

OPTIMIZATION OF TEACHER WORKING GROUP (KKG) IN
IMPROVING PAI TEACHER LITERACY IN COMPILING HOTS
QUESTIONS IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS
SIMEULUE TENGAH DISTRICT

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Abstract

The ability to develop Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) questions is a critical competency emphasized in the *Merdeka Curriculum*, particularly in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at the elementary level. However, the literacy of PAI teachers in designing HOTS questions remains low in the Simeulue Tengah District. This study aims to assess PAI teachers' literacy in formulating HOTS questions, their participation in Teacher Working Groups (KKG), and the main barriers to effective KKG utilization. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed, using both open- and close-ended questionnaires distributed to 12 PAI teachers from 10 elementary schools. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The findings indicate that although 66.7% of teachers found the KKG beneficial for developing HOTS questions, participation levels were low: 58% rarely attended KKG activities, and only 25% felt significantly supported. The main barriers identified include time constraints due to workload and household responsibilities, minimal support from principals and supervisors, limited access to resources such as digital media and contextual teaching materials, low teacher awareness of the benefits of KKG, and training sessions that are often too theoretical and lack contextual relevance. To optimize the effectiveness of KKG, training must be more practical and context-based, with sustained pedagogical discussions and stronger institutional support. Strengthening the role of KKG is essential for enhancing PAI teachers' capacity to develop HOTS questions and, ultimately, to improve the quality of religious education.

Keywords: KKG; Teacher Literacy; HOTS Questions; Islamic Religious Education; Elementary School.

A. Introduction

Education is the main foundation for shaping a generation that is critical, creative, and adaptive to changes in the times, with HOTS (Higher Order Thinking Skills) being the main focus in 21st-century learning (Sumantri, 2022). HOTS requires students not only to remember and understand but also to analyze, evaluate, and create solutions for complex problems. Therefore, teachers' ability to create HOTS-based questions is very important, including in

Islamic Religious Education in elementary schools. However, the low literacy of teachers in creating HOTS questions, due to limited training and lack of professional guidance, has become the main challenge (Hidayah & Husna, 2024).

The Teacher Working Group (KKG) plays an important role as a forum for the professional development of teachers, but it has not been utilized optimally. (Trisno & Lainah, 2022) Improving the literacy of PAI teachers in creating HOTS questions involves understanding Bloom's taxonomy, formulating question indicators according to basic competencies, and selecting appropriate operational verbs. (Hasanah et al., 2024) In addition, questions that are contextual and relevant to the lives of students and contain Islamic values are also needed. This increase in literacy can be done through training, discussion, and direct practice in KKG, which in turn will help teachers encourage students to think critically and make learning more meaningful. (Indriawati et al., 2023)

The Teacher Working Group (KKG) has a strategic role in improving the quality of learning, including in compiling HOTS-based questions (Yusniar et al., 2024). However, the implementation of KKG in this District has not been optimal, with activities that tend to be limited to administrative meetings or routine discussions, without a specific focus on improving HOTS question-writing literacy competencies (Darma et al., 2024). In fact, mastery of HOTS question literacy is very important so that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning does not only focus on memorization, but can also encourage students to think critically, analytically, and reflectively. Therefore, optimizing the role of KKG through training and discussions that focus on compiling HOTS questions is very necessary to improve teacher capacity and the quality of PA learning (Mutakin & Sriyanto, 2021).

The results of the questionnaire distribution to Islamic Religious Education teachers in Elementary Schools in Simeulue Tengah District showed that around 58% of teachers rarely participated in KKG activities related to compiling HOTS questions. This low participation was caused by teachers' limited time and the suboptimal role of KKG in providing relevant resources and training. This condition indicates a gap between the objectives of KKG to improve teacher competence and its implementation, which has an impact on low teacher literacy in compiling HOTS questions. This study aims to analyze the optimization of the role of the KKG in improving Islamic Religious Education teacher literacy, especially in compiling HOTS questions in Elementary Schools in Simeulue Tengah District. In addition, this study also contains conceptual and empirical analysis of the effectiveness of KKG in developing teacher professional literacy as a whole. Not only that, this study also examines various factors that

cause low teacher participation in KKG activities, such as time constraints, minimal material support, and lack of facilitation that encourages the process of reflection and collaboration between teachers. The results of the study are expected to provide an overview of strategies to make KKG an effective and sustainable professional development forum in improving the quality of Islamic Religious Education learning evaluation.

Several previous studies have shown that Teacher Working Groups (KKG) have a significant contribution in improving teacher competence, especially in compiling questions based on Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS). Hiliyati Yus (2020) found that teacher involvement in KKG activities can significantly improve their ability to design HOTS questions, with a clear difference in quality between the first and second cycles (Yus, 2020). Another study by Zulraflī et al. (2023) also strengthens these findings by stating that HOTS question compilation training can improve teachers' understanding and creativity in developing questions that challenge students' critical thinking skills (Zulraflī et al., 2023). Satyani (2021) even showed that the peer tutor-based KKG Mini model is effective in improving teacher skills, even though it is applied in the context of online learning (Satyani, 2021). Meanwhile, Sumantri (2022) emphasized that HOTS question training provides real benefits in improving teachers' ability to formulate questions that are in accordance with curriculum demands, although there are still some technical obstacles in its implementation (Sumantri, 2022). Furthermore, research by Dedik (2022) shows that training facilitated in the KKG forum is able to improve teachers' ability to compile HOTS questions, as seen from the significant increase in scores in each cycle (Dedik, 2022). This finding is in line with the results of the Cappa study (2020), which showed that active teacher involvement in KKG contributed to a 16% increase in the design of HOTS-based learning plans (Cappa, 2020). These findings collectively confirm that KKG plays an important role in supporting the mastery of more complex pedagogical skills, especially in the context of 21st century learning. The development of HOTS questions is crucial in measuring students' high-level thinking skills, so the role of KKG in training and collaboration between teachers is an effective and relevant strategy to be implemented in Elementary Schools, especially in Simeulue Tengah District.

This research was conducted in an Elementary School located in Simeulue Tengah District, which consists of 10 elementary schools and is one of the areas with limited access and educational facilities. These geographical conditions and limited resources provide an important contextual contribution in understanding the challenges of teacher professional development, especially Islamic Religious

Education (PAI) teachers, in disadvantaged areas. The novelty of this study lies in the contextual focus on the literacy of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in compiling questions based on Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) in the 3T region, especially in the Simeulue Tengah District which has not been the object of much academic study. This study makes a significant contribution to the discourse on the development of teacher professionalism in remote areas, especially in the context of compiling HOTS questions as a requirement of the Merdeka Curriculum. Different from previous studies which were generally descriptive in nature, this study conceptually and empirically analyzes the effectiveness of the Teacher Working Group (KKG) as a professional learning community (Professional Learning Community), by placing KKG not merely as an administrative forum, but as a reflective-collaborative space that encourages teacher independence (teacher agency). Another novelty lies in the in-depth exploration of the factors inhibiting teacher participation in KKG activities, both from the structural side such as limited time and facilities, as well as the cultural side such as low understanding of the benefits of KKG and perceptions that are still formalistic. Therefore, this study not only enriches the literature on the professional development of Islamic Religious Education teachers, but also becomes a contextual reference in efforts to strengthen HOTS question-making literacy in elementary education units that are in conditions of limited resources.

On the other hand, KKG which should be a collaborative forum and a means of teacher professional development has not been utilized optimally. Through this study, it is expected that an effective strategy can be found in optimizing the role of KKG to improve PAI teacher literacy in compiling HOTS questions. Thus, this study not only contributes to improving the quality of PAI learning, but also supports the continuous professional development of teachers, especially in the elementary school environment of Simeulue Tengah District.

B. Research Methods

This study uses a descriptive qualitative method with the aim of analyzing the literacy of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in compiling questions based on Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) in Elementary Schools in Simeulue Tengah District. This approach was chosen because it is able to describe in depth and contextually the perceptions, experiences, and obstacles faced by teachers in the field, especially in compiling HOTS questions and their involvement in professional forums such as the Teacher Working Group (KKG). This study was conducted in 10 Elementary Schools in Simeulue Tengah District, with a sample of 12 active PAI teachers. The sampling technique used purposive

sampling, which is a sample selection technique based on certain considerations that are relevant to the research objectives. The teachers selected are those who teach PAI subjects, both those who are active and less active in KKG activities. The reason for using this technique is to obtain a variety of data that reflects field conditions more completely and diversely, thus allowing researchers to comprehensively evaluate the level of teacher literacy in compiling HOTS questions.

The main instruments used in this study were closed and open questionnaires designed to reveal two main aspects, namely: (1) teacher literacy in compiling HOTS questions, and (2) the level of teacher participation in KKG activities. This questionnaire includes questions to evaluate the extent of teacher understanding of the concept and application of HOTS questions in Islamic Religious Education learning, as well as factors that encourage or inhibit their involvement in professional forums such as KKG. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistical analysis, by calculating the frequency and percentage of each answer item. This technique was chosen so that researchers could describe in detail the empirical conditions in the field, such as the tendency of teacher understanding of HOTS questions, and the extent to which they were involved in professional development activities through KKG. Through this descriptive qualitative approach, researchers not only attempt to photograph factual conditions numerically, but also interpret the data results by linking them to the social and professional context of Islamic Religious Education teachers in Central Simeulue. The results of this analysis are expected to be the basis for compiling strategic recommendations that support the optimization of the role of KKG as a forum for improving teacher competence, especially in improving literacy and the ability to compile HOTS questions in Islamic Religious Education subjects at the Elementary School level.

C. Results and Discussion

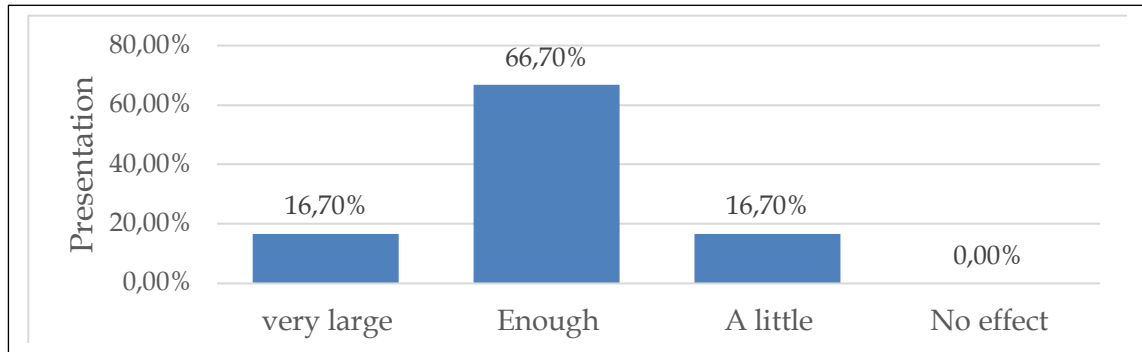
1. Results

Optimizing the Role of KKG in Improving Teacher Literacy

Teacher Working Groups (KKG) act as a strategic professional forum to improve teacher competence, including in compiling questions that are in accordance with the Merdeka Curriculum and the 2013 Curriculum. One indicator of this competence is the teacher's ability to compile Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) questions. To measure how much influence KKG has on the ability of Islamic Religious Education teachers to compile questions that are in accordance with the curriculum, researchers conducted a survey of Islamic

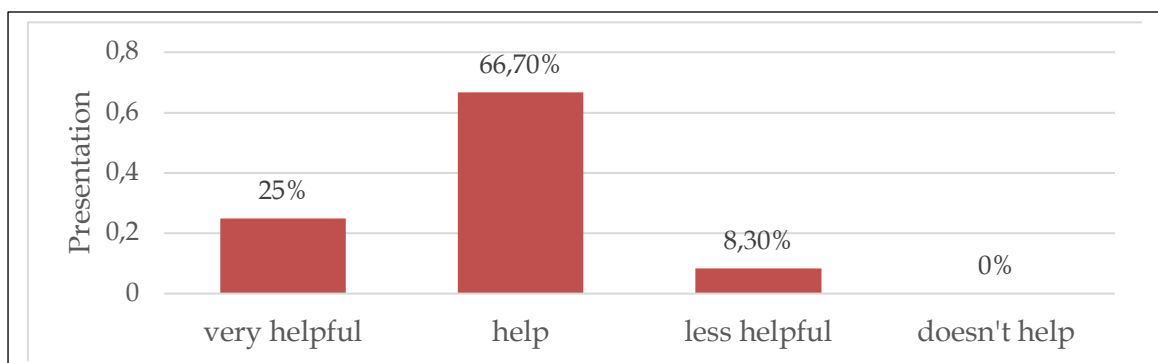
Religious Education teachers in Elementary Schools in Simeulue Tengah District.
Here are the results:

Chart 1
Level of Influence of KKG on Teachers' Ability to Compile HOTS Questions



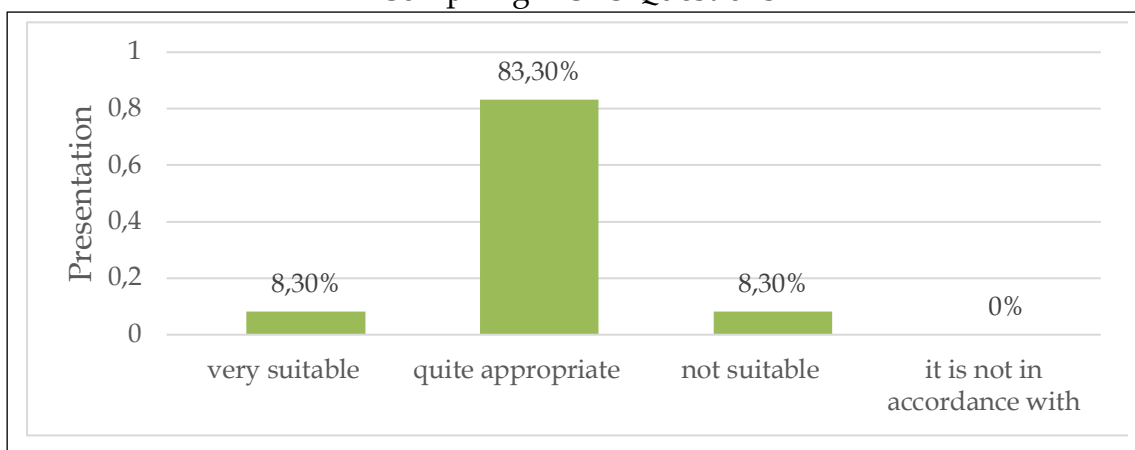
Based on the results above, most respondents (66.70%) stated that KKG had a significant influence on their ability to compile questions in accordance with the curriculum. This shows that the existence of KKG does make a significant contribution, especially as a space for sharing good practices, pedagogical discussions, and increasing understanding of curriculum demands. As many as 16.70% of respondents stated that it had a very large influence, indicating that teachers who actively and consistently participate in KKG activities feel a sharper increase in their abilities. They admitted that they understand the revised Bloom's taxonomy better and are able to compile questions that challenge students' analytical, evaluation, and creative abilities. However, another 16.70% considered that the influence of KKG was still small, possibly due to the lack of direct assistance or training materials that did not specifically target the compilation of HOTS questions. No respondents stated that KKG had no influence at all (0%), indicating that the existence of KKG at least has a basic role in improving teacher literacy.

Chart 2
To What Extent Does KKG Help Islamic Religious Education Teachers Face Challenges Compiling HOTS Questions



Based on the research results, it is known that most of the Islamic Religious Education teachers in Elementary Schools in Simeulue Tengah District felt the benefits of participating in the KKG activities, especially in helping them face challenges in compiling HOTS questions. As many as 66.70% of respondents stated that the KKG helped, which shows that this forum is quite effective as a forum for sharing knowledge and strategies, especially in understanding the characteristics of HOTS questions and their application according to the curriculum. Meanwhile, 25% of respondents considered the KKG very helpful, especially those who actively participated in the activities, received guidance from more experienced colleagues, and were involved in technical discussions on compiling questions based on high-level thinking skills. However, there were still 8.30% of teachers who felt that the KKG was less helpful, which was most likely due to the lack of focus on the material on HOTS topics or the limited time allocated for technical discussions. No respondents stated that the KKG did not help at all (0%), which indicates that the role of the KKG still has a positive value, although it is not yet fully optimal in answering all the challenges teachers face in compiling HOTS questions.

Chart 3.
Teachers' Perceptions of Flexibility and Suitability of KKG Activities in
Compiling HOTS Questions



The results of the study showed that most Islamic Religious Education teachers in Elementary Schools in Simeulue Tengah District considered the KKG activities to be quite flexible and appropriate to their needs in compiling HOTS questions. This can be seen from 83.30% of respondents who stated that the KKG activities were "quite appropriate". This means that, although not perfect, the implementation of the KKG has provided space for teachers to understand and practice compiling questions in accordance with HOTS principles. As many as 8.30% of respondents even stated that the KKG activities were "very appropriate",

which indicates that some teachers feel that this activity is very targeted, both in terms of material and implementation methods. However, there were 8.30% of respondents who felt that the KKG was "less appropriate", which was likely influenced by technical constraints such as time allocation, the focus of the material being too general, or the lack of in-depth discussion of HOTS questions. No respondents stated that it was "not appropriate" (0%), which indicates that in general, the KKG activities are still considered relevant and beneficial for Islamic Religious Education teachers, although there is still room for improvement to be more optimal in meeting the needs of teachers in compiling quality questions according to the curriculum.

Conceptual and Empirical Analysis of the Effectiveness of KKG in Professional Literacy

Theoretically, the Teacher Working Group (KKG) represents a concrete form of the Professional Learning Community (PLC), namely a professional learning community that emphasizes the importance of collaboration between teachers in the continuous learning process (Tam, 2023). In KKG, teachers are not only objects of training, but also active subjects in designing, reflecting, and improving classroom learning practices. This marks a shift in approach from instruction-based training to a collaborative approach, where professional development is no longer top-down, but grows from the real needs of teachers in the field. Hord (1997) emphasized that effective PLCs always reflect five main dimensions: supportive leadership, shared vision, collective learning, sharing of practices, and focus on student outcomes. If this principle is adopted systematically in the implementation of KKG, then this forum is no longer just an administrative discussion space, but becomes a driving force for improving teacher quality as a whole (Barr & Williams, 2020).

In the context of professional literacy, KKG can function as a dynamic learning vehicle that strengthens teachers capacity in understanding the curriculum, designing HOTS questions, and developing contextual and transformative authentic assessments. Professional literacy itself includes more than just pedagogical skills; it touches on the realm of critical thinking about education policy, sensitivity to student needs, and reflective ability in interpreting learning outcomes (Apiyani et al., 2022). May Britt Postholm emphasizes that meaningful professional development must be sustainable, responsive to student learning data, and supported by learning that is oriented towards real practice (Postholm, 2012). In this context, KKG becomes very strategic because it is able to facilitate teachers in conducting needs analysis,

developing teaching tools collaboratively, and implementing learning outcomes into contextual practices.

Furthermore, the success of KKG as a platform for teacher professional development is largely determined by various structural and cultural prerequisites. First, the KKG agenda must be prepared based on an assessment of the real needs of teachers, not just following a routine and uniform calendar of activities. Second, the existence of KKG facilitators must be upgraded to become instructional leaders who are able to guide the reflection process, not just convey materials. Third, synergy between the principal, supervisor, and education office is absolutely necessary to provide support in the form of affirmative policies, provision of time and space, and adequate supporting facilities. Fourth, KKG must provide a safe and open space for teachers to learn from mistakes, share challenges, and provide feedback to each other in a spirit of collegiality and empowerment (Antinluoma et al., 2021). In the empirical context in Simeulue Tengah District, research findings show that although most teachers feel the benefits of KKG, there is still a gap between the ideal potential and implementation in the field. Some active teachers benefit from increased HOTS question-making skills and curriculum understanding, but limited involvement, lack of material focus, and the dominance of the lecture approach in meetings indicate that the design and implementation of the KKG program still require in-depth improvement. This fact strengthens the argument that the effectiveness of KKG is not determined by its existence alone, but by the quality of implementation, relevance of content, level of active participation, and ongoing institutional support. Therefore, efforts are needed to revitalize KKG systematically by placing it as a professional learning community that is oriented towards teacher agency, namely teacher independence in designing, assessing, and improving the learning process. With a needs-based, reflective, and participatory approach, KKG will be able to transform into a center for learning innovation, not just an administrative reporting forum. This transformation is important not only to improve teacher professional literacy, but also to answer the challenges of the Merdeka curriculum which requires teachers to become adaptive, collaborative, and data-based learning facilitators.

Factors Inhibiting Teacher Participation in KKG

Time Constraints

Time constraints are one of the main obstacles for teachers, especially Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at the elementary school level, to participate in Teacher Working Group (KKG) activities. Teaching duties,

administrative burdens, and family responsibilities often make it difficult for teachers to attend KKG meetings, especially if they are scheduled outside of working hours or on holidays. As a result, KKG is considered an additional burden, not a means of professional development. To increase participation, more flexible scheduling and an adaptive approach are needed (Wardiana, 2023).

Lack of Support from Schools

Lack of support from schools is a significant factor that hinders teacher participation in Teacher Working Group (KKG) activities. This support includes more than just permission to participate in activities, but also the provision of adequate facilities, motivation, and recognition of the importance of teacher professional development through forums such as KKG (Mayoni et al., 2023). In practice, some schools do not provide special space or time for teachers to be actively involved in KKG, so this activity is often considered as an additional activity that is not too important compared to other administrative activities. Furthermore, the attitude of the principal or the institution's manager who does not emphasize the urgency of KKG causes this activity to lose its weight in the eyes of teachers (Wardiana, 2023). When school leaders do not actively encourage participation or even model non-involvement, teachers tend to follow suit. Teachers may feel that participating in KKG will not have a significant impact on their performance appraisal or career development. As a result, motivation to participate in KKG becomes low.(Badrudin et al., 2020). Therefore, active involvement and concrete support from the school are essential so that KKG can function optimally as a forum for improving teacher competence, including in terms of compiling Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) questions.(Wibowo & Santosa, 2022).

Lack of Facilities and Supporting Tools

Teacher participation in KKG is often hampered by the lack of facilities and supporting tools, such as digital devices, internet access, and relevant teaching materials. In compiling HOTS-based questions, teachers really need digital training and technology-based evaluation media. However, limited facilities such as meeting rooms, projectors, and presentation devices make KKG run conventionally and less interesting. As a result, teachers are reluctant to participate in activities that are considered less useful. Therefore, improving facilities and technical support is very important to support the effectiveness of KKG in improving teacher professional competence.(Purnawanti et al., 2016)

Lack of Understanding of the Benefits of KKG

Some teachers still do not fully understand the long-term benefits of participating in Teacher Working Group (KKG) activities, especially in the context of improving professional skills such as compiling questions based on Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS). Many teachers consider KKG activities as merely a routine or formality that must be followed without providing a significant impact on the quality of learning. This view generally arises due to the lack of effective socialization regarding the objectives and strategic benefits of KKG as a means of improving competence and collaboration between teachers. (Sadali et al., 2021) As a result, teachers' motivation to actively participate in KKG is low. They do not see a direct relationship between participating in KKG and improving their performance in class, especially in terms of learning innovation and compiling evaluation questions that are in accordance with the curriculum. When the benefits obtained are not visible or not felt in real terms, the desire to learn and share in the KKG forum weakens. Therefore, there needs to be an effort from facilitators, principals, and the education office to continue educating teachers about the importance of KKG and how these activities can have a real impact on improving their professionalism. (Affandi et al., 2022).

Less Relevant or Too General Material

Low teacher participation in Teacher Working Group (KKG) activities is often caused by less relevant or too general material. Many teachers feel that the topics discussed do not directly touch their concrete needs, especially in compiling questions based on Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS). The material presented is often in the form of general theory without being accompanied by applied examples or case studies that are in accordance with the context of learning in elementary schools. This makes it difficult for teachers to relate the material received to the challenges they face in class. Research by Egi Nusivera (2023) shows that teachers often have difficulty in compiling HOTS questions due to a lack of training and understanding of the HOTS concept as well as minimal information and socialization regarding it. In addition, a study by Chuseri et al. (2021) emphasized that the lack of information, training, or socialization about HOTS causes teachers to be less skilled in compiling HOTS questions. (Nusivera et al., 2023) To improve the effectiveness of KKG, it is important for facilitators to design materials based on regular teacher needs assessments so that the content of the activities is truly relevant and impactful. Thus, KKG activities can be an effective means of improving teacher professional

competence, especially in compiling HOTS questions that require creativity and critical thinking skills.(Palettei & Sulfemi, 2019).

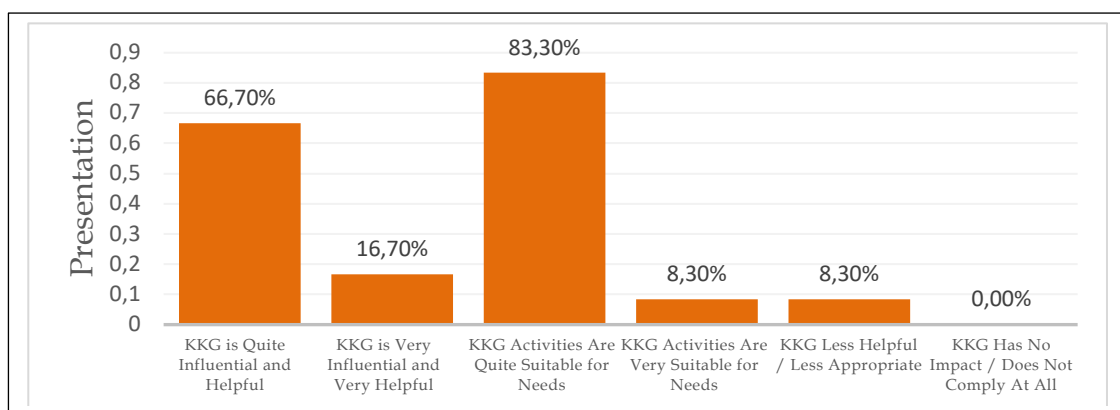
2. Discussion

Optimizing the Role of KKG in Improving Teacher Literacy

The results of the study indicate that the Teacher Working Group (KKG) has an important role in improving the skills of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in Elementary Schools in Simeulue Tengah District, especially in compiling Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) questions. Most teachers stated that KKG had a significant influence on improving their skills, especially in understanding the curriculum, revised Bloom's taxonomy, and question-making techniques that challenge students' critical thinking skills. KKG activities were considered a strategic space for sharing experiences, discussing pedagogy, and obtaining guidance from colleagues. However, a small number of teachers felt that the influence of KKG was still limited, which was thought to be due to the lack of specific assistance and less than optimal time allocation in discussing HOTS topics. However, overall, no respondents stated that KKG had no influence at all. This shows that the existence of KKG at least has a basic value in supporting teacher literacy and competence. Teachers' perceptions of the flexibility and suitability of KKG activities were also relatively positive, although there were a small number of teachers who felt that KKG activities were not fully in accordance with the needs of compiling HOTS questions. Therefore, optimizing materials, methods, and the sustainability of technical discussions in KKG activities are important keys to strengthening the role of this forum in supporting teacher competence in a sustainable manner.

Chart 4

Recapitulation of Islamic Religious Education Teachers' Perceptions of the Role of KKG in Improving the Ability to Compile HOTS Questions in Simeulue Tengah District



Religious Education teachers' perceptions of the role and effectiveness of KKG activities in compiling HOTS questions. As many as 66.70% of teachers stated that KKG had a fairly large influence and was quite helpful, indicating that KKG is an effective forum in improving teacher literacy and technical skills. 16.70% of teachers felt a very large influence, illustrating that teachers who were actively and consistently involved in KKG activities received maximum benefits. In terms of activity suitability, 83.30% of teachers stated that KKG was quite appropriate for their needs, and 8.30% stated that the activity was very appropriate, indicating that the structure of KKG activities was quite relevant and applicable. Only 8.30% of teachers felt that KKG was still less helpful or less appropriate, indicating that there was room for improvement in the quality of implementation. Not a single teacher stated that KKG had no influence or was not appropriate at all. This emphasizes that KKG has a real positive value in supporting the improvement of Islamic Religious Education teachers' competence in compiling HOTS questions.

Conceptual and Empirical Analysis of the Effectiveness of KKG in Professional Literacy

Teacher Working Groups (KKG) have a strategic role in strengthening teacher professional literacy, especially in the context of implementing the Independent Curriculum which demands independence, reflectivity, and collaboration in learning. Conceptually, KKG is a real form of a professional learning community or Professional Learning Community (PLC) which emphasizes the importance of collective learning, participatory leadership, and a focus on student learning outcomes (Tam, 2023). The involvement of teachers as active subjects in the process of planning, reflecting, and developing teaching practices makes KKG a potential means of realizing educational transformation from an instructional approach to a collaborative one. Empirical findings in the field, especially in Simeulue Tengah District, indicate a duality between potential and challenges in implementing KKG. On the one hand, some teachers reported an increase in understanding of the curriculum and the ability to compose HOTS questions as a result of involvement in KKG. However, on the other hand, there are still serious obstacles such as low active participation, activity agendas that are not yet responsive to the real needs of teachers, and meeting patterns that are still dominated by one-way lecture methods. This shows that KKG, even though it has been running structurally, has not fully functioned as a dynamic and contextual learning community as intended by PLC theory.

The transformation of KKG into a meaningful professional learning space must start with a paradigm shift. KKG should not only be a routine reporting forum or a one-way administrative training place. Instead, KKG needs to be developed into a learning community that encourages teachers to think critically, share good practices, and actively reflect on and improve learning. Effective teacher professional development must be based on real practice in the classroom, be reflective, and oriented towards continuous improvement (Antinluoma et al., 2021). If KKG only carries out the annual activity agenda without considering the actual needs of teachers and student learning outcome data, then its existence tends not to have a significant impact on improving the quality of teaching. Structural and cultural aspects are determining factors in the effectiveness of KKG. First, the KKG agenda needs to be prepared in a participatory manner based on the results of teacher needs assessments in each educational unit. Second, KKG facilitators must have the capacity as instructional leaders who not only deliver material but are also able to facilitate the process of reflection and in-depth discussion. Third, institutional support from school principals, supervisors, and education offices is needed in the form of affirmative regulations, specially allocated time, and provision of adequate facilities. Fourth, a collaborative and safe learning culture to exchange ideas and learn from failures needs to be fostered so that teachers feel supported in their self-development process (Barr & Williams, 2020).

Within the framework of professional literacy, optimally functioning KKG can improve teachers' ability to understand education policies, analyze student needs, and design relevant and transformative learning. This not only includes technical skills such as creating HOTS questions or teaching tools, but also includes the capacity to think critically, reflectively, and adaptively to the dynamics of education. When KKG is truly oriented towards teacher agency, teachers do not only become policy implementers, but also agents of change in the learning ecosystem. Thus, revitalizing KKG is an urgent need to answer the challenges of implementing the Independent Curriculum. Strategic steps are needed to strengthen the quality of KKG implementation so that it is not only present administratively, but also has a real impact on improving the quality of education at the school level. If this is achieved, KKG can become a center for sustainable, contextual learning innovation that has a broad impact on the quality of student learning outcomes.

Analysis of Inhibiting Factors of Islamic Religious Education Teacher Participation in KKG in Developing HOTS Questions

Active participation of teachers in Teacher Working Group (KKG) activities is an important element in improving professional competence, including in compiling Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) questions. However, the results of the study show that there are a number of significant inhibiting factors. One of the main obstacles is time constraints. Islamic Religious Education teachers at the elementary school level face busy teaching schedules, administrative burdens, and family responsibilities, making it difficult to find time to participate in KKG, especially if the meetings are held outside of working hours or on holidays. KKG activities are ultimately considered an additional burden, not an opportunity to increase capacity. In addition, the lack of support from the school is also an equally important obstacle. Many schools have not provided adequate facilities or special time for teachers to participate in KKG. In fact, in some cases, the principal has shown little commitment to the importance of professional development through the KKG forum. When school leaders do not set an example or do not encourage teachers to be active in KKG, teachers lose motivation because they feel that participating in KKG does not have an impact on their performance assessment or career development.

The next factor is the limited facilities and supporting facilities. Teachers often encounter obstacles such as the unavailability of digital devices, limited internet access, and a lack of relevant and up-to-date teaching materials. The preparation of ideal HOTS questions requires training and technology-based facilities, but in practice, KKG activities are still carried out conventionally. The lack of facilities such as comfortable meeting rooms, projectors, or presentation aids makes activities monotonous and less interesting, so that teacher participation decreases. Research also shows that a lack of understanding of the benefits of KKG is a barrier in itself. Many teachers still consider KKG as a formality without real benefits. This happens because of weak socialization about the strategic objectives and long-term impacts of KKG on the quality of learning. As a result, teachers are reluctant to participate in activities that are considered irrelevant to their needs in the classroom. This view causes KKG to be unable to develop as a dynamic and productive professional forum.

Low teacher participation. Many teachers feel that the material presented in the KKG does not directly answer the challenges they face, especially in compiling HOTS-based questions. The material tends to be theoretical and less applicable, without case studies or real examples from the classroom. In fact, teachers really need practical and contextual technical guidance. When the

material does not match the real needs of teachers, the motivation to actively participate in the KKG becomes low. Therefore, to optimize the function of the KKG, a more adaptive and contextual approach is needed. The activity schedule needs to be adjusted to teachers' free time, facilities must be improved, support from school leaders must be strengthened, and activity materials must be designed based on a concrete needs assessment. With these steps, teacher participation in the KKG can increase significantly and have a real impact on improving the quality of learning, especially in compiling HOTS questions.

D. Conclusion

This study concludes that the Teacher Working Group (KKG) serves as a strategic platform for enhancing the professional literacy of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in developing HOTS-based questions aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum. Active participation in KKG improves teachers' understanding of curriculum demands, question design, and reflective pedagogy. However, its implementation remains suboptimal due to structural and cultural barriers, including limited time, inadequate institutional support, insufficient facilities, and a lack of contextualized training materials. Conceptually, KKG has the potential to function as a Professional Learning Community (PLC), yet its impact depends on the quality of facilitation, relevance of content, and school-level support. This study, conducted in a 3T region, provides empirical and contextual insights into revitalizing KKG as a collaborative, needs-based, and sustainable forum for professional development, thereby strengthening the quality of Islamic education through improved teacher competence in designing HOTS assessments.

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