

Analysis of Prospective Catholic Religious Education Teachers Ability in Compiling Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) Assessment Questions in the Merdeka Curriculum

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Draft article history
Submitted: 06-08-2026;
Revised: 09-24-2026;
Accepted: 09-27-2026;

ABSTRACT: This study aims to analyze the ability of prospective Catholic Religious Education teacher students to develop questions based on Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) in accordance with the principles of the Curriculum Merdeka at the elementary and secondary school levels. This research is motivated by the demands of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes not only mastery of knowledge but also the development of critical, creative, and reflective thinking skills, especially in Catholic Religious Education, which is oriented towards building students' character and faith. This study employed a descriptive mixed-methods design. The subjects of this study were prospective Catholic Religious Education teacher students at STAKat Negeri Pontianak who had taken the learning evaluation course. Data were collected using HOTS question document assessment rubrics, structured questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model. The results showed that only 27% of the questions developed by students fully met HOTS criteria, 49% were in the sufficient category, and the remaining 24% were still at the low cognitive level (C1-C3). Students experienced difficulties, particularly in designing authentic and life-relevant stimulus contexts and formulating higher-order operational verbs (C4-C6). Factors influencing these abilities included understanding the Merdeka Curriculum, practical experience in lectures, and mastery of pedagogical competencies. This study recommends the need for intensive training and structured mentoring in developing HOTS-based assessments to better prepare prospective teachers to implement the Merdeka Curriculum effectively in schools.

Keywords: Catholic Religious Education, higher-order thinking assessment, HOTS, Merdeka Curriculum, prospective teachers.

ABSTRAK: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis kemampuan mahasiswa calon guru Pendidikan Agama Katolik dalam menyusun soal berbasis Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) sesuai dengan prinsip Kurikulum Merdeka pada jenjang sekolah dasar dan menengah. Penelitian ini dilatarbelakangi oleh tuntutan Kurikulum Merdeka yang tidak hanya menekankan penguasaan materi pengetahuan, melainkan juga pengembangan keterampilan berpikir kritis, kreatif, dan reflektif terutama dalam Pendidikan Agama Katolik yang berorientasi pada pembentukan karakter dan iman siswa. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain mixed-methods descriptive (deskriptif metode campuran). Subjek penelitian adalah mahasiswa calon guru Pendidikan Agama Katolik di STAKat Negeri Pontianak yang telah menempuh mata kuliah evaluasi pembelajaran. Data dikumpulkan melalui instrumen rubrik penilaian dokumen soal HOTS, kuesioner terstruktur, dan wawancara semi-terstruktur. Data kuantitatif dianalisis menggunakan statistik deskriptif, sedangkan data kualitatif dianalisis

menggunakan model interaktif Miles dan Huberman. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa hanya 27% soal yang dikembangkan mahasiswa memenuhi kriteria HOTS secara penuh, sebanyak 49% berada dalam kategori cukup, dan 24% sisanya masih berada pada tingkat kognitif rendah (C1-C3). Mahasiswa mengalami kesulitan terutama dalam merancang konteks stimulus yang autentik dan relevan dengan kehidupan siswa serta memformulasikan kata kerja operasional tingkat tinggi (C4-C6). Faktor-faktor yang memengaruhi kemampuan ini meliputi pemahaman Kurikulum Merdeka, pengalaman latihan dalam perkuliahan, dan penguasaan kompetensi pedagogik. Penelitian ini merekomendasikan perlunya pelatihan intensif dan pendampingan terstruktur dalam penyusunan asesmen berbasis HOTS agar calon guru lebih siap mengimplementasikan Kurikulum Merdeka secara efektif di sekolah.

Kata Kunci: HOTS, Kurikulum Merdeka, Pendidikan Agama Katolik, calon guru, asesmen berpikir tingkat tinggi

INTRODUCTION

Changes in curriculum policy in Indonesia through the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum place the development of Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) as one of the primary demands of 21st-century learning. The Merdeka Curriculum no longer focuses on superficial content mastery, but rather on students' abilities to analyze, evaluate, and create as a form of readiness to face the complexities of real life. Within this framework, assessment becomes a strategic instrument that teachers must design to encourage students to reach higher levels of thinking, in line with learning outcomes and the Pancasila Student Profile mandated by the government.

Conceptually, HOTS is understood as the ability to think at a higher cognitive level than simply remembering and understanding, as it requires learners to process, connect, and transform knowledge to face new situations. HOTS encompasses critical, logical, reflective, creative, and metacognitive thinking dimensions, enabling students to differentiate ideas, construct arguments, formulate explanations, and even deeply understand complex issues (Listiani et al., 2022; Sabaruddin, 2022). Kurniati emphasized that the HOTS process occurs when someone connects new information with knowledge already stored in their memory, then restructures and develops it to achieve certain goals or find solutions to complex problems. Therefore, HOTS is not just a "difficult problem," but rather a complex mental process that requires the critical and creative use of prior knowledge (Dinni, n.d., 2018). This conceptual framework is based on the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy, which divides the cognitive domain into six levels, where HOTS is identified at the levels of analyzing (C4), evaluating (C5), and creating (C6) (Yuliandini et al., 2019). This taxonomy integration is crucial; if teacher learning evaluation stops at the C1-C3 level, students will only master factual and procedural knowledge, while their higher-order thinking skills will not develop optimally (Yuliandini et al., 2019). Mastery of HOTS has been shown to be closely related to problem-solving skills, argumentation skills, and decision-making in unstructured situations through active learning models such as Problem-Based Learning or Project-Based Learning (Ali et al., 2025).

In the realm of national education policy, HOTS is emphasized through evaluation instruments such as the National Assessment and Minimum Competency Assessment (MCA), which rely on questions based on contextual

stimuli such as discourse, data, and infographics to test literacy and numeracy at the analytical and reflective levels (Handayani et al., 2023). Based on guidelines from the Ministry of Education, HOTS question development requires the use of Representative Operational Verbs (ROV) and stimuli that closely reflect students' lives. However, the reality on the ground shows a significant gap. Various item analysis reports indicate that most teacher-created evaluation instruments still focus on lower-order thinking skills (LOTS). Teachers often struggle to formulate authentic stimuli and systematically integrate HOTS into evaluation instruments and teaching modules, resulting in students frequently experiencing difficulties when faced with analysis-based questions (Handayani et al., 2023; Riswari, 2025).

This situation becomes even more crucial when viewed within the context of Catholic Religious Education and Character Education. In the Merdeka Curriculum, Catholic religious education aims not only to impart dogmatic knowledge of the faith, but also to encourage students to understand, internalize, and actualize that faith in their daily lives. The core textbooks, developed jointly by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) and the Ministry of Religious Affairs, are designed with the spirit of independent learning in mind, enabling students to reflect on their life experiences, take stances, and act based on Gospel values (Tobing, 2025). This requires assessment methods that encourage students to think critically about social, moral, and spiritual realities, and connect Church teachings to concrete situations within the family, school, and community. The development of HOTS questions in Catholic Religious Education plays a strategic role in shaping reflective and responsible individuals, not merely religiously formal (Thomas H Groome, 2011). In line with the mandate of *Gravissimum Educationis* (GE), Catholic educators are required not only to master theological material but also to be skilled at designing learning experiences and evaluations that challenge students' critical and creative thinking (*Gravissimum Educationis* [GE], 2014). However, the preparedness of Catholic Religious Education teachers in the field still faces various obstacles, ranging from limited curriculum training to diverse independent interpretations that result in inconsistent assessment formats (Markhamah et al., 2021).

This disparity between curriculum demands and field practice places prospective Catholic Religion teachers as key to the sustainability of future education reform. Although modules and technical guidelines for HOTS test writing are available (Markhamah et al., 2021), a review of previous literature reveals a significant research gap. Most existing research tends to focus on analyzing HOTS content in textbooks, evaluating existing teachers, or developing teaching materials for general subjects. Research specifically examining and analyzing the abilities of prospective Catholic Religion teachers to design HOTS-based assessment instruments in accordance with the characteristics of the Merdeka Curriculum remains very limited. Yet, the quality of learning assessment in future schools is largely determined by the extent to which teacher training institutions (TTI) equip prospective educators with conceptual understanding and technical skills in test writing from their college days.

Within this framework, this study aims to deeply analyze the abilities of prospective Catholic Religious Education students in developing basic and intermediate questions, while also identifying the supporting and inhibiting factors they face during the development process. The results of this study are expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of HOTS-based assessment studies in religious education, as well as provide practical contributions to teacher education study programs and related institutions in designing strategies to improve assessment competencies that are more effective, contextual, and efficient.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive mixed-methods design aimed at in-depth descriptions of prospective Catholic Religious Education teacher students' abilities in developing Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS)-based questions within the context of the Merdeka Curriculum. The qualitative descriptive approach was chosen because it allowed researchers to uncover the processes, considerations, and obstacles faced by students when developing HOTS questions, rather than simply assessing the final product quantitatively.

The research subjects were students in the Catholic Religious Education study program at STAKat Negeri Pontianak who had taken courses related to learning evaluation or assessment development. Subject selection was conducted purposively with the following criteria: active student status in the middle/final semester, having been assigned to develop questions or assessment tools for elementary and secondary school levels, and being willing to participate in the research. The research location was the Catholic Religious Education study program, which provides education for prospective Catholic religious teachers and has begun integrating the Merdeka Curriculum into its learning.

Data and Data Collection Techniques The data in this study were: HOTS question documents prepared by prospective teacher students, in the form of multiple choice, descriptive, or other assessment forms they developed for elementary and secondary school levels. Verbal data from students regarding their understanding, considerations, and experiences in preparing HOTS questions according to the Merdeka Curriculum. Data collection techniques included: documentation analysis, namely collecting and reviewing HOTS question products created by students based on course assignments or assessment preparation practices. Semi-structured interviews with several selected students to further explore their understanding of HOTS, the Merdeka Curriculum, and the steps taken when preparing questions. A short, open-ended questionnaire, to supplement descriptive information regarding students' experiences and general difficulties in preparing HOTS questions.

The primary instrument of this research is the researcher herself, who plans, collects, and interprets data, assisted by several supporting instruments. These supporting instruments include: a HOTS question analysis sheet/assessment rubric developed based on cognitive level indicators C4 (analyzing), C5 (evaluating), and C6 (creating) in the revised Bloom's Taxonomy, as well as good question writing guidelines. A semi-structured interview guide containing questions on understanding HOTS concepts,

the Merdeka Curriculum, and question development strategies. A documentation format for recording subject identity, the type of questions developed, and the learning context targeted for assessment. The HOTS question analysis rubric was developed by adapting indicators from previous studies on teacher/student abilities to develop HOTS questions, such as competency selection, stimulus suitability, clarity of higher-order thinking demands, and the suitability of the answer key or rubric.

Data analysis techniques were conducted qualitatively using the Miles and Huberman model, which includes three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing/verification. In the data reduction stage, researchers selected and grouped question document data and interview results based on categories such as cognitive level suitability, stimulus quality, and suitability with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. In the data presentation stage, findings were compiled in the form of tables, matrices, and descriptive narratives that illustrate the profile of students' abilities in developing HOTS questions. In the conclusion stage, researchers formulated interpretations regarding student ability tendencies, the most frequent types of errors, and factors that support and hinder their ability to develop HOTS questions. Data validity was maintained through technical triangulation, namely comparing the results of the question document analysis with interview data and, if used, questionnaire data. Peer debriefing or peer discussion, namely consulting initial findings with lecturers/other researchers to minimize interpretation bias. Member checking, namely confirming the summary of interview results with participants to ensure the alignment between the researcher's interpretation and the subject's experience.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Demographic profile of respondents in this study involved N=120 prospective Catholic Religious Education student teachers in the Catholic Religious Education Study Program of STAKat Negeri Pontianak. All selected respondents were active fifth and seventh semester students who had taken the Learning Evaluation and Assessment Development course. Based on gender, the sample consisted of 78 female students (65%) and 42 male students (35%), with an age range between 20 and 23 years (mean age = 21.2 years; SD=0.9). Of the total respondents, 68 students (56.7%) were in their fifth semester, and 52 students (43.3%) were in their seventh semester. All participants had received basic training on the Merdeka Curriculum and the general principles of designing learning evaluation instruments.

Student perceptions regarding understanding HOTS concepts, the Merdeka Curriculum, and readiness to design questions were measured using a structured questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). A summary of the measurement results per competency indicator is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Student Competency and Perception Questionnaire Results (N=120)

Indicator Competence	Mean	Deviation Standard (DS)	Interpretation
Indicator 1: Understanding of HOTS Concepts	4,02	0,61	High
Indicator 2: Understanding of the Independent Curriculum	4,08	0,68	High
Indicator 3: Formulation of Indicators and Objectives	3,98	0,55	High
Indicator 4: Question Development	3,92	0,64	High
Indicator 5: Contextualization and Christian Values	4,12	0,52	Very High
Indicator 6: Real Experience & Practical Readiness	3,95	0,60	High
Overall Mean	4,01	0,60	High

The questionnaire results indicated that students' self-perception was very positive (overall mean = 4.01; SD = 0.60). In Indicators 1 and 2, the majority of students believed they understood the HOTS conceptual framework (C4–C6) and its correlation with the Pancasila Student Profile. Furthermore, in Indicators 5 and 6, approximately 85% to 90% of students agreed and strongly agreed that they were able to integrate Catholic faith values into the context of the questions and felt confident in implementing HOTS question development during field experience practice.

In contrast to the high self-perception of students in the questionnaire, the results of a document analysis of 120 Catholic Religious Education questions developed by students revealed a very different picture of actual abilities. Measurement using a HOTS evaluation rubric based on Revised Bloom's Taxonomy indicators mapped the quality of the questions into three categories: Good Category (Full HOTS Criteria): Only 27% (32 questions) consistently meet the four main characteristics of HOTS questions, namely measuring higher-order thinking skills (analysis/evaluation/creation), presenting authentic contextual stimuli, using real-issue-based cases, and demanding reflective-argumentative reasoning. Adequate Category: As many as 49% (59 questions) are in the moderate category. These questions have been equipped with stimuli (such as citations of Scripture texts or short narratives), but the demands of the questions asked are still at the level of conceptual understanding (C2) or simple application (C3). Low Category: The remaining 24% (29 questions) are entirely classified as Lower-Order Thinking Skills (LOTS). These questions are in the form of memorization of theological facts, dogmatic definitions of the Church, or repetition of texts without any reasoning process at all.

In terms of writing technique construction, 61% of the questions met the rules of good writing (clear formulation of the main question and homogeneous

answer options). However, there was a structural mismatch in most of the questions: the pastoral stimulus or biblical text presented at the beginning of the question was often not explored in the question, so that the stimulus only served as an "ornamental stimulus" and not the basis for analytical reasoning.

The most crucial finding in this study is the sharp discrepancy between students' self-perceptions and their actual performance in developing HOTS questions. In the questionnaire data, more than 85%-90% of students expressed a high level of self-efficacy regarding their ability to design HOTS-based questions and integrate Christian values. However, an objective assessment of the question product documents showed that only 27% of the questions truly met HOTS criteria.

This discrepancy phenomenon can be explained through the conceptual theories of the Illusion of Competence and the Dunning-Kruger Effect. Pre-service teachers tend to associate "conceptual understanding" with "practical skills." Because they have theoretically studied the definitions of HOTS, Bloom's Taxonomy terms, and the concept of the Merdeka Curriculum in college (as reflected in the high average questionnaire scores), they assume that they are automatically skilled at constructing test instruments. Students are not yet able to differentiate between recognizing operational verbs (such as the words "analyze" or "evaluate") and constructing test narratives that truly require C4-C6 thinking processes.

In the context of Catholic Religious Education, this discrepancy becomes even more apparent when students attempt to design contextual stimuli. Students feel they have created HOTS questions simply by citing Bible verses or Church documents (*Gaudium et Spes* / Catechism). However, the accompanying questions merely ask elementary/middle school students to "State the content of the verse" or "Explain the meaning of the term" (C1–C2). Students experience confusion in transforming theological texts into concrete cases of everyday life such as bullying, social media use, or religious tolerance, which require moral analysis and reflective decisions based on Gospel values.

This gap between theoretical knowledge and technical practice indicates that the portion of question-writing practice in learning evaluation courses at universities remains superficial. Evaluation instruction has focused more on developing outlines and understanding taxonomy theory, but provides minimal practice in micro-drafting, item analysis review, and gradual clinical mentoring.

To bridge this gap, Teacher Training Institutions (TTI) need to restructure their assessment training models for prospective teachers. Peer-review-based approaches, contextual question bank development workshops, and simulations for developing authentic stimuli based on the realities of elementary and secondary school students' lives must be integrated extensively. This way, prospective Catholic Religious Education teachers will not only gain theoretical confidence but also master the technical-pedagogical competencies to precisely implement HOTS assessments in the Merdeka Curriculum.

Discussion

The main findings of this study reveal a clear discrepancy between the high self-efficacy of prospective Catholic Religious Education teachers and their low practical ability in constructing Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS)-based assessment instruments. This phenomenon should not be viewed simply as a technical failure in writing questions, but rather must be analyzed to answer the fundamental question: Why do prospective teachers experience such significant obstacles in transforming HOTS conceptual knowledge into real assessment products? Based on a qualitative synthesis analysis and literature comparison, four main factors are the root causes of this skill gap:

Insufficient Clinical Practice and Feedback

The first root cause stems from the portion and design of evaluation learning in higher education, which remains theoretical and transactional. Students are generally equipped with taxonomic definitions, general rules for writing questions, and assessment outlines, but receive very little micro-drafting practice accompanied by gradual clinical feedback. This aligns with the findings of Florentina Dwi Astuti (2023), who emphasized that student teachers often find HOTS development rules taboo because they are never guided through specific modules or guidelines for instrument development. They generally only receive ready-made instrument examples from lecturers or conventional syllabi/lesson plans, then attempt to replicate them independently without in-depth understanding. As a result, students understand test design as a mechanical activity of compiling questions and answers, without mastering the logic behind creating stimuli, reasoning indicators, and high-level cognitive.

Lack of Authentic Theological Assessment Literacy

In the context of Catholic Religious Education, the biggest obstacle for students lies in the difficulty of transforming theological dogma and biblical texts into authentic case studies. Student teachers experience methodological failure when attempting to simplify theological language for elementary and secondary school levels. As explained in Cognitive Development Theory by Santrock J.W. (2018), elementary school-aged children are at the concrete operational stage, where their logical thinking only functions optimally when connected to physical reality or real events. Student teachers often fail to design operational verbs (KKO) C4–C6 into the students' everyday contexts (such as issues of bullying, social media, or social justice), so they tend to "secure" the problem by returning to memorizing verses or definitions of Church teachings (C1–C2).

This condition aligns with the findings of Choirul Anam (2025) and Mahmudah et al. (2023), who found that limited assessment literacy causes educators to become trapped in low-cognitive testing. However, as emphasized by Thomas H. Groome (1991) and the Lumen Gentium document (1990), contextual evaluation of religious education must transform from mere assessment of learning (testing memorization of dogma) to assessment for learning that invites students to engage in critical faith reflection, moral consideration (discernment), and concrete action (C6). Without a strong

contextual stimulus, Catholic religious education is at risk of becoming trapped in formalistic memorization that loses its relevance to students' lives (Goran & Toron, 2026).

Curriculum Transition Complexity

The third main cause relates to students' position in the midst of a curriculum paradigm transition. The Merdeka Curriculum demands assessments integrated with differentiated learning, Learning Outcomes (CP), and strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile. Students theoretically understand that HOTS is a means of developing critical reasoning and faith maturity (Nurmelly, 2022; Collier, 2008; Park, 2025). However, they struggle to align the cognitive domain of HOTS with the characteristics of the Merdeka Curriculum instruments, such as the Minimum Competency Assessment (AKM). This finding reinforces Halawa et al.'s (2024) study on the readiness of Catholic Religion teachers for the Merdeka Curriculum, which showed that most educators have attempted to design learning and evaluation according to the new curriculum, but are hampered by the lack of standardized teaching modules and assessment tools specifically for religion subjects.

Inadequate Mentoring & Peer-Review Modeling

The fourth reason is the lack of intensive project-based mentoring in higher education. The findings of this study align with research by Izzati & Febrian (2021) and Rahmawati et al. (2022) on prospective mathematics and elementary school teachers, which showed that prospective educators generally possess strong theoretical skills but are very weak in analyzing test item quality and creating creative-based instruments (C6). As also found by Maimunah et al. (2020) / Rastic Andrari & Dewi Qadarsih (2020), prospective teacher students' higher-order thinking skills often stop at the analysis and evaluation levels (C4–C5), while their ability to create new instruments (C6) remains low.

To cover this weakness, the learning process at LPTKs can no longer rely solely on lectures. As recommended by Hayati et al. (n.d.), Azmi et al. (n.d.), and Quthb et al. (n.d., 2025), strengthening assessment competencies must be carried out through project-based learning schemes, question bank development workshops, peer-reviewed clinical simulations, and regular instrument case studies with mentor teachers or practitioners in schools.

Quantitative Summary: HOTS Concept Understanding Score: The average comprehension test is in the moderate category (± 63.4), where students master the theoretical KKO but are weak in differentiating LOTS and HOTS questions in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum. Proportion of Question Quality: Only 27% of questions meet the full HOTS criteria (contextual stimulus, C4–C6, aligned with CP), 49% are in the sufficient category (there is a stimulus, but the questions are C2–C3), and 24% are in the low/LOTS category (theological memorization). Writing Technique Quality: 61% of questions meet the rules of formal writing but experience a mismatch between the stimulus narrative (Scriptural text/pastoral case) and the questions asked.

Qualitative Summary: Student Perception: Students view HOTS as a vital competency for building critical reasoning and reflection of students' faith but express a False Self-Confidence (Illusion of Competence). Main Obstacles: Students expressed a lack of HOTS examples specifically for Catholicism, difficulty designing contextual stimuli that are close to the world of children/adolescents (such as parishes, social media, families), and limited portions of practical exercises in lectures.

Table 2. Comparison Matrix with Previous Literature

No	Research Focus and Researchers	Subject & Curriculum	Findings and Relevance of Discussion	Citation
1	Readiness of PAK Teachers in the MerdekaCurriculum	PAK (Merdeka) Junior High School Teacher	Teachers have designed the Merdeka Curriculum assessment but are hampered by the limitations of the PAK-specific teaching/assessment modules. Explaining the Curriculum Transition Complexity factor.	(Halawa et al., 2024)
2	Prospective Teachers' Ability to Develop HOTS Tests	Mathematics Prospective Teacher	The average ability was good (76.2), but very weak in the analysis of the quality of the test items. Confirming the weakness of the technical evaluation of prospective teachers.	(Izzati & Febrian, 2021)
3	Development of Elementary School HOTS Assessment Instruments	15 Prospective Elementary School Teachers	Produce valid and reliable instruments as a reference for developing HOTS questions. Promote the importance of pedagogical guides.	(Rahmawati et al., 2022)
4	HOTS Thinking Skills of Prospective Teachers	Mathematics Education Student	Prospective teachers are skilled at the C4–C5 level, but very low at the creating level (C6). This strengthens the findings of the limitations of C6 PAK students.	(Maimunah et al., 2020; Rastisc Andriani & Dewi Qadarsih, 2020)
5	Analysis of Teachers' Ability to Create HOTS Questions	High School Teacher (K13)	Some teachers are able to create HOTS questions according to the guidelines, but face obstacles regarding stimulus relevance.	(Mahmudha et al., 2023)

The main problem that has been described confirms that the paradigm shift of assessment is not enough to be done only through the socialization of the

concept but requires systematic and sustainable pedagogical intervention at the tertiary level. TTI that organize Catholic Religious Education need to take the following strategic steps: Reconstruction of Learning Evaluation Curriculum: Shifting the portion of lectures from 70% theory / 30% practice to 30% theory / 70% practice micro-drafting and item analysis based on Project-Based Learning (Quthb et al., n.d.). Development of Modules & Question Banks Specifically for PAK: Providing a reference instrument (benchmark) in the form of a HOTS question bank for Catholic Religious Education integrated with contextual issues of children and adolescents, to erode the perception that HOTS rules are foreign (taboo) (Florentina Dwi Astuti, 2023). Clinical Partnership with KKG/MGMP and Partner Schools: Building sustainable collaboration between students, lecturers, and mentor teachers in elementary and secondary schools. Through a joint assessment surgery forum, students receive authentic feedback on language adequacy, cognitive complexity, and stimulus appeal before engaging in Field Experience Practice (FEP).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the ability of prospective Catholic Religious Education students to construct questions based on Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) in the Merdeka Curriculum is in the moderate category, with a clear gap between theoretical conceptual mastery and practical skills in item construction. Quantitatively, although the level of students' understanding of HOTS concepts is considered adequate, only 27% of the developed question instruments truly meet the full HOTS criteria. Most of the instruments are still dominated by the "adequate" category (49%) and the "low/LOTS" category (24%) which do not consistently demand higher-order reasoning processes (C4–C6). Qualitatively, students have a positive perception and recognize the urgency of HOTS assessment in the Merdeka Curriculum but are hampered by the limited contextual theological example questions, confusion in transforming theological texts for elementary and secondary school levels, and minimal clinical practice during lectures.

This research provides a theoretical contribution to the study of religious education assessment by expanding the literature on the integration of the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy into Catholic Religious Education based on the Merdeka Curriculum. The findings of this study enrich academic understanding of the phenomena of the Illusion of Competence and the Dunning-Kruger Effect in prospective educators, where mastery of theoretical terms and KKO does not automatically correlate with the ability to develop authentic, reflective, and transformative evaluation instruments.

Practically, these findings provide an empirical evaluation framework for religious Teacher Training Institutions (TTI) to reconstruct their Learning Evaluation course curricula. This research provides a diagnostic map of prospective teachers' technical weaknesses, particularly in developing contextual stimuli based on pastoral cases and students' real-life issues, which can be used as a reference in designing standardized assessment training modules.

This study has limitations in the limited subject coverage at one university. Therefore, future research is recommended to: Involve a broader sample and multicenter in various religious TTI in Indonesia to increase the generalizability of the findings. Implement an action research design or experimental research to test the effectiveness of the training model of question preparation based on Project-Based Learning and Clinical Peer-Review. Directly test the level of readability, empirical validity, and discrimination of HOTS questions made by prospective teachers when tested in real-life with students in elementary and secondary schools.

Implications for TTI Curriculum: A paradigm shift in learning is needed from a theoretical-top-down approach to project-based learning (PBL). Learning evaluation lectures need to increase the portion of micro-drafting exercises, item surgery simulations, and the provision of a standardized HOTS question bank for Catholic Religious Education. Implications for Guidance and Partnerships: Collaboration schemes and peer review modeling are needed between universities, partner schools, and religious teacher communities (KKG/MGMP). Clinical mentoring from mentor teachers and lecturers during Field Experience Practice (PPL) is crucial to provide direct feedback on the language appropriateness, theological depth, and cognitive complexity of questions designed by students.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author expresses his deepest gratitude and appreciation to STAKat Negeri Pontianak for the institutional support and facilities provided during the research process. He also expresses his gratitude to the lecturers and students of the Catholic Religious Education Study Program who actively participated in this research. This research was conducted independently by the authors with institutional support from STAKat Negeri Pontianak and received no external funding.

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