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REASON, UNDERSTANDING AND COGNITION IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE EDUCATIONAL VALUE OF COGNITIVE PROCESSES

Bilişsel Süreçlerin Eğitimsel Değeri Bağlamında Din Eğitiminde Akıl, Anlama ve Biliş

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the educational value of cognitive processes in religious education from a multidimensional perspective and aims to analyze how reasoning, understanding, and cognition-based approaches can be integrated into curricula. Focusing solely on the transmission of information in religious education limits students' intellectual, affective, and behavioral development, leading to superficial and temporary learning in the internalization of religious values. The importance of this research stems from its contribution to the restructuring of religious education by evaluating contemporary cognitive development theories alongside the approaches based on reason, wisdom, and contemplation in classical Islamic thought. Structured using a qualitative research design, this study deeply examines curricula, textbooks, learning outcomes, and methods through document analysis. Furthermore, the theoretical framework is built around a constructivist approach. Cognitive development approaches of theorists such as Piaget, Vygotsky, Bloom, Bruner, and Gardner are examined within the context of religious education, and the pedagogical contributions of methods such as concept maps, discussion techniques, dramatization, and project-based learning are evaluated. The findings indicate that cognitive objectives in religious education programs are often limited to knowledge and comprehension, and that higher-order cognitive skills (analysis, evaluation, and creation) are not adequately addressed. Furthermore, student-centered methods such as discussion, dramatization, and project-based activities were found to contribute to a deeper and more meaningful understanding of religious concepts. The study suggests that religious education should be transformed from a purely transmission-based approach into a cognitively based structure that supports critical thinking, problem-solving, meaning-making, and value-oriented life skills.

Keywords: Religious education, cognitive development, educational value, mind

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, din eğitiminde bilişsel süreçlerin eğitimsel değerini çok boyutlu bir bakış açısıyla ele almakta ve akıl yürütme, anlama ve biliş temelli yaklaşımların müfredatlara nasıl entegre edilebileceğini analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Din eğitiminin yalnızca bilgi aktarımına odaklanması, öğrencilerin entelektüel, duyuşsal ve davranışsal gelişimini sınırlamakta, dini değerlerin içselleştirilmesinde yüzeysel ve geçici öğrenmelere yol açmaktadır. Bu araştırmanın önemi, çağdaş bilişsel gelişim teorilerini klasik İslam düşüncesindeki akıl,

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hikmet ve tefekkür temelli yaklaşımlarla birlikte değerlendirerek din eğitiminin yeniden yapılandırılmasına katkıda bulunmasından kaynaklanmaktadır. Nitel araştırma deseni kullanılarak yapılandırılan bu çalışmada, müfredatlar, ders kitapları, öğrenme çıktıları ve yöntemler doküman analizi yoluyla derinlemesine incelenmiştir. Ayrıca, teorik çerçeve yapılandırmacı bir yaklaşım etrafında oluşturulmuştur. Piaget, Vygotsky, Bloom, Bruner ve Gardner gibi teorisyenlerin bilişsel gelişim yaklaşımları din eğitimi bağlamında incelenmiş ve kavram haritaları, tartışma teknikleri, dramatizasyon ve proje tabanlı öğrenme gibi yöntemlerin katkıları pedagojik olarak değerlendirilmiştir. Bulgular, din eğitimi programlarındaki bilişsel hedeflerin genellikle bilgi ve kavrama ile sınırlı olduğunu, üst düzey bilişsel becerilerin (analiz, değerlendirme ve yaratma) ise yeterince ele alınmadığını göstermektedir. Ayrıca, tartışma, dramatizasyon ve proje uygulamaları gibi öğrenci merkezli yöntemlerin, dini kavramların daha derin ve anlamlı bir şekilde anlaşılmasına katkıda bulunduğu görülmüştür. Çalışma, din eğitiminin salt aktarıma dayalı bir yaklaşımdan ziyade, eleştirel düşünme, problem çözme, anlam oluşturma ve değer odaklı yaşam becerilerini destekleyen bilişsel temelli bir yapıya dönüştürülmesi gerektiğini öne sürmektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Din eğitimi, bilişsel gelişim, eğitimsel değer, zihin

Introduction

Education is a systematic process that aims to develop an individual's mental, affective, and behavioral aspects. Within this process, cognitive structures play a central role in determining how students learn, process information, and construct meaning. In educational sciences literature, learning is no longer simply the acquisition of knowledge but also the individual's capacity to reconstruct this knowledge in their minds, establish meaning, and solve problems. In this context, "cognition" is a fundamental variable shaping the structure of learning. Cognitive processes have become a cornerstone that determines the quality of learning, especially in disciplines where complex and abstract content is prevalent. Religious education undoubtedly stands at the forefront of these disciplines (Bilgin, 1986).

Religious education aims not only to enable individuals to acquire conceptual knowledge about a belief system, but also to attribute meaning to this knowledge, critically evaluate it, and relate it to a value-based life. In this respect, religious education is one of the areas that must most intensively activate cognitive processes. However, in traditional religious education practices, methods based on rote memorization and lacking cognitive depth still dominate. This situation causes students to learn religious texts, concepts, and values only superficially, thus preventing this knowledge from being integrated into real life. However, religious education must be structured to stimulate individuals' mental activities, fostering deep reflection, comparison, synthesis, and interpretation (Senemoğlu, 2005).

Cognitive development theories provide strong theoretical foundations that address students' mental processes according to age and individual differences. Piaget's stages of cognitive development, Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, Bruner's spiral curriculum approach, Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive goals,

and Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences serve as guides in restructuring religious education with contemporary approaches. The common thread among these theories is their emphasis on learning as not merely a receptive process but also a constructive and dynamic interaction. Only through such cognitive-based approaches can religious values gain meaning for students. Otherwise, students' approach to religious knowledge will remain at a formal and figurative level, and intellectual and moral transformation will not be achieved (Ayverdi, 2005).

The purpose of this study is to examine the educational value of cognitive processes in the context of religious education from a multifaceted perspective, specifically analyzing how reasoning, understanding, and meaning-making are reflected in curricula, teacher practices, and student experiences. Furthermore, among the study's primary objectives is to uncover the role played by higher-order cognitive skills (analysis, synthesis, evaluation, abstraction, and creation) in the comprehension of religious values and to demonstrate how these skills can be integrated with religious teaching methods.

The significance of this study lies in its emphasis on the fact that religious education is not merely a memorization-focused process of imparting knowledge, but rather a developmental area that builds the individual's intellectual, ethical, and spiritual aspects. Reinterpreting religious education, particularly in light of contemporary learning theories, and aligning traditional pedagogical approaches with the cognitive construction process strengthens this study's contribution to the religious education literature. Furthermore, this research demonstrates with concrete examples how cognitive-based teaching methods (such as concept maps, discussion techniques, dramatization, and project-based learning) can be used in religious education (Şerifi, 1991).

A qualitative research design was adopted in this study. Religious education programs, textbooks, learning outcomes, and teaching activities in Turkey were evaluated through content analysis using document analysis. Furthermore, relevant theoretical literature and academic studies were reviewed to analyze the educational implications of cognitive development theories in the context of religious education. Using an interpretive approach, a critical analysis was conducted to determine the extent to which cognitive objectives were integrated into the program, the methods used to support them, and the extent to which they were reflected in the student's learning.

The findings of the study reveal that religious education programs generally focus on cognitive objectives at the knowledge and comprehension level, but insufficiently address higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, evaluation, and creation. In contrast, in teaching environments where methods such as concept maps, discussion techniques, dramatization, and project-based learning are used, students' capacities for deep understanding, interpretation, and connection to values

are significantly improved. These findings demonstrate the effectiveness of cognitive-based teaching strategies in making religious education permanent, meaningful, and holistic (Fabretti, 2015).

The development of religious education is a multidimensional issue, not only at the program level but also interconnected with many dynamics, such as teachers' pedagogical skills, students' cognitive competence, and social context. In this context, a structure based not only on theoretical approaches but also cognitive-based strategies that are reflected in classroom practice are needed. In particular, engaging students mentally in the learning of abstract and value-laden religious content will transform them not only into knowledgeable individuals but also into thinkers, interpreters, and constructors of meaning. This is only possible with systematic cognitive literacy and higher-order thinking skills.

Consequently, this article emphasizes the central role of cognitive processes in the restructuring of religious education and argues that curricula, methods, and content should be redesigned in light of cognitive development theories. Cognitive-based teaching methods should be viewed as strategic tools that strengthen not only academic achievement but also individuals' capacity for moral reasoning, critical thinking, and meaning-making. Studies conducted in this direction will make significant contributions to aligning religious education with contemporary requirements, pedagogical principles, and individual developmental needs (Yavuz, 1987).

1. Method

1.1. Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to examine the educational value of cognitive processes in the context of religious education and to demonstrate, on a theoretical and practical level, how religious learning can be deepened along the axis of reason, understanding, and cognition. Today, religious education is often shaped by traditional transmission approaches and fails to sufficiently stimulate students' intellectual activities. This hinders the achievement of fundamental goals such as internalizing religious values, making them meaningful, and connecting them to real life. To address this deficiency, the study aims to contribute to the restructuring of religious education by focusing on contemporary cognitive development theories. In this context, the approaches of theorists such as Piaget, Vygotsky, Bruner, Bloom, and Gardner are integrated into religious learning processes, specifically analyzing how higher-order cognitive skills (analysis, evaluation, creation, and criticism) can be integrated with religious knowledge. The study not only presents a theoretical analysis but also examines the practical implications of this goal by focusing on concrete areas such as curriculum, textbooks, and teacher practices. Thus, the aim is to transform religious education into a structure that fosters thought, encourages inquiry, and fosters meaning-making.

1.2. Significance of the Study

The significance of this study stems from its aim to re-align religious education with contemporary pedagogical needs. Traditional teaching approaches have largely transformed religious education into a process focused on memorization, repetition, and exams, making it difficult for students to establish a genuine connection with values. This research proposes a rethinking of religious education, both theoretically and practically, by focusing on the multi-layered approach offered by cognitive development theories. Religious knowledge, particularly its abstract, normative, and metaphysical content, can become meaningful not only through the transfer of knowledge but also through higher-level intellectual activities. By providing conceptual tools that enable the integration of religious values into the student's mental structure, the study contributes to the transformation of religious education from superficial information transfer to a process that fosters cognitive awareness. Furthermore, this study emphasizes that religious education is a strategic field that impacts not only individual but also social and cultural development, highlighting the power of a cognitive-based approach in fostering a sense of both ethical and social responsibility. The need for religious education to evolve into a format that encourages individuals to use their intellectual capacity, is open to critical thinking, and is focused on meaning is considered a significant contribution in this context.

1.3. Study Method

This research was designed based on a qualitative research design and conducted using document analysis. Because qualitative research aims to generate meaning, interpret it, and conduct in-depth analysis, its selection in a conceptual and multidimensional field like religious education is particularly appropriate (Taguchi, & St.Pierre, 2017). During the research process, the Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge curricula, high school textbooks, and objectives published by the Ministry of National Education in Turkey were systematically examined. Furthermore, domestic and international literature on constructivist theory, higher-order cognitive objectives, and religious learning processes was reviewed to form the theoretical framework of the study. The cognitive development approaches of Piaget, Vygotsky, Bloom, Bruner, and Gardner were examined, and the intersections of these theories with religious education were revealed. In the document analysis, the level of cognitive objectives in the programs (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, evaluation, and creation) was classified using descriptive content analysis. It has been demonstrated which teaching methods provide the degree of cognitive depth. Thanks to this method, the actual counterparts and shortcomings of cognitive processes in religious learning have been identified both theoretically and empirically.

1.4. Study Findings

Research findings indicate that religious education programs contain limited cognitive objectives and insufficient emphasis on higher-order skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Current textbooks primarily focus on knowledge and comprehension, while activities that develop students' mental processes such as critical thinking, problem solving, and creative interpretation are few and limited in number. However, when cognitive-based teaching methods such as concept maps, discussion techniques, dramatization, and project-based learning are used, students have been observed to achieve deeper, more meaningful, and more internalized religious learning. Dramatization and project practices, in particular, facilitated students' connection to values, their connection to current problems, and the development of ethical reflexes. Furthermore, students' ability to comprehend not only the text itself but also its subtexts, historical context, and contemporary implications was improved. These findings demonstrate that integrating religious education with higher-order cognitive objectives positively impacts both academic achievement and the development of value-based awareness. Therefore, the need to expand cognitive-based teaching strategies is strongly warranted.

2. The Relationship Between Cognitive Development Theories and Religious Learning

Cognitive development theories, which center on the individual's mental processes in education, consider learning not merely as the transfer of information but as a process through which an individual processes, interprets, and constructs information. These approaches, particularly in abstract, symbolic, and value-based areas such as religious learning, have the potential to shape an individual's world of meaning. Religious education is not merely about the transfer of information based on memorization, but rather about the individual's development of faith, meaning, wisdom, and moral orientation. Therefore, the relationship between cognitive development theories and religious learning should be evaluated not only from a pedagogical but also from an epistemological and moral perspective (Fığlalı, 1997).

Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development argues that children's ways of thinking change with age. According to him, cognitive development progresses through four stages: sensory-motor, preoperational, concrete operational, and abstract operational. Of these stages, the abstract operational stage, which coincides with adolescence, is critical for an individual's ability to understand abstract concepts, religious symbols, and metaphysical principles. In religious learning, this period corresponds to an individual's ability to make sense of sacred concepts and abstract categories such as the afterlife, fate, sin, and virtue. In this context, the development of an individual's logical thinking skills during Piaget's abstract operational stage is a significant turning point in the process of religious understanding (Morozova, Zvyagina, & Terebova, 2008).

While Piaget's theory does not directly offer a pedagogical perspective on religious education, it provides a strong foundation for how individuals should approach religious content at different ages. For example, the concretization and narrativeization of religious narratives in childhood is crucial for appropriateness to the child's cognitive level. Otherwise, abstract religious concepts presented without considering the child's mental developmental stages can become information that cannot be understood and therefore cannot be internalized (Ömeroğlu & Kandır, 2007).

Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development also provides a helpful framework for understanding the cognitive aspect of religious learning. Kohlberg assesses individuals' levels of moral reasoning in three main stages and six stages: preconventional, conventional, and postconventional. When religious education is considered not merely a field where behavioral patterns are taught but a process aimed at the development of moral reason, determining an individual's level of moral reasoning becomes crucial. Kohlberg's postconventional level refers to an individual's ability to make decisions within the framework of universal ethical principles. In this context, an individual's ability to relate concepts such as God's will, justice, and truth to universal ethical values requires advanced cognitive and moral development (Armstrong, 2000).

Lev Vygotsky's theory of sociocultural development posits that an individual's cognitive development is shaped through social interaction and cultural tools. According to this theory, the learning process occurs within the individual's zone of proximal development, through interaction with more competent individuals. In this context, religious education is shaped through an individual's interactions with their social environment, family, community structure, and teachers. For example, Quran recitation, the interpretation of hadiths, or the learning of worship practices are conveyed within both cultural and social contexts. Language, metaphors and rituals, which are symbolic tools in these processes, nourish socio-cultural development as well as cognitive development (Glock, 1962).

Robert Siegler and Neo-Piagetians have argued that cognitive development follows a fluctuating course rather than a linear process, and that individuals may employ different strategies in different tasks (Efklides, & Shayer, 2018). In religious learning, individuals sometimes approach concepts with literal meanings and sometimes with metaphorical or symbolic meanings. This diversity demonstrates the need to consider both different cognitive strategies and pedagogical approaches in the educational process. For example, the same individual may attempt to understand the wisdom of a religious act through logical reasoning while simultaneously evaluating a moral situation through an intuitive approach (Özhamam, 2007).

Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences is important for religious learning. According to him, individuals possess not only logical-mathematical intelligence but also linguistic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, musical, and naturalistic intelligence. When considered within the framework of this theory, it becomes clear that religious education cannot be reduced to a solely cognitive dimension but must also offer a structure encompassing the individual's holistic intelligence domains. For example, one student might use musical rhythm to memorize Quranic verses; another might contemplate religious texts through their intrapersonal intelligence and interpret them. Religious education that addresses these different intelligences provides a foundation that supports cognitive development (Ausubel, 2000).

Jerome Bruner's spiral curriculum approach also establishes a direct bridge between cognitive development and religious learning. According to Bruner, fundamental concepts at every age level can be taught through continuous repetition, from the simple to the complex. This approach aligns particularly well with the lifelong nature of religious education. Continuous exposure to religious texts, concepts, and rituals at different ages and cognitive levels supports both deep learning and the construction of meaning (Görmez, 2016).

The relationship between cognitive development and religious learning has also been emphasized, directly or indirectly, in the Islamic tradition. Al-Ghazali, by considering the concepts of "ta'lîm" and "tafakkur" together, states that knowledge is not merely information to be transmitted but the product of a mental processing process. His concept of "ilm-i ladunni" (ilm-i ledunni) argues that knowledge can be acquired not only through reason but also through inner intuition and heartfelt awareness. This demonstrates that religious learning is an affective and intuitive process, as well as a cognitive one (Aydınalp, 2008).

Modern pedagogical approaches have demonstrated that religious education should be based not only on knowledge but also on understanding, interpretation, and critical thinking. Bloom's revised taxonomy of cognitive objectives supports this understanding. Each of the six-level structure (remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, creating) can be used to restructure religious teaching objectives. For example, at the "understanding" level, students can explain the meaning of a verse, while at the "creating" level, they can interpret the verse on a new moral issue. This enables religious education to be restructured from a purely dogmatic structure to one based on processes of thought and interpretation (Özyürek, 2013).

Consequently, cognitive developmental theories offer a pedagogical opportunity to analyze the multilayered structure of religious learning. Piaget's stage development model, Vygotsky's emphasis on social interaction, Kohlberg's stages of moral reasoning, Gardner's domains of intelligence, and Bruner's spiral structure

offer a rich theoretical framework for how religious learning can be structured appropriately for age, intelligence type, social context, and moral level. The educational implications of these theories necessitate the pedagogical design of not only cognitive activities but also higher-level religious cognitive activities such as deep understanding, contemplation, interpretation, and internalization.

3. Reasoning and Meaning Processes in Religious Education

Religious education is a multidimensional learning field that aims not only to equip individuals with religious knowledge but also to enable them to interpret this knowledge through reason and guide their lives. In this context, reasoning and meaning-making emerge as fundamental components that must be effectively integrated with an individual's cognitive processes, rather than simply memorizing religious knowledge. By combining the cognitive structuring approaches offered by modern educational theories with the central role given to reason by classical religious thought, it is possible to create a foundation that strengthens both intellectual depth and moral consistency in religious education. Reasoning determines both the methodological and pedagogical aspects of an individual's relationship with religious texts, while meaning-making refers to the integration of this relationship with values, worldview, and action (Polat, 2013).

The reasoning process is a fundamental skill that enables students to analyze religious texts they encounter, comprehend their context, and question their internal consistency. Within Bloom's revised cognitive taxonomy, the levels of analysis, evaluation, and creation are directly related to students' capacities to think critically and develop creative interpretations of religious texts. At this point, students should not only memorize a verse but also be able to analyze its historical, moral, and sociocultural context; they should also be able to discuss how to analyze a contemporary problem in light of this text. This means the effective use of both higher-order cognitive skills and the systematics of religious thought (Hay & Hunt, 2000).

Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development is extremely useful in this process. Many religious texts may be too complex for students to understand on their own. However, when analyzed with expert guidance in pedagogically structured learning environments, these texts become cognitively accessible. Especially in disciplines such as tafsir education, contextual, linguistic, and semantic analyses of verses are conveyed to students with the guidance of the teacher, while simultaneously building critical and reflective thinking skills (Schunk, 2009).

The hermeneutic approach emerges as an important tool in understanding religious texts. Understanding requires grasping not the literal content of a text, but its semantic dimension. At this point, Gadamer's concept of "pre-understanding" comes into play; the individual approaches the text with their own historical and cultural background and generates new meanings during this interaction. Religious education should guide this process and help students construct meaning,

taking into account their level of readiness. The process of understanding, in this sense, is not fixed; it is a constantly evolving, pluralistic, and open-ended cognitive activity (Senemoğlu, 2005).

In the integration of reasoning into religious learning, the usul tradition developed by classical Islamic thought offers an epistemological legacy compatible with today's pedagogical approach. Methods such as qiyas, istihsan, and maslaha, particularly those developed in the usul al-kalam and fiqh usul al-fiqh, provide the ability not only to interpret texts but also to relate them to contemporary problems. In this context, reasoning is a mental discipline not limited to religious knowledge but also aimed at generating solutions to the complexities of social life (Özyürek & Ömeroğlu, 2013).

The Cognitive Apprenticeship model offers a suitable pedagogical framework for developing reasoning skills in religious learning. According to this model, learning occurs through observation by masters and active practice. This approach is also observed in classical forms of religious education; in the madrasah system, the teacher-student relationship aims not only at transmitting knowledge but also at internalizing ways of thinking. In this process, students form their own mental patterns by observing their teacher's methodological analysis. This model can still be used in structured learning scenarios today; for example, students can gain intellectual depth by discussing a verse in different contexts and by comparatively analyzing similar religious texts (Yavuzer, Demir et al., 2006).

Contemporary neuroscientific research has revealed that meaning-making processes occur through the simultaneous activation of cognitive and emotional regions in the brain. The prefrontal cortex, in particular, plays an active role in functions such as decision-making, analytical thinking, and logical inference. These findings demonstrate that religious education is a process that involves not only intellectual but also emotional resonance. In other words, for a student to grasp the meaning of a verse, they must be exposed not only to logical explanation but also to the emotional impact of the text. In this context, religious education should construct a pedagogical structure that engages both the mind and the heart.

Another prominent factor in the process of religious meaning-making is contextuality. The social and cultural context in which the student lives directly influences how they interpret the text. Therefore, the teaching of religious texts should be structured to connect universal messages to local realities. As Freire stated in his understanding of critical pedagogy, the purpose of education is to equip individuals with the capacity to reread and transform the world. From this perspective, religious education should not only enable students to acquire knowledge but also to make moral and conscious interventions in the world (Köylü, 2011).

Furthermore, the processes of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, defined as higher-order cognitive skills, are crucial for students to develop a critical approach

to religious texts. These skills are particularly relevant in discussing complex religious issues and analyzing different sectarian or cultural interpretations. Students should not only learn a single viewpoint but also be able to substantiate it, compare alternative interpretations, and draw conclusions. This approach requires religious education to embrace pluralism, critical thinking, and individual ijtihad. Ibn Rushd, a classical Islamic thinker, argued that there is no conflict between reason and tradition; on the contrary, correct reason enables accurate textual interpretation. His philosophical approach encourages reading religious texts not literally, but with layers of wisdom-laden meaning. This perspective enhances the epistemic value of reasoning in religious education today, instilling in students a critical yet respectful approach to text (Kılavuz, 2000).

Finally, the multimedia environments offered by the digital age enable students to perceive religious texts in different formats. These digital resources, which present visual, auditory, and textual elements together, enrich the meaning-making process. However, these environments must be structured within a pedagogical system. Otherwise, students are exposed to information but cannot construct meaning. At this point, media literacy, under the guidance of the teacher, enhances students' capacity to analyze, verify, and critique digital religious content (Slavin, 2013).

Consequently, restructuring religious education around the axis of reasoning and meaning-making requires synthesizing both the pedagogical opportunities offered by cognitive theories and the profound intellectual heritage of Islamic thought. This way, students can establish authentic relationships with religious texts not only at the knowledge level but also at the intellectual, moral, and cultural levels. This relationship allows the individual to give meaning to his life, produce value and make social contributions (Özden, 2003).

4. Reflection of Cognitive Goals in Religious Education Programs

The success of religious education programs depends not only on the comprehensiveness of the content but also on the level of cognitive objectives these content addresses. In educational sciences literature, cognitive objectives are pedagogical goals that stimulate an individual's mental processes such as acquiring, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating knowledge. Particularly in religious education programs, the scope and practical application of these objectives play a fundamental role in determining how students approach religious knowledge, interpret this knowledge, and implement it in their lives. However, not only the definition of cognitive objectives but also their integration into curricula, textbooks, and teaching outcomes is a separate evaluation issue (Yeşilyaprak et al., 2002).

In Türkiye, the Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge (RKAB) course curriculum is being gradually updated in a structured manner by the Ministry of

National Education. As clearly stated in the 2018 curriculum, the goal is not only for students to acquire religious knowledge but also to analyze, question, and interpret this information (Koç, 2025). This demonstrates that cognitive objectives are associated with higher-level mental processes, especially at the secondary school level. However, whether these objectives are represented to the same extent in textbooks and teacher practices as they are stated in the curriculum remains a pedagogical problem (Solmuş, 2000).

Bloom's classic taxonomy proposes structuring teaching objectives at six levels: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. The revised version adds the dimension of "creation" to this structure, aiming for students to become producers rather than merely consumers of knowledge. When we examine the extent to which this hierarchical goal structure is used in religious education programs, we see that the first three levels (knowledge, comprehension, application) are generally dominant, while the levels of analysis, evaluation, and creation are limited. This can lead to students developing a superficial understanding of religious knowledge and limit the development of higher-order cognitive skills such as critical thinking, conceptual analysis, and moral reasoning (Megginson, 1977).

In the DKAB high school textbook published in 2023, a section titled "Interpretation Differences in Islamic Thought" asked students to compare different sects and thought structures. This suggests a cognitive objective at the analytical level. However, the majority of the textbook focuses on questions and activities at the knowledge and comprehension level. For example, statements like "Memorize some verses from the Quran" and "Explain the given hadiths" often fall short of the knowledge and comprehension level. This can be considered evidence that the objectives outlined in the curriculum are not being adequately reflected in practice.

On the other hand, in curricula developed based on the constructivist approach, in line with contemporary educational approaches, students are encouraged to actively access and reconstruct knowledge. This approach, particularly in value-laden fields such as religious education, requires students not only to memorize readily available information but also to integrate that knowledge into their own cognitive and affective structures. In this context, cognitive objectives cease to be merely a dimension of the curriculum; they become one of the fundamental building blocks that determine the pedagogical philosophy (Davies, 2014).

A similar pattern is observed in international comparisons. For example, religious education programs in Finland focus on higher-level cognitive objectives through activities such as individual inquiry, resource use, and value-based discussion. Students are expected not only to learn religious concepts but also to establish relationships between them, develop personal opinions, and defend them.

However, current curricula in Turkey are still quite limited in this regard and rely heavily on the transfer of knowledge from teacher to student.

How cognitive objectives are reflected in textbooks is also important in this process. Because textbooks embody curricula, the text types, visuals, question patterns, and activity types used there directly influence students' cognitive processes. Content analyses reveal that religious culture textbooks largely contain explanatory narratives, while open-ended questions that provide students with space for reflection are limited. This poses a significant obstacle to operationalizing cognitive objectives in the teaching-learning process (Morgan, 1991). Furthermore, teachers' pedagogical content knowledge determines how effectively these objectives are implemented. The teacher should be a learning leader, not just a conveyor of information, but also one who encourages students to think, question, and draw new conclusions. However, current research indicates that many religious education teachers are limited in developing content, posing questions, and creating discussion environments geared toward cognitive objectives. This deficiency results in the objectives defined in curricula not being reflected in classroom practice (Pajares & Miller, 1994).

Another important point is the relationship between cognitive objectives and affective and psychomotor objectives. Especially in multidimensional fields such as religious education, not only mental skills but also the processes of developing values, forming attitudes, and acquiring behaviors should be considered. In this sense, Bloom's three domains (cognitive, affective, and psychomotor) should be considered as a whole, and holistic approaches should be adopted instead of isolated designs. For example, it is not enough for students to simply define the concept of "justice"; to internalize this concept and apply it in their lives, they must first establish a mental structure and then relate this structure to values. In this context, cognitive objectives hold a central position, feeding other dimensions of education (Demir & Kaya, 2015).

The place of cognitive objectives in Quranic instruction should be evaluated from both traditional and contemporary perspectives. While traditional methods are based on memorization, contemporary approaches focus on understanding, interpreting, and contextualizing the Quran. In this context, Quranic instruction should be viewed as a cognitive activity not only at the phonetic level but also at the semantic level. While memorizing the words of a verse, students must also grasp its exegetical and moral dimensions. This necessitates that programs be structured to support not only knowledge but also higher-order thinking skills.

Consequently, the question of the extent to which cognitive objectives are included in religious education programs can be considered a complex issue encompassing not only pedagogical but also epistemological and cultural dimensions. The constructivist, multi-level, and individual-centered approaches offered by

modern educational theories necessitate the redesign of religious education to support both individual faith development and a sense of social responsibility. This transformation requires a holistic educational policy that extends not only to the program level but also to teacher training processes, textbooks, assessment tools, and learning environments (Özbek, 1991).

5. The Role of Higher-Order Cognitive Skills in the Comprehension of Religious Values

The process of understanding and internalizing religious values by an individual is a multilayered structure that does not occur solely at the level of acquiring knowledge; it is analyzed cognitively, felt emotionally, and adopted behaviorally. Therefore, the purpose of religious education is not only the transfer of conceptual knowledge but also the transformation of this knowledge through higher-level cognitive skills and its transfer to the value dimension. High-level cognitive skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, reasoning, judgment, and abstraction are fundamental tools that make understanding religious values not only a learning process but also a process of living and creating meaning.

Achieving high-level cognitive goals allows an individual to approach acquired religious knowledge with a questioning and analytical approach. This prevents individuals from establishing a superficial relationship with religious values. For example, the concept of "justice" should not be conveyed merely as a definition; it should be questioned how this concept has been interpreted historically, what social justice issues it may be associated with today, and how it may manifest in individual behavior. Such multifaceted analyses are made possible by critical thinking skills (Dennis & Vander Wal, 2010). The concept of "critical thinking" is of primary importance in the relationship between higher-order cognitive skills and religious education. Critical thinking is the ability of an individual to establish consistency between premises and conclusions, recognize contradictions, evaluate arguments, and propose new suggestions. Because religious texts often contain multiple meanings open to different interpretations, critical thinking skills are crucial in processing such texts. Students' ability to analyze Quranic verses or hadiths in different contexts and to see their historical, moral, and contemporary layers of meaning allows them not only to absorb information but also to reflect on and reconstruct it.

Problem-solving skills also play a central role in the internalization of religious values. While religious principles are often taught as abstract normative constructs, individuals may lack the understanding of how to relate these principles to concrete life problems. At this point, students should be given the opportunity during the educational process to reflect on how religious values can be applied to current problems. For example, the solutions offered by Islamic morality to issues such as environmental ethics, digital media use, and gender justice could be discussed. In

this way, students learn to both define problems and generate appropriate religious solutions to them.

Reasoning and judgment skills enable individuals to evaluate different religious arguments and make choices by developing comparative analyses. In this process, students learn to ask not only "what is true?" but also "why is it true?" This contributes to the development of an ethical stance. For example, when comparing verses on zakat, charity, or social justice, an individual's ability to analyze the Quranic basis of social solidarity by establishing connections between these texts enables them not only to understand the text but also to connect it with values (Dennis & Vander Wal, 2010).

Abstractiveness is directly related to the ontological dimension of religious education. Religious concepts often contain metaphysical elements. Abstract content, such as the afterlife, fate, and the attributes of God, becomes meaningful only when an individual reaches this level of intellectual understanding. Understanding such concepts requires a conceptual framework constructed in the individual's mind through symbols, metaphors, and representations. At this point, abstract concepts should be linked to concrete life experiences, taking into account students' cognitive developmental levels, and this association should serve to establish meaning at the individual level.

The integration of cognitive skills with religious values contributes not only to individual but also to the formation of a social consciousness. In this context, ethical reasoning models play a crucial role in the individual's adoption and implementation of moral values. Kohlberg's theory of moral development argues that individuals develop more complex forms of moral reasoning over time and can reach the level of universal ethical principles. This developmental process is directly related to the way religious education equips individuals with higher-level cognitive skills. If students are taught only rules, they will shape their behavior according to external pressures. However, when individuals analyze rules with questions of why and how, they begin to grasp the values behind these rules (Acar, 2005).

Contemporary learning theories also explain how higher-order cognitive skills become functional in the understanding of religious values. Constructivist learning theory, in particular, argues that individuals do not passively receive information; they reconstruct it by relating it to prior knowledge. This approach to teaching religious values facilitates students' connection to values based on their own experiences, life circumstances, and mental patterns. This type of learning is both meaningful and enduring because individuals not only access information but also live with it.

Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences also makes this process more comprehensive. Given that different individuals have strengths in different

intelligence areas, individual differences should be taken into account in the process of internalizing religious values. For example, a student with high interpersonal intelligence may perceive the value of social cooperation in group work, while a student with high intrapersonal intelligence may grasp the same value through solitary contemplation. This diversity necessitates individualizing the teaching process and linking cognitive skills and values in multiple ways (Ulusoy, 2003).

Research on the development of higher-order skills in cognitive psychology demonstrates that active learning, problem-based learning, and reflective thinking support these skills. It is clear that in religious education, students should be mentally activated not only through content presentation but also through discussions, debates, case studies, and ethical scenarios. This also paves the way for meaning-making and in-depth learning in education. The inquisitive nature of today's youth, in particular, necessitates the adoption of dialogue-based, meaning-seeking pedagogical approaches instead of traditional transmission-based models (Duran, 2021).

The promotion of reason, wisdom, and contemplation within the context of Islamic thought demonstrates the traditional support for these cognitive processes. The recurring questions "Do you not think?" and "Do you not reason?" in the Quran reveal the relationship between cognitive processes and worship and morality. In this respect, the need to understand, discuss, and internalize religious values, not merely memorize them, emerges as both an epistemological and pedagogical principle. Consequently, higher-order cognitive skills are indispensable tools that ensure that religious values don't remain superficial but become ingrained in an individual's mental, emotional, and behavioral world. Skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, judgment, abstraction, and reasoning facilitate students' understanding of religious values, their implementation, and the construction of a value-based life. Therefore, it is essential that religious education programs and teaching processes be transformed into a student-centered, meaning-focused structure based on cognitive skills (Rosenberg, 1956).

6. Deep Understanding in Religious Education with Cognitive-Based Teaching Methods

Religious education is not merely a discipline that transmits knowledge; it is a multidimensional process that shapes an individual's world of meaning, guides their behavior, and develops their intellectual awareness. This multidimensionality demonstrates that the teaching process cannot be conducted solely through transmission-based methods; rather, pedagogical approaches that prioritize student-centered and cognitive development must be implemented. In this context, cognitive-based teaching methods such as concept maps, discussion techniques, dramatization, and project-based learning are critical for the in-depth understanding and

internalization of religious values. These methods are cognitive tools that enable students not only to learn but also to construct meaning, critique, connect, and transform (Tosun, 2010).

Concept maps are visual-schematic tools that help students structure their knowledge on a topic and establish meaningful relationships between this knowledge. This technique is particularly effective in teaching complex religious concepts. For example, concept maps can support the systematic establishment of concepts such as "action," "intention," "sincerity," and "taqwa," which are subcomponents of the concept of "faith," in the student's mind. In this context, concept maps are said to enhance meaningful learning and enable students to actively engage with information. When this method is used in religious education, students not only learn concepts but also recognize the religious, moral, and social connections between these concepts. This context is directly related to the concept of deep learning, as learning becomes meaningful only when concepts are organized within a cohesive mental framework (Dwyer, Hogan & Stewart, 2014).

Discussion techniques are among the effective methods that deepen learning by creating cognitive conflict. Particularly when addressing morally grounded topics that are open to interpretation, such as religious values, discussions allow students to evaluate different perspectives, defend their own views, and develop metacognitive awareness. In education, discussing topics such as "justice in Islam" and "the relationship between freedom and responsibility" through discussion enhances students' conceptual thinking skills. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development theory emphasizes the role of social interaction in learning, enabling students to learn from one another in discussion environments. In this context, controlled discussions or seminars conducted in religious classes provide a productive pedagogical basis for individuals to develop higher-level cognitive skills (Rousseau, 1966).

The dramatization technique, on the other hand, allows for the connection of abstract religious concepts to concrete real-life examples. This technique is particularly effective at the intersection of affective and cognitive objectives, such as building empathy, fostering emotional engagement, and translating values into behavior. Students' role-playing of historical-symbolic events, such as the "Treaty of Hudaybiyyah," "Imam Omar's understanding of justice," or "the patience of Prophet Joseph," allows them to both establish an emotional connection with the text and connect values to concrete real-life examples. Heathcote emphasizes that dramatic games contribute to the generation of new meanings in students' intellectual worlds and that this method is particularly powerful in internalizing complex concepts. Given the emotionally resonant nature of religious education, the dramatization method supports both the cognitive and affective development of individuals. Project-based learning is an approach that aims to enable students to construct knowledge and connect it to real life by engaging in long-term,

interdisciplinary, and problem-focused work. This method is highly effective in instilling religious values. For example, when the concept of "alms" is discussed, students organizing a charity campaign that promotes social solidarity enables them to learn not only the theoretical but also the practical aspects of this value. It is stated that project-based learning supports higher-level cognitive skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making, and also develops students' capacity for responsibility and collaboration. With this method, religious education becomes a learning environment not only within the classroom but also within a social context (Wright, 2000).

The effectiveness of these methods is closely linked to the structure of the learning environment. The integration of information technologies enables the creation of concept maps in a digital environment, the implementation of discussion techniques in online forums, dramatization through video projects, and the support of project-based learning with e-portfolios. Especially in the digitalized educational environments following the pandemic, digital adaptations of these methods have enabled cognitive processes to be supported with various tools. Religious education can also achieve a more flexible, participatory and student-centered structure through these digital pedagogical tools (Tomic, 1993).

The process of meaning-making is central to the association of cognitive-based teaching methods with religious values. Meaning-making occurs when students connect new information to previous experiences, grasp the context, and demonstrate emotional engagement. Bruner (1960, p. 33) argues that the purpose of education is not merely to convey knowledge but to develop the individual's capacity to generate meaning. In this sense, the teacher is a learning leader who guides the meaning-making processes, not merely a lecturer. Students' engagement with concept maps, their generation of their own ideas in discussions, their self-expression in dramatization, and their active participation in projects make them the subjects of knowledge (Sağlam, 2000).

These methods, which center on higher-level cognitive skills, also foster a deep internalization of values. This is because when individuals actively process information, they develop a deeper commitment to that information. Particularly in religious education, fundamental values such as the concept of "faith" are not merely explained; Considering that knowledge must be experienced, felt, and thought, the importance of cognitive-based constructivist approaches, in addition to traditional narrative-based methods, becomes even more evident.

These methods are crucial not only for students' cognitive but also for their ethical development. Because religious education is intertwined with the teaching of values, students can develop individual judgment, engage in ethical reasoning, and assume responsibility only in active and meaningful learning environments.

This demonstrates that religious education should be conducted within a pedagogical framework that is not merely dogmatic but also critical, creative, and practical.

In conclusion, cognitive-based teaching methods such as concept maps, discussion techniques, dramatization, and project-based learning are powerful tools that restructure both the content and objectives of religious education. These methods enable students to understand, question, produce, and implement information rather than simply memorize it. This contributes to the development of both individual awareness and social responsibility. By centering these methods, religious education programs can design more meaningful, effective, and lasting learning experiences.

Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

Religious education, with its historical and universal dimensions, holds an indispensable place in human experience, yet it is one of the disciplines most in need of restructuring within the framework of modern educational theories. In this restructuring process, the conceptual tools offered by cognitive development theories hold great potential for making religious learning more effective, in-depth, and meaningful at the pedagogical level. In particular, the integration of higher-level cognitive skills such as reasoning, conceptual understanding, critical thinking, and problem-solving into educational processes enables religious knowledge to transform from memorized data into an internalized worldview. The findings and discussions in this study aim to reveal the extent to which religious education is linked to cognitive structures, the limitations of the current structure, and how these limits can be overcome.

Research findings indicate that cognitive objectives in religious education curricula in Turkey are generally limited at a low level, and high-level mental processes such as analysis, evaluation, and creation are not sufficiently emphasized. An examination of textbooks reveals that definitions and explanations at the knowledge level and short exercises at the comprehension level predominate; It has been found that activities that encourage students' active participation, comparison, questioning, and the generation of new results are quite limited. This situation poses a pedagogical limitation on the potential depth of religious education. However, cognitive development theories emphasize that individuals should experience learning as an active, not passive, process, centering on the process by which knowledge is mentally constructed, given meaning, and blended with individual experience.

Based on this theoretical foundation, the structural transformation of religious education should occur not only at the curriculum level but also in teacher roles, classroom practices, and assessment and evaluation processes. Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development suggests that the potential level of student comprehension can be exceeded through a more competent guide. From this

perspective, the teacher should assume a role not only of providing information but also of guiding the student, enabling them to explore their mental processes and encouraging them to construct meaning. However, currently, a significant portion of teachers struggle to effectively incorporate cognitive objectives into classroom activities, often adopting a centralized, exam-focused approach. In this context, it becomes a necessity to include cognitive development theories, constructivist pedagogies and higher-order thinking skills integrated with values in teacher training programs.

Higher-level cognitive skills play an indispensable role not only in intellectual achievement but also in the internalization of values and strengthening of moral orientations. Critical thinking, judgment, and abstraction skills, in particular, enable individuals to interpret religious texts not only at a literal level but also within a historical, moral, and ethical context. This approach encourages students to ask "why?", evaluate alternative interpretations, and develop their own moral stance. Kohlberg's theory of moral development also argues that individuals can develop more abstract and universal ethical values over time; this is only possible through an educational process supported by cognitive skills. Therefore, religious education requires not only imparting information but also cognitively structuring the processes of value creation and ethical reflex formation.

The integration of cognitive-based teaching methods such as concept maps, discussion techniques, dramatization, and project-based learning into religious education is among the main recommendations of the research. Concept maps, especially considering the complexity and multilayered nature of religious content, facilitate students' mental establishment of conceptual relationships and support the process of constructing meaning by making the connections between different concepts visible. Discussion techniques, on the other hand, enable individuals to encounter different perspectives, form their own opinions, and justify them. This approach enables students to approach religious knowledge more critically and transform this knowledge into ethical choices. Dramatization and project-based learning are effective strategies that enable students' active participation and emotional connection in translating religious values into practice. Dramatization, in particular, allows abstract values to be concretized through staging, while project work allows students to transform values into socially responsible actions.

The effective implementation of these teaching methods requires not only methodological choice but also theoretical and pedagogical consistency. Curricula should include clear objectives, outcomes, and assessment tools related to these methods, and teachers should be provided with concrete content and guidance on implementing these methods. Furthermore, teachers' competence in preparing lesson plans, designing activities, and creating a learning environment in line with cognitive objectives is among the factors that will directly impact the quality of religious education. The results of the study reveal that cognitive-based teaching

methods in religious education not only increase academic knowledge but also facilitate students' emotional and moral connection to religious texts, their meaningful internalization of values, and their practical application of these values. In this context, religious education is not merely a field of knowledge; it is also a personality-building area that develops cognitive awareness, ethical reasoning, and moral orientation. The structural framework offered by cognitive development theories strongly aligns with these multidimensional goals of religious education. Transforming this alignment into a pedagogical model will enable education to fulfill both its individual and societal functions more effectively.

In conclusion, the data obtained in this study clearly demonstrate the need to restructure religious education with cognitive-based approaches. The focus should not be on students passively receiving information, but rather actively processing, questioning, analyzing, and connecting it to values. In this process, curriculum, course materials, teacher competencies, and assessment tools should be redesigned according to cognitive objectives. Furthermore, planning education as a holistic structure encompassing not only intellectual but also affective and behavioral dimensions will ensure the meaningful and lasting learning of religious values. A constructive, participatory, and inquisitive religious education model that prioritizes cognitive processes provides a strong pedagogical foundation that will contribute not only to academic success but also to moral maturation and individual awareness.

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