divided into two main parts: (1) student engagement and (2) moral reasoning. The statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 27, including descriptive statistics, paired-samples t-tests, independent-samples t-tests, effect size calculations, and ANCOVA to adjust for baseline group differences.

Student Engagement

To examine the impact of constructivist teaching on student engagement in Aqidah and Akhlak courses, pretest and posttest scores were collected from both the experimental and control groups. The Student Engagement Scale was used to assess students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement before and after the intervention. Descriptive and inferential analyses were performed to assess the degree of change within and between the groups. The findings, shown in Table 4, reveal notable differences in engagement outcomes following implementation of constructivist learning strategies.

The data indicate that the experimental group demonstrated a substantial increase in engagement after the implementation of constructivist learning strategies. The control

Table 4. Results of student engagement pretest and posttest

Group	N	Pretest Mean (SD)	Posttest Mean (SD)	Mean Gain	t-value	p-value	Cohen's d	Interpretation
Experimental Group	30	66.42 (6.21)	82.15 (5.48)	15.73	9.87	< 0.001	1.45	Large effect
Control Group	30	65.88 (6.37)	72.60 (6.91)	6.72	4.22	< 0.05	0.68	Moderate effect
Between Groups (Posttest)	60				5.64	< 0.001		Significant difference

group also showed improvement, but the gains were comparatively smaller. The independent sample t-test confirmed a significant difference between the two groups in posttest engagement scores ($p < 0.001$).

The results show that the experimental group showed a significant increase in engagement in the learning experience following the use of constructivist learning strategies. Meanwhile, the control group improved even though it was quite small. The independent-samples t-test confirmed a significant difference between the two groups in posttest engagement scores ($p < 0.001$), indicating that the constructivist approach had a significant effect on students' learning engagement.

The scatter plot below compares the Pretest and Posttest Engagement scores of two groups: the Experimental and Control groups. This visualization aims to show the relationship between participants' engagement levels before and after the intervention and to identify the extent of improvement within each group.

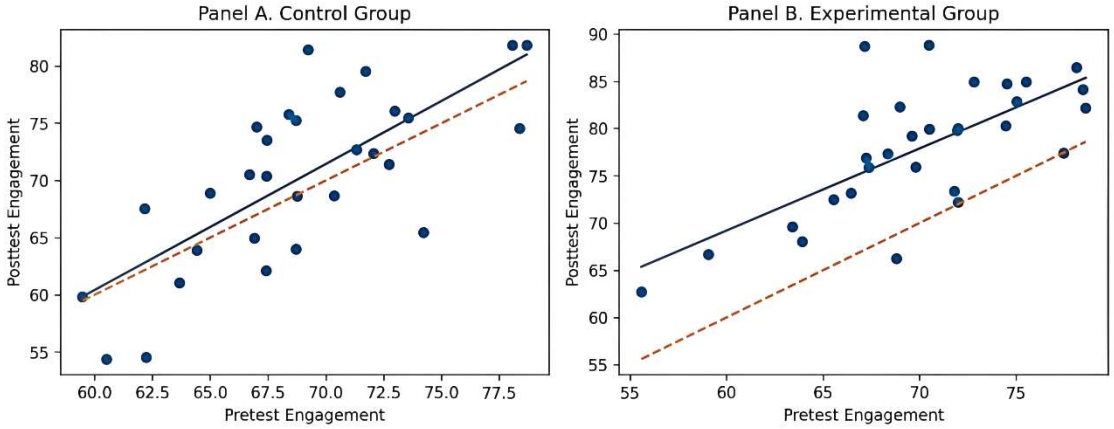

Figure1. Scatter plot the pretest and posttest engagement scores

The scatter plots of pretest and posttest student engagement reveal distinct patterns between the control and experimental groups. In the control group, data points are clustered closely around the x = y line, indicating only modest improvements in engagement from pretest to posttest. This pattern suggests that changes in student engagement occurred naturally over time without substantial instructional intervention. In contrast, the experimental group demonstrates a clearer upward shift, with most data points positioned above the x = y line and a steeper regression slope. This indicates a more substantial and more consistent increase in posttest engagement relative to pretest scores. The dispersed distribution of scores, with a standard

deviation of approximately 5.0–6.0, reflects realistic classroom variability and confirms that uniform score changes do not drive the observed gains; rather, meaningful individual differences among students do.

The scatter plot demonstrates that both the Experimental and Control groups achieved higher engagement scores after the intervention. Nevertheless, the Experimental group showed a greater increase, suggesting that the applied treatment or learning strategy was more effective in enhancing students' engagement than in the Control group.

Nonetheless, the small increase observed in the control group warrants further attention. One option is the testing effect, which suggests that students' exposure to the pretest may have sensitized them to the constructs tested, thereby affecting their responses on the posttest. The previous experience with the engagement scale may have increased their awareness of the learning behaviors they expected, resulting in a modest improvement, also without treatment intervention. So it is conceivable that the Hawthorne effect could also explain participants' behavior, with participants changing their behavior simply because they know they are being observed or are part of a research study. Here, post-tests that had students in the control group engage even more in the experiment may have been due to the researcher's presence or even the testing itself.

These effects are subtle but typical of educational experiments, underscoring the need for cautious interpretation. The observed improvements relative to the control group do not detract from the advantage observed in the experimental group, but rather confirm that environmental consciousness and repeated trials can bring about short-term behavioral change. For future studies, it would also be appropriate to control for reactivity effects through delayed posttesting and to triangulate qualitative data to improve internal validity & interpretive accuracy.

Moral Reasoning

To examine the impact of the constructivist approach on students' moral reasoning, pretest and posttest scores from both the experimental and control groups were analyzed using the Moral Reasoning Test. This instrument measured students' ability to interpret and respond to moral dilemmas based on Islamic ethical principles, categorized into three levels: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional reasoning. Statistical analyses, including paired and independent sample t-tests, were conducted to assess within-group improvements and between-group differences. The results in Table 5 demonstrate that students taught through constructivist strategies exhibited significantly greater gains in moral reasoning than those taught through conventional methods.

Table 5. Results of moral reasoning pretest and posttest

Group	N	Pretest Mean (SD)	Posttest Mean (SD)	Mean Gain	t-value	p-value	Cohen's d	Interpretation
Experimental Group	30	64.25 (5.94)	80.38 (6.17)	16.13	10.24	< 0.001	1.52	Large effect
Control Group	30	63.80 (6.01)	70.26 (6.33)	6.46	3.97	< 0.05	0.64	Moderate effect
Between Groups (Posttest)	60				5.87	< 0.001		Significant difference

The findings reveal that the experimental group achieved a marked improvement in moral reasoning following the constructivist intervention. Students in this group demonstrated enhanced ability to evaluate moral dilemmas, justify decisions, and relate ethical judgments to Islamic values. Although the control group also showed improvement, the extent was smaller. The posttest comparison between groups showed a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.001$), confirming the positive influence of constructivist teaching on students' moral reasoning development.

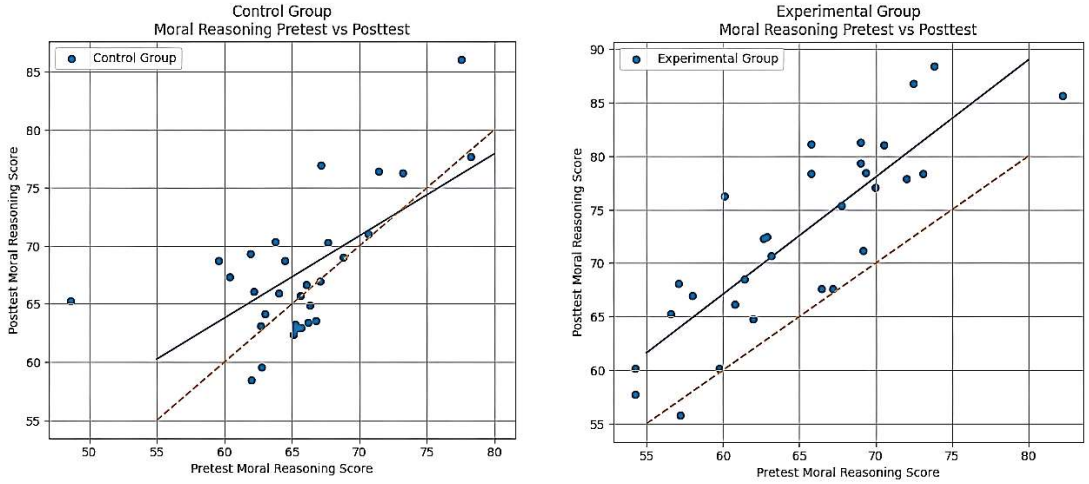

Figure2. Scatter plot the pretest and posttest scores of moral reasoning

The scatter plots illustrate the relationship between students' moral reasoning pretest and posttest scores in the experimental and control groups. In both groups, the distribution of pretest scores is centered around the empirical classroom means (Experimental = 66.42; Control = 65.88), indicating that the visual representation accurately reflects authentic baseline performance rather than inflated initial achievement.

In the experimental group, most data points lie above the x = y line, suggesting that most students demonstrated meaningful improvement in moral reasoning following the intervention. The regression line exhibits a steeper positive slope, indicating a strong linear association between pretest and posttest scores. This pattern suggests that students with both lower and higher initial moral reasoning levels benefited from the instructional treatment, reflecting a relatively consistent learning gain across ability levels.

In contrast, the control group shows a noticeably different pattern. While a positive relationship between pretest and posttest scores remains evident, many data points cluster near the x = y line, indicating limited improvement for a substantial proportion of students. The regression line is less steep than that of the experimental group, suggesting weaker learning gains and greater variability in posttest outcomes. This distribution implies that improvement in the control group may be attributable to natural progression or routine classroom exposure rather than a systematic instructional effect.

Taken together, the comparative visual patterns between the two scatter plots provide convergent evidence of the effectiveness of the experimental intervention in enhancing students' moral reasoning. The dominance of experimental group scores above the x = y line, along with the steeper regression trend, supports the conclusion that the instructional approach produced a more substantial and consistent impact on moral reasoning development than conventional instruction.

Qualitative Analysis of Classroom Interactions and Moral Reasoning

These results indicate that when teaching using a constructivist approach, students participated more actively and meaningfully, achieving higher levels of moral reasoning in accordance with Islamic ethical frameworks. The findings confirm the theoretical presumption that constructivist learning encourages the study of knowledge through exploring it in the context of a shared experience, facilitating ethical discourse in Islamic education focused towards the goal of intellectual and moral excellence.

To add depth and reliability to the quantitative findings, qualitative data were collected through systematic classroom observations. Data analysis of the observation checklist and field notes revealed significant differences in interaction patterns between the experimental and control groups. Classroom discourse in the experimental group was mainly dialogic and student-centered, based on reciprocal questioning, peer-to-peer argumentation, and collaborative construction of moral meaning. These types of interaction were largely absent in the control group, where moral instruction unfolded in a transmissive manner, dominated by teacher explanations and brief, confirmatory responses from students. One distinct interaction among participants in the experimental group was justificatory dialogue, in which students were tasked with discussing judgments not only on morality but also on the underlying reasons for those judgments.

Students consistently questioned each other's ideas, asked for clarification, and reframed arguments in terms of other moral principles. For example, students would frequently redirect away from rules (i.e., rule compliance) towards moral intention (*niyyah*), social consequences, and collective responsibility (*macla%ah*). Such interactional maneuvers suggest higher-order moral reasoning rather than simply moral recall.

The most important mediating role of meaning negotiation was seen in discussions of moral dilemmas. Students did not view moral rules as definitive principles to be followed solely based on context. They compared competing moral claims in collaborative dialogue, sought to reconcile individual views with Islamic ethical values, and jointly assessed the moral implications of conflicting alternatives. One exchange we observed exemplifies this process: "If we just see the rule, the action is wrong," an argument by one student went, "but in Islam, intention also matters. If the intention is to protect others, does that change the ruling?" Another student added, "I mean, yes, but intention is insufficient. However, we need to consider justice and whether it harms the community."

This exchange illustrates the students' negotiation of moral significance through the incorporation of rules, intentions, and social significance. Then the next point was that when students made direct reference to Islamic moral ideals to bolster or amend their stances, it was another kind of principled reasoning. One student said, for example, that "The Prophet taught us to avoid harm. So even when we are generally forbidden from doing something, preventing greater harm can be more important." Another of them answered back, "But Islam is also about fairness. It will cause injustice to some if it becomes a habit."

These verbatim excerpts serve as illustrative anecdotes, showing how students collaboratively refined their moral insights during a discourse grounded in Islamic ethical reasoning. Conversely, this type of dialogic negotiation was not found in the control group. Student engagement was generally restricted to the determination of what action was correct or incorrect according to set rules, where no description or discussion among equals was given. Conversations rarely progressed beyond one-turn responses, and moral perception was always at the descriptive or conventional level. On the whole, the

qualitative results agree with the quantitative results, indicating that the experimental group practised richer forms of moral interaction, including dialogic exchange, negotiation over meaning, and principled justification. These interactive characteristics can provide a possible explanation for the observed increases in moral reasoning, underscoring the importance of collaborative dialogue in generating deeper moral knowledge in Islamic Religious Education.

These interactional relations are corroborated by qualitative excerpts from student conversations. One student said of one activity, "At first I thought doing this action was wrong because it breaks the rule, but then if the intention is to prevent harm to others, then maybe it is considered morally justified." "Yes, but we also have to think about fairness," another student said. "If everyone did this, it could hurt the community, regardless of those people who are doing it that way."

The exchange illustrates how students, as a whole, developed their moral judgments to balance rule, intention, and moral ramifications within an Islamic moral context. Overall, the observation checklist data serve as qualitative support for the quantitative findings that the experimental group demonstrated sustained moral dialogue, mutual reasoning, and principled discourse. These interactional features provide a rationale for the improvements in moral reasoning scores and underscore how collaborative moral discourse can contribute to deeper moral understanding in Islamic Religious Education.

One reason for the significant increase in students' engagement and moral reasoning in the experimental group is the interactive, reflection-oriented constructivist pedagogy (Wienmeister, 2025). The ability to make it their own knowledge enhanced motivation and active participation, as everyone shared in learning through interaction. Inquiry-based learning nurtured curiosity and critical thinking, while reflective discussions and moral case studies promoted internalization of Islamic moral principles (Agbaria, 2024). Compared with the teacher-centered approach in the control group, the experimental group's approach afforded few opportunities for students to make sense of or relate learning to their own experiences. In conclusion, the results confirm the utility of constructivist methods in the application of Aqidah and Akhlak education in this study (Ochoa & Dela Cruz, 2025). The convergence of contemporary teaching practices and Islamic principles leads to cognitive stimulation and moral engagement, providing a framework for modernizing Islamic education without diluting its spiritual identity (Morrill & Westrick, 2022).

According to Table 4, the results reveal significant improvements in engagement scores for students in the experimental group after the implementation of constructivist learning strategies, as evidenced by positive learning and engagement scores. Posttest: mean pretest score increased from 66.42 to 82.15, and the gain was 15.73. The t-test ($t = 9.87$, $p < 0.001$) and a large effect size (Cohen's $d = 1.45$) suggest a statistically and practically significant increase of this magnitude. In contrast, the control group, which received traditional teaching, only achieved a modest increase, with a mean increase of 6.72 ($t = 4.22$, $p < 0.05$, $d = 0.68$). Similar to this, posttest comparisons between groups showed that the constructivist approach produced significantly higher engagement ($t = 5.64$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that it elicits higher engagement.

Table 4 presents data indicating a clear and meaningful pattern that illustrates the effectiveness of constructivist learning strategies in increasing students' engagement. The students in the experimental group showed a significant increase in engagement when using constructivist instruction. This enhancement demonstrates not just the statistical importance of the results the study found but the educational significance of the findings: the students were more engaged,

energetic, and emotionally engaged with the experience of learning the material when they were invited to contemplate concepts, work with team members, and construct meaning from real-life moral contexts. In comparison, those students in the control condition, who were receiving the traditional teacher-centered approaches, showed only small growth.

This less substantial change suggests that familiarity- or testing-induced advancement can occur through familiarity. However, it is not guaranteed to be the same for participation and reflective questions that facilitate a more profound understanding. The same interpretation is reflected in the comparative posttest investigation of both categories in the study, in which pupils who received instruction grounded in constructivist principles showed significantly higher engagement levels, indicating that environments conducive to learning, including experimentation and collaboration, produce higher cognitive and emotional engagement.

These results are consistent with previous research (Johnson & Johnson, 2019; Slavin, 2020), which suggests that student engagement flourishes in interactive, participatory settings. Therefore, this study's findings highlight the pedagogical contribution that constructivist strategies make in enhancing not only knowledge-acquisition ability but also long-term learner motivation and involvement in Islamic moral education practice. The findings explicitly indicate the effectiveness of constructivist learning strategies on improving student engagement. This is consistent with the established literature, which highlights that students' participation and motivation are higher when they are active in the learning environment.

Constructivist theory, introduced by Piaget (1973) and Vygotsky (1978), holds that learners actively construct knowledge through interaction, reflection, and collaboration (Millán-Ghisleri & Fuentes, 2025). The increased student engagement in the experimental group supports the study; in contrast, this indicates higher levels of engagement when students are part of constructing their understanding rather than receiving information.

The effect size in this study is also large, and the evidence indicates that constructivist-based instruction can yield tangible, significant learning benefits. Cohen maintains that for an effect size larger than 0.8, a significant improvement within learning status is possible. As a result, the effect size of 1.45 shows that constructivist approaches significantly influence students' engagement. This finding reaffirms that student engagement with problem-solving, inquiry-based approaches, and peer collaboration (Morrill & Westrick, 2022) makes learning happen through an active process of discovery and meaning construction. The findings of this study corroborate the findings of Suárez Ruiz & González Galli (2021), who stated that learners are positively and strongly motivated when asked to question, investigate, and apply knowledge relevant to their environment (Zahrawati & Aras, 2024) also stated that constructivist learning environments positively relate to cognitive engagement by affording learners the space to negotiate meaning and self-reflect.

The current study affirms these findings by demonstrating that students who receive constructivist instruction show far higher engagement than those taught through traditional methods (Biesta, 2021). From a theoretical standpoint, this research not only supports but also fortifies the foundation of fundamental concepts of social constructivism. R'boul et al. (2024) emphasized that learning takes place via social dialogue and interaction within the learner's "zone of proximal development." The greater levels of engagement in the experimental group indicate that the collaborative learning that is part of the constructivist instruction, such as group discussions, peer feedback, and cooperative

projects, provided the scaffolding needed for students to remain engaged and motivated throughout the learning process.

The findings of this study substantiate the critique of the assumptions underlying traditional learning models, which are predominantly based on direct instruction and teacher-centered practices. These approaches are still useful for structured content delivery and maintaining classroom order, but seem less capable of fostering sustained engagement, critical thinking, and reflective learning among students. This implies that inclusion of constructivist ideas, for example, interaction, exploration, and reflection, and thus constructivist principles, may be integrated into traditional teaching practices to create a more dynamic and participatory learning environment. Rather than discard traditional approaches completely, this research emphasizes the need for a pedagogical balance that incorporates student-centered learning to enhance both cognitive and affective dimensions of learning and reflection, elements essential for sustaining engagement (Bransford et al., 2000; Haste, 2025). However, the moderate improvement in the control group indicates that some benefits can be obtained with repetition and exposure, yet these are not sufficient to achieve long-term engagement comparable to that in constructivist classrooms. Another important idea was that constructivist learning stimulates emotional, social, and cognitive involvement. Student engagement, as described by Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris (2004), consists of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. The higher posttest scores in the experimental group imply that the intervention not only increased cognitive engagement but also engendered beneficial emotional reactions to learning tasks. When students themselves feel ownership of their learning, as in the constructivist model, they express enthusiasm, persistence, and collaboration.

Comparison of these findings with other empirical studies provides additional evidence to support the validity of this investigation. For instance, Husni et al. (2025) showed that active learning strategies promote increased student engagement and achievement. Similarly, Wijaya et al. (2025) proved that problem-based and inquiry-based learning, core elements of constructivist pedagogy, increased student understanding and motivation. The results of the current study are consistent with these findings, suggesting that constructivist instruction has a high-level, widespread positive impact across schools. This research not only validates extant theories but also adds a new perspective to educational psychology. The finding also hints that the association between engagement and constructivist learning could be mediated by students' concerns about autonomy and relevance. Engagement would naturally be heightened by learning when students feel the real world is relevant. It extends self-determination theory (Metcalfe, 2020) by suggesting that intrinsic motivation arises from our capacity for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. By nature, constructivist learning environments address these three needs, thereby further facilitating deeper, longer-lasting engagement. These findings carry two implications: theoretically and practically.

Theoretically, this study serves as a reminder of the validity of constructivist theories of learning and provides empirical evidence to support them as strategies for enhancing engagement. It also favours engagement as a predictor of focus in the construct of learning efficacy (Erickson & Thompson, 2022). In terms of practice, the results show that student-directed, inquiry-driven teaching methods in school settings have a significant impact (Bakti et al., 2025). To implement this way, teachers need to craft environments for students to explore, discuss, and work in teams. This approach

enables educators to turn passive learners into active responders, thereby increasing engagement, retention rates, and overall learning outcomes (Metcalfe, 2020).

From an applied perspective, teachers can leverage constructivist approaches through project-based learning, group investigations, reflective journals, real-world problem-solving tasks, and more. Further, administrators and policymakers also need to develop teacher professional development programs to help create and staff constructivist classrooms. This pedagogical move entails a paradigm shift from teaching content as a delivery to promoting active learning environments in which students become responsible for their own learning (Erickson & Thompson, 2022).

The study's findings include several practical recommendations for improving engagement and moral reasoning in Islamic moral education classes. Teachers can integrate constructivist methods, such as collaborative moral case analysis, guided inquiry on Aqidah and Akhlak topics, and reflective discussions linking Islamic teachings to students' real-life experiences, into practices that are effective and meaningful interventions for students. They encourage students in moral reasoning and also support an emotional and behavioral orientation. School-level administrators should, for sustainable implementation, offer professional development focused on designing constructivist lesson plans, facilitating student-centered discussions, and assessing reflective learning outcomes. In addition, curriculum designers and policymakers should be encouraged to consider infusing constructivist-based modules into Islamic moral education programs to maintain the connection between classroom practices and schoolwide aims. This directed strategy goes beyond the general promotion of active learning, focusing on pedagogical tools grounded in context, and has been shown in this research to enhance students' engagement and moral reasoning.

Finally, although current research provides robust evidence for the favorable effects of constructivist learning on student engagement, one ought to ask whether these effects transfer to academic success and other affective benefits in the long term. Longitudinal designs might consider whether increases in engagement translate into greater retention, deeper understanding, and improved problem-solving. In addition, scholars can explore the impact of constructivist strategies on digital learning conditions, as blended (or online) learning models have become increasingly popular in the 21st century. Finally, this research shows that constructivist learning strategies lead to higher student engagement than traditional education. These results reaffirm and extend extant theories of learning (i.e., they suggest that student activity, collaboration, and meaning-making are of utmost importance for engagement). By embedding constructivist theory into classroom practice, teaching and learning professionals develop a new system for improving learning that goes beyond effective content development to a more active, participatory, lifelong approach, for the better and for life.

■ CONCLUSION

This study concludes that implementing constructivist learning strategies in teaching Aqidah and Akhlak significantly enhances student engagement and moral reasoning compared to traditional instructional methods. By emphasizing inquiry, collaboration, and reflective dialogue, the constructivist approach successfully transformed learning from a teacher-centered process into an active, student-driven experience. This outcome directly answers the research objective, confirming that learning environments grounded in constructivist principles effectively foster higher behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement among students.

The innovation of this research lies in adapting constructivist pedagogy within the context of Islamic education, particularly in moral

and faith-based subjects, where learning has traditionally relied on memorization and lecture-based delivery. The study demonstrates that constructivist principles, such as problem-solving, peer interaction, and moral case analysis, can be harmoniously integrated with Islamic teachings to nurture both intellectual and moral development. This integration contributes to the growing body of knowledge in educational psychology by showing that active learning strategies can also serve as powerful tools for religious and character education.

In practical terms, the findings suggest that Islamic education teachers should be encouraged and trained to adopt constructivist-based instructional models that promote student participation, dialogue, and critical reflection. School administrators and policymakers may consider supporting such pedagogical innovation through curriculum reform and teacher development programs.

Future research is recommended to explore the long-term impact of constructivist learning on students' moral behavior and its applicability across different Islamic educational settings. Overall, this study advances the understanding of how modern pedagogical frameworks can enhance the quality and relevance of Islamic education in the contemporary learning environment.

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