Story-Based Exploratory Learning Model to Improve Students' Critical Thinking Skills and Religious Understanding

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Article Information	**Abstract**
	This research explores the use of the story of Prophet Musa and Khidr in Surah Al-Kahfi as an exploratory learning model to enhance students' critical thinking skills and religious understanding. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentation involving various stakeholders, including teachers, students, and administrative staff. The validity of the data was ensured through triangulation and member checking, while thematic analysis was utilized to interpret the findings. The study reveals that the integration of the story into the learning process fosters an interactive environment where students engage in critical reflection and discussion. Through guided inquiry and collaborative learning, students develop their analytical skills as they navigate religious concepts in a meaningful context. This process encourages students to draw connections between their faith and personal experiences, thereby enhancing their critical thinking capabilities. The originality of this research lies in its innovative adaptation of a traditional narrative into a modern educational framework, offering insights into the practical application of Qur'anic stories in classrooms. By focusing on the process of learning rather than solely on outcomes, this study contributes to the discourse on value-based education in Islamic settings and demonstrates the potential of story-based learning to cultivate critical thinkers in contemporary education. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi pemanfaatan kisah Nabi Musa dan Khidr dalam Surah Al-Kahfi sebagai model pembelajaran eksplorasi untuk meningkatkan kemampuan berpikir kritis dan pemahaman agama siswa. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara, observasi, dan dokumentasi yang melibatkan berbagai pemangku kepentingan, termasuk guru, siswa, dan staf administrasi. Keabsahan data dipastikan melalui triangulasi dan

pengecekan anggota, sedangkan analisis tematik digunakan untuk menafsirkan temuan. Studi ini mengungkapkan bahwa integrasi cerita ke dalam proses pembelajaran menumbuhkan lingkungan interaktif di mana siswa terlibat dalam refleksi dan diskusi kritis. Melalui penyelidikan terpandu dan pembelajaran kolaboratif, siswa mengembangkan keterampilan analitis mereka saat mereka menavigasi konsep agama dalam konteks yang bermakna. Proses ini mendorong siswa untuk menarik hubungan antara iman dan pengalaman pribadi mereka, sehingga meningkatkan kemampuan berpikir kritis mereka. Orisinalitas penelitian ini terletak pada adaptasi inovatif dari narasi tradisional ke dalam kerangka pendidikan modern, menawarkan wawasan tentang penerapan praktis cerita Al-Qur'an di ruang kelas. Dengan berfokus pada proses pembelajaran daripada hanya pada hasil, penelitian ini berkontribusi pada wacana pendidikan berbasis nilai dalam lingkungan Islam dan menunjukkan potensi pembelajaran berbasis cerita untuk menumbuhkan pemikir kritis dalam pendidikan kontemporer.

I.   INTRODUCTION

In the current global educational landscape, there is a rising recognition of the importance of integrating critical thinking skills with value-based learning across various disciplines. As education systems strive to cultivate well-rounded individuals capable of navigating complex societal challenges, the need for innovative teaching methods that promote deep understanding and engagement becomes increasingly crucial. This context highlights a significant challenge in Islamic education, where traditional pedagogical approaches often prioritize rote memorization over critical reflection and experiential learning (Yulianti et al., 2023). As a response, the integration of narratives, particularly those found in religious texts, offers a potential strategy to enhance both critical thinking skills and religious understanding among students, setting the stage for this research.

Previous studies have examined the effectiveness of storytelling in education, with specific focus on its role in enhancing critical thinking and engagement. For instance, Asykur et al. (2022) explored the use of Qur'anic stories in teaching methods and found that storytelling fosters a unique connection between students and religious narratives. Furthermore, Ihsan (2019) emphasized the importance of experiential learning through Islamic narratives, arguing that such approaches improve students' moral reasoning. In a different context, Muis & Huda (2023)

investigated how story-based learning can bridge theoretical knowledge and practical application, revealing its potential to nurture critical thinking. Other studies, including Bendraou & Sakale (2023) and Fauzia et al. (2023), have also examined various storytelling methodologies, each contributing unique insights into their educational impact. However, a gap remains in the specific exploration of how the story of Prophet Musa and Khidr can be systematically applied as an exploratory learning model in Islamic educational settings, warranting further investigation.

This study is significant because it offers a new approach that addresses the challenges of modern Islamic education. Based on the values of the story of Prophet Musa and Khidr, this study hypothesizes that the application of an exploratory learning model based on this story can enhance students' religious understanding while also developing their critical thinking skills. By making the Qur'an a source of pedagogical inspiration, this study also contributes to the development of a more integrated and applicable value-based Islamic curriculum.

The story of Prophet Musa and Khidr in Surah Al-Kahfi is a narrative rich in educational and spiritual values. It begins with Prophet Musa's journey to seek knowledge from Khidr, a servant of Allah endowed with wisdom and special knowledge. In this story, Prophet Musa is introduced to the concept of learning through direct experience, with teachings emphasizing patience, submission to Allah's will, and wisdom that cannot always be understood logically. As a concept, this story illustrates the ideal teacher-student relationship, where a student is taught to understand that learning is not just theory-based but also practical experience filled with wisdom (Mufid & Chailani, 2024; Wardhani, 2023).

In its manifestation, the story of Prophet Musa and Khidr covers three main dimensions: experiential learning, spiritual values in education, and a reflective attitude toward knowledge. These dimensions are depicted through various events in the story, such as the destruction of a boat, the killing of a child, and the building of a wall. Each action of Khidr carries hidden wisdom, teaching Prophet Musa the importance of patience and accepting human limitations in understanding Allah's will. This shows that the story not only provides a narrative

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example but also a practical model of value-based learning (Muzakki et al., 2022; Yulianti et al., 2023).

Exploratory learning is defined as a pedagogical approach that encourages students to discover knowledge through exploration, reflection, and direct experience. This model emphasizes active student involvement in the learning process, with the teacher acting as a facilitator (Hanks, 2017; Maria, 2024). In the context of Islamic education, exploratory learning can serve as a tool to integrate religious values into the development of critical thinking skills. This approach aligns with the constructivist paradigm, which positions students as active subjects in building their own understanding (He & Qi, 2023).

The manifestation of the exploratory learning model includes the use of problem-based methods, project-based learning, and activities that involve direct exploration of the learning context. In practice, this model employs various strategies such as group discussions, case studies, or simulations. Exploratory learning also encourages students to ask questions, test hypotheses, and analyze outcomes, thus strengthening their critical and creative thinking skills. Consequently, this approach not only enhances conceptual understanding but also fosters a reflective attitude toward the learning process (Dianita, 2023).

Islamic education is a system of education aimed at shaping individuals with Islamic character, including faith, knowledge, and noble morals. Islamic education focuses not only on cognitive aspects but also on spiritual and moral development, with the Qur'an and Hadith as the primary sources of its curriculum. This definition encompasses various aspects, from formal education in schools to informal education in families and communities, with a focus on character development based on Islamic values (Ernawati, 2023).

The manifestation of Islamic education can be observed in various institutions, such as madrasahs, pesantrens, and integrated Islamic schools, which integrate religious values with academic curricula. In practice, Islamic education involves the use of diverse teaching methods, such as lectures, discussions, and simulations, combined with the inculcation of moral values. Islamic education also emphasizes the importance of contextual learning, where students are encouraged

to understand religious teachings in their daily lives, thereby creating harmony between faith and knowledge (Ihsan, 2019; Muis & Huda, 2023).

The primary objective of this research is to explore how the story of Prophet Musa and Khidr in Surah Al-Kahfi can be effectively applied as an exploratory learning model to enhance students' critical thinking skills. By focusing on this narrative, the study aims to contribute to the development of teaching methods that integrate religious values with critical thought. Additionally, the research seeks to identify the processes involved in engaging students through storytelling, ultimately providing a framework for educators to implement these strategies in Islamic schools.

II.   METHOD

The research employs a qualitative descriptive approach, which facilitates an in-depth exploration of the implementation of the story of Prophet Musa and Khidr as an exploratory learning model (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This approach is appropriate for understanding the complexities of educational practices in Islamic contexts and how they can be enhanced through storytelling.

The methodology encompasses various components, including the type of research, approaches, data collection techniques, and data analysis methods. The research specifically utilizes a case study method to gain insights into the integration of narrative-based learning within an Islamic school. Primary data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation (Ikhwan, 2021).

The research engaged key stakeholders at SMP Islam At-Tanwir Lamandau, including the principal, three teachers involved in the curriculum implementation, and thirty students who are the primary subjects of learning. Interviews were conducted to gather perspectives on the use of the story in teaching, while observations of classroom interactions provided additional context on how students engage with the narrative.

In applying the research methods, the focus was on how the storytelling technique can be incorporated into lessons to promote critical thinking and engagement. For instance, during interviews, teachers shared their experiences of guiding discussions around the story, prompting students to reflect on its moral implications in light of contemporary challenges. This practical application illustrates the direct relevance of the methodologies to the research theme (Afrizal et al., 2022).

Data collection techniques were systematically employed to ensure robust findings. Interviews were conducted using semi-structured formats, allowing for flexibility while maintaining focus on key themes related to the investigative focus. Observations involved directly attending classes to witness the learning dynamics, while documentation analysis included reviewing lesson plans and curriculum materials that incorporate narrative learning. Each technique contributed to a layered understanding of how storytelling can enhance critical thinking skills among students (Miles et al., 2014).

III.   FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The research findings are derived from a comprehensive data collection process involving interviews, observations, and documentation. This combination reveals key insights into the implementation of story-based learning, focusing particularly on the narrative of Prophet Musa and Khidr at SMP Islam At-Tanwir Lamandau.
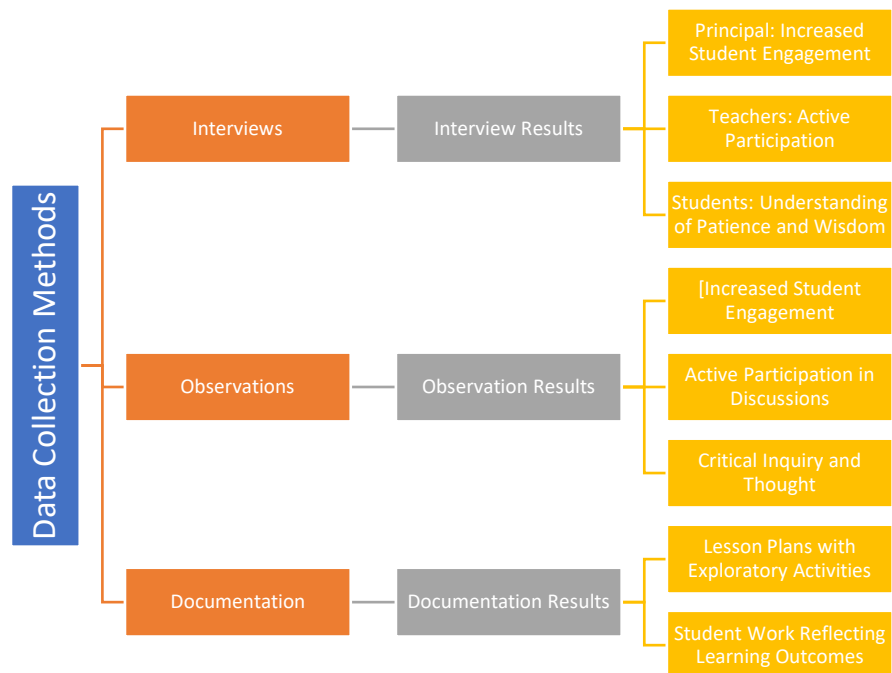
Figure 1. *Data collection methods*

Interviews with the principal, teachers, and students provided rich qualitative data. The principal, Siti Maghfiroh, observed, "The integration of the story of Prophet Musa and Khidr into our curriculum has significantly impacted students' engagement," indicating a positive shift in the learning atmosphere. Teachers TP also expressed favorable views, noting that "students are more willing to participate and share their thoughts during discussions about the story" . Students conveyed their excitement, with one stating, "I understand more about patience and wisdom when we talk about Musa and Khidr". These statements highlight the story's potential to resonate with students on a personal level.

Observations conducted during classroom activities showcased a notable increase in student engagement. During sessions centered around the story, students demonstrated active participation in group discussions, delving into various interpretations and implications of the narrative. The atmosphere was lively, with students asking probing questions, such as "Why did Khidr take those actions?" This inquiry prompted rich, meaningful discussions. The dynamic nature of the classroom indicated that students were not merely passive recipients of knowledge but were actively engaged in the learning process.

The analysis of documentation, including lesson plans and student work, revealed that teachers were successfully implementing exploratory activities aligned with the story. For example, one lesson plan included role-playing scenarios from the narrative, encouraging students to explore moral lessons creatively. This integration of active learning strategies not only made the material more accessible but also provided students with opportunities to practice critical thinking in a structured manner.
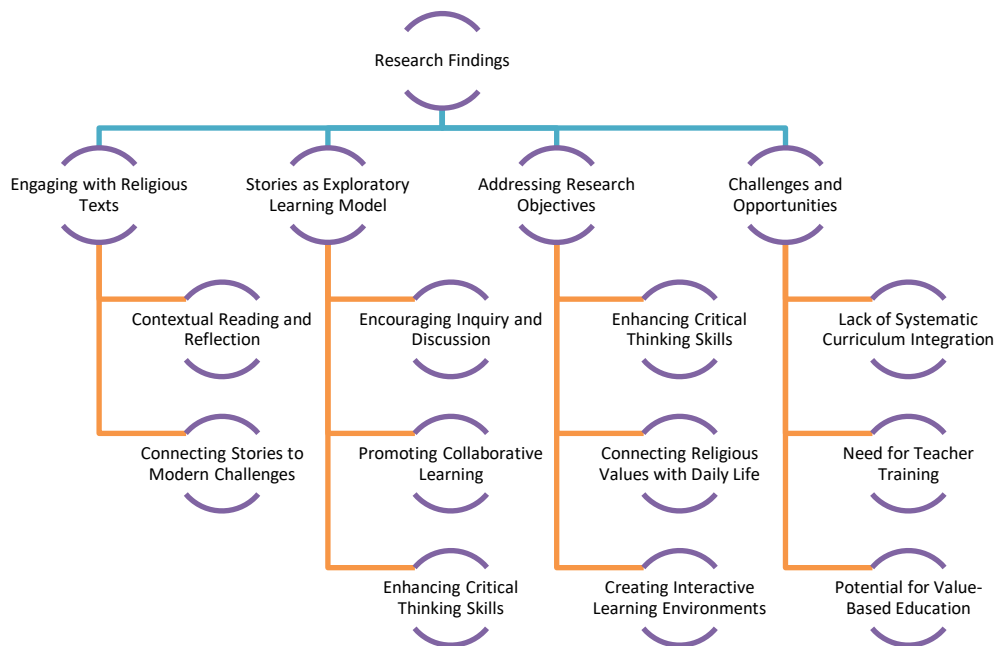

Figure 2. *Research findings*

Interactivity, Exploration, and Implications for Research Objectives

How to Read the Stories: Engaging with Religious Texts

Engaging with stories like that of Prophet Musa and Khidr requires an understanding that balances both narrative and moral teachings. Teachers emphasized contextual reading, which encourages students to reflect on the implications of the stories. By guiding students to draw parallels between the story and real-life experiences, they foster critical thinking. One teacher highlighted, "I invite students to connect the narrative's events to modern challenges they face," effectively making the lessons more relevant and applicable to students' lives. This connection cultivates a deeper comprehension of Islamic values, as students learn to engage with their faith critically.

Stories as a Model for Exploratory Learning

The narrative of Prophet Musa and Khidr serves as an ideal model for exploratory learning. The rich, layered story presents numerous opportunities for students to engage interactively with content, promoting inquiry and discussion. During classroom sessions, students explored themes of patience, wisdom, and the pursuit of knowledge. The exploratory approach not only encourages students to ask questions but also supports collaborative inquiry where they seek answers together, enhancing their learning experience. Observations highlighted that when students discussed their interpretations, they exhibited more critical thinking skills and a willingness to engage with complex ideas, reflecting their growth in understanding.

Addressing Research Objectives

This discussion directly addresses the three main objectives set forth by the research:

First, Objective One: Enhance Critical Thinking Skills The findings clearly show that story-based learning significantly enhances students' critical thinking skills. By engaging with the story, students demonstrated improved curiosity and a willingness to discuss complex ideas. Teachers reported students proactively seeking connections between the narrative and their personal experiences, indicating a deeper cognitive engagement.

Second, Objective Two: Connect Religious Values with Daily Life The study illustrates how the story serves as a bridge connecting religious values with everyday experiences. Through guided discussions, students articulated how the moral lessons from the story applied to their lives. For instance, they expressed understanding of patience in difficult situations and the importance of wisdom in decision-making, which aligns with the core objectives of Islamic education.

Third, Objective Three: Create an Interactive Learning Environment The research findings revealed that employing stories in lesson plans contributes to a more interactive learning environment. Students shifted from being passive recipients of information to active participants in their educational journey. The teachers' innovative use of storytelling led to more collaborative learning activities,

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where students were encouraged to express their viewpoints openly, fostering a sense of community within the classroom.

The research findings indicate that the story of Prophet Musa and Khidr holds significant potential for integration into the learning process at SMP Islam At-Tanwir Lamandau. Based on interviews, teachers stated that this story provides important lessons, such as patience, sincerity, and experiential learning, which are relevant to character development. Observations show that this story can engage students in the learning process, motivating them to participate more actively in discussions, and enhancing their critical thinking skills. Documentation supports these findings by showing interactive student activities and learning outcomes that reflect the educational values in the story.

The explanation of the data reveals that using the story of Prophet Musa and Khidr as a learning medium increases the appeal of the material for students. Teachers mentioned that lecture and memorization methods tend to make students passive, while story-based learning provides space for exploring religious teachings more deeply. Observations and documentation reinforce this by showing more active student involvement, both in group discussions and in answering questions that link the values of the story to their daily lives.

The relationship between the description and explanation of the data shows that, although the story of Prophet Musa and Khidr has great potential as a learning medium, its implementation still faces challenges. One of the main challenges is the lack of a systematic guide for integrating this story into the formal curriculum. This results in a gap between the educational potential of the story and the reality of learning, which is still dominated by conventional methods.

The study also found that the exploratory learning model based on the story of Prophet Musa and Khidr creates a dynamic and interactive classroom atmosphere. Based on interviews, teachers acknowledged that this approach encourages students to think more critically, ask questions, and search for answers independently. Observations show that this method enables teachers to connect abstract religious concepts with students' real-life experiences.

Documentation supports this finding with visual evidence and student works that reflect a deep understanding of religious values.

The explanation of the data shows that applying the exploratory learning model requires teachers' creativity in designing activities relevant to the story of Prophet Musa and Khidr. The interviewed teachers explained that they need to modify the Lesson Plan (*Rencana Pembelajaran Semester/RPP*) to include exploratory elements, such as group discussions, simulations, and reflections. Observations revealed that students became more enthusiastic and actively engaged when given the opportunity to express their opinions openly.

The relationship between the description and explanation of the data shows that the exploratory learning model is not only relevant to value-based learning needs but also addresses the problem of low critical thinking skills among students. However, the research findings also indicate the need for additional training for teachers to optimize the implementation of this method so that the potential of story-based learning can be fully utilized.

The research findings related to Islamic education show that the integration of religious values with critical thinking skills remains a major challenge at SMP Islam At-Tanwir Lamandau. According to interviews, the principal mentioned that the current curriculum does not provide enough space for innovation in teaching methods. Observations indicate that students often struggle to connect religious concepts with their life context. Documentation supports this finding by showing that the learning material tends to be theoretical and less practical.

The explanation of the data reveals that value-based Islamic education and skills require a more contextual approach. The interviewed teachers stated that story-based learning, particularly the story of Prophet Musa and Khidr, has the potential to bridge this gap. Observations show that students involved in story-based learning demonstrate a better understanding of religious concepts and their application in daily life.

The relationship between the description and explanation of the data shows that value-based Islamic education integrated with critical thinking skills can be an effective solution to the challenges of modern education. However, the findings of

this study also indicate the need for policy support, teacher training, and the development of a more adaptive curriculum to realize a holistic and contextual approach to learning.
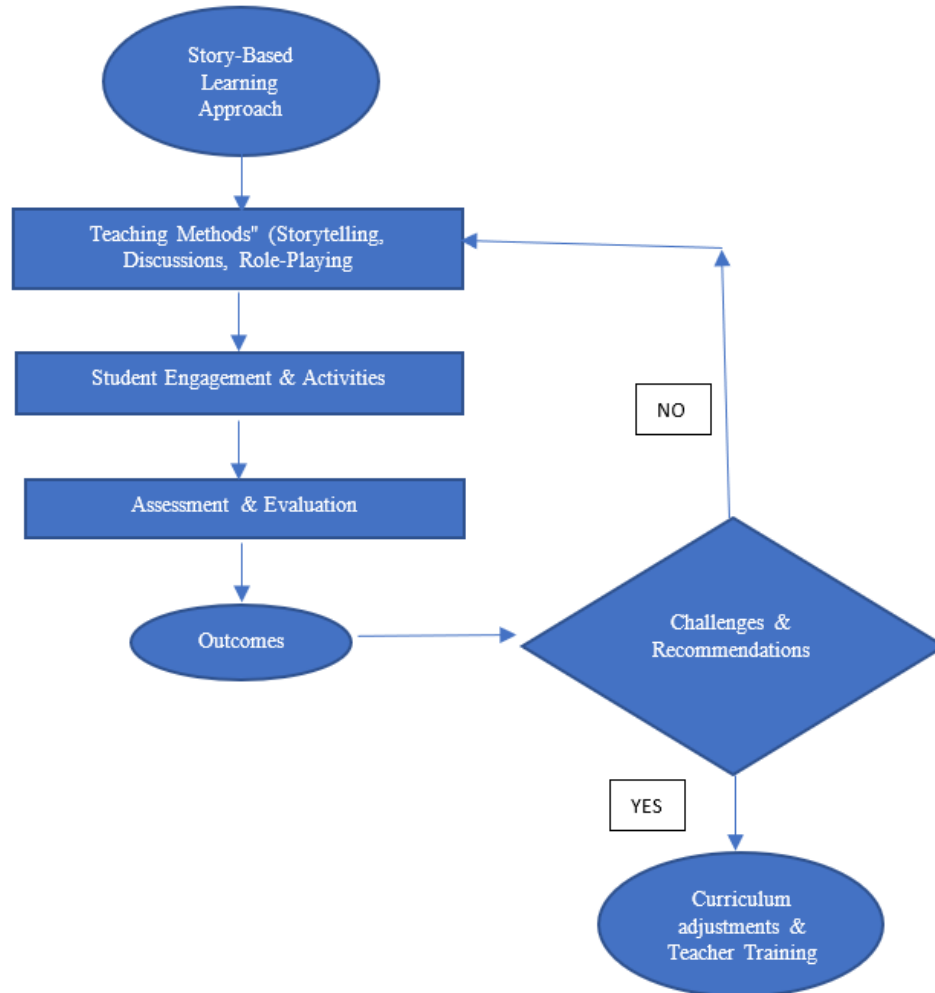

Figure 3. *Implementing the exploratory learning model*

Discussion

The research results show that the story of Prophet Musa and Khidr in Surah Al-Kahfi contains many educational values such as patience, sincerity, and submission to the profound wisdom of Allah. When implemented in learning, this story proves to increase students' interest and develop critical thinking skills through an exploratory approach. Students become more actively engaged in learning, while teachers become more innovative in delivering the material. This success is supported by interviews that show appreciation for using the story as an educational tool, observations that note an increase in class dynamics, and

documentation that records the positive effects on students' attitudes and understanding (Mutaqien, 2022).

This research is related to previous studies that emphasize the importance of story-based learning in Islamic education. For example, Kartini et al. (2022) research highlights the effectiveness of Prophet stories in instilling moral values among students. However, this study has a specific advantage by adapting the story of Prophet Musa and Khidr into an exploratory learning model, which has not been deeply studied. The exploratory approach used at SMP Islam At-Tanwir Lamandau makes a new contribution by integrating Qur'anic narratives to develop students' critical thinking skills, surpassing the traditional narrative approach that is usually only instructive.

Reflection on the research results shows that the story-based exploratory learning model of Prophet Musa and Khidr can be a solution to pedagogical challenges in Islamic schools. This model not only strengthens students' understanding of religious values but also shapes their character to be more critical, patient, and reflective. This shows that the goal of Islamic education to produce a character-based generation can be achieved through methods relevant to modern contexts, making learning more meaningful for students (Azizeh, 2019).

The implications of this research include the development of a more contextual and relevant Islamic education curriculum that meets the needs of today's students. The story-based exploratory learning model can serve as an alternative in curriculum development, especially in Islamic Religious Education subjects. Furthermore, this approach can be adopted at various levels of education, not only limited to junior high school, to enhance student-centered learning effectiveness (Al-Bayaydah, 2022).

This research outcome emerges from a combination of several factors, including the strength of the story of Prophet Musa and Khidr, which offers many reflective lessons, the exploratory method that facilitates student interaction, and the teachers' commitment to creatively implementing this approach. The success is also influenced by the context of Islamic schools that support value-based

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learning, which strengthens the relevance between the lesson content and students' lives (Syahputra, 2020).

Based on the research findings, the next step to take is teacher training to master the effective application of the story-based exploratory learning model. Additionally, school policies could focus on providing teaching materials that support the integration of stories into the learning process. Further research is also needed to explore the long-term impact of this model on students' critical thinking skills and character development in various educational contexts (Bendraou & Sakale, 2023; Fauzia et al., 2023).

The results indicate that integrating story-based learning into the curriculum at SMP Islam At-Tanwir Lamandau not only enhances students' engagement but also fosters critical thinking, connects religious teachings to real-life applications, and promotes a dynamic learning environment. This approach aligns with the objectives of modern Islamic education, preparing students to navigate contemporary challenges through a critical and reflective lens.

IV. CONCLUSION

This research reveals a surprising fact: the story of Prophet Musa and Khidr in Surah Al-Kahfi is not only rich in moral lessons but also has a transformative potential in modern education. When adapted into an exploratory learning model, this story stimulates students' critical thinking skills and builds a profound understanding of religion. The active participation of students in the learning process, along with teachers' creativity in utilizing this story as an educational medium, has created an interactive, meaningful, and relevant learning atmosphere that meets the needs of the times. This study makes a significant contribution, both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, this research enriches the literature on Islamic education by offering a new perspective on integrating Qur'anic stories into the exploratory learning method. Practically, this research provides an applicable learning model, especially for Islamic schools that aim to improve value-based education quality. This model proves that story-based

learning approaches can align with exploratory approaches to build a critical, religious generation, and address contemporary life challenges.

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