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SYNTHESIS OF CHARACTER BUILDING MODELS THROUGH ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION CURRICULUM: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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HIGHLIGHT

- The PAI curriculum currently faces a critical gap in adapting to 21st-century digital skills and competence demands

- This research proposes a new Character Building Model by integrating PAI values with contemporary national curriculum frameworks.

ABSTRACT

This Systematic Literature Review (SLR) investigates PAI curriculum alignment with national character development goals. PAI implementation struggles to adapt to 21st-century digital competence demands, forming the main gap. Utilizing an SLR protocol, articles (2020–2025) were analyzed to synthesize curriculum dynamics and relevance gaps. Findings confirm a critical disjunction between PAI's spiritual objectives and digital skills necessity. The primary contribution is the Synthesis of a novel Character Building Model, integrating PAI values with competence-based learning frameworks, offering practical guidance for policymakers and educators.

KEYWORD

PAI Curriculum, Systematic Literature Review, Character Building, Curriculum Relevance, Integration Model

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A. INTRODUCTION

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) occupies a central and strategic position within the Indonesian national education system as the primary vehicle for moral and spiritual character formation, in accordance with the mandate of the National Education Law (UU No. 20/2003). Although the curriculum has experienced substantial policy evolution from early structural formulations to its current articulation within the Merdeka Curriculum its capacity to cultivate learners with robust moral resilience and strong national character remains the subject of critical scrutiny.

The PAI curriculum has not been systematically aligned with the demands of 21st-century competencies, particularly digital literacy and critical thinking. This misalignment is further exacerbated by implementation challenges, such as uneven teacher preparedness and inconsistencies with the Indonesian National Qualification Framework (KKNI). Notably, prior studies often treat these issues in a descriptive manner, lacking an integrative synthesis that explains how historical curricular dynamics contribute to contemporary relevance gaps and what specific structural problems impede PAI's adaptability in the digital era. This deficiency underscores the necessity of a systematic review capable of delineating the precise nature of the problem.

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to: (1) synthesize the historical and policy trajectories of PAI curriculum development, (2) identify and critically analyze relevance gaps and implementation barriers in the context of digital transformation, and (3) formulate an integrative model for strengthening national character. Through this methodological approach, the article offers substantive scholarly novelty in the form of a novel character curriculum integration model an analytical framework designed to bridge PAI's core normative values with contemporary national competency requirements, thereby providing a theoretically grounded and practically applicable foundation for future curriculum refinement.

B. METHOD

This study adopts a rigorous Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology to synthesize contemporary scholarship on the PAI curriculum, national character formation, and the integration of 21st-century digital competencies. This article was implemented with strict attention to transparency, objectivity, and reproducibility,

with the aim of generating a theoretically grounded basis for the Novel Character Curriculum Integration Model.

1. Search Strategy and Scope

The literature search was conducted across Scopus, Google Scholar, and the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) for publications dated January 2020–May 2025 to capture contemporary discourse in the Merdeka Curriculum era. Search terms included:

- PAI Curriculum and Character Building
- Islamic Education and Digital Competence
- PAI Curriculum and 21st Century Skills and Model.

2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The articles were selected based on pre-defined criteria to maintain the quality and relevance of the data:

- Inclusion: (a) Peer-reviewed journal articles, (b) Written in English or Indonesian, (c) Directly discussing PAI curriculum, character development, and/or curriculum integration models, and (d) Accessible in full-text format.
- Exclusion: (a) Non-empirical studies (e.g., editorial, book reviews, theses, dissertations), (b) Studies not focused on primary and secondary education contexts, and (c) Duplicates across databases.

3. Selection Process (PRISMA Adaptation)

Article selection followed prisma adapted stages to ensure traceability and systematic filtering.

To justify the final 40 articles: thematic saturation was reached, meaning additional sources no longer produced new concepts or theoretical variation.

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Key Findings	Emerging Patterns & Contradictions	Supporting Articles (N)
Policy Dynamics & Evolution of the PAI Curriculum	Shifts from KTSP-K13–Merdeka Curriculum	Highlights the transformation of PAI from a normative orientation toward 21st-century competencies.	Broad consensus on policy direction; however, implementation remains inconsistent and slow.	18
	Alignment of regulations with new	National policies (e.g., Law No. 20/2003; PMA	Some argue regulations are flexible enough; most consider	12

	competence needs	regulations) do not fully operationalize digital competence integration.	them still normative and insufficiently actionable.	
	Teacher roles in policy enactment	Teachers function as key agents in translating curriculum policy into classroom practice.	Teacher readiness consistently emerges as the dominant obstacle.	15
Relevance Gap: Challenges of PAI in the Digital Era	Digital competence gaps	PAI curriculum insufficiently incorporates critical thinking, problem-solving, and digital ethics.	High consistency: nearly all studies report similar gaps.	30
	Limited digital literacy integration	Learning materials remain textual and rarely use digital ecosystems effectively.	Some innovative cases exist, but they are sporadic and lack standardization.	22
	Teacher capacity limitations	Teachers lack training in digital pedagogy and instructional design.	Variation across regions: urban schools more prepared; rural areas face significant challenges.	27
Dimensions of Character Development in PAI	Core moral values (faith, ethics, trustworthiness, integrity)	Studies identify these four moral foundations as	No contradictions; strong consensus on moral character	32

		central to PAI instruction.	as PAI's primary goal.	
	National character (tolerance, cooperation, civic responsibility)	Integration aligns with the Profil Pelajar Pancasila framework.	Several studies note that PAI still prioritizes personal morality over civic engagement.	19
	Need for digitally contextualized character formation	Strong emphasis on cultivating digital citizenship and online ethical behavior.	Few studies offer concrete curricular models.	14
Curriculum Integration Models & Development Recommendations	Value competence integration models	Proposed models combine spiritual values with 21st-century soft skills.	Many models remain conceptual and lack practical operational guidelines.	16
	Innovative pedagogical strategies	Service learning, project-based learning, and inquiry-based approaches considered most relevant.	Main limitations include teacher readiness and lack of innovative PAI-based learning modules.	20
	Need for a new comprehensive model	Studies emphasize the necessity of a systemically integrated and applicable model.	Many studies point towards this gap, strengthening the novelty claim of the present article.	25

4. Data Analysis and Synthesis

The final set of 40 articles was subjected to thematic analysis. Data extraction focused on four key themes: (a) PAI curriculum policy dynamics and historical evolution, (b) identified relevance gaps in the digital era, (c) proposed character development elements, and (d) existing curriculum integration models. The synthesis process involved cross-comparative analysis to identify recurring patterns, contradictions, and common recommendations, culminating in the formulation of the Novel Character Curriculum Integration Model presented in the discussion section.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The systematic literature review (SLR) presents a comprehensive yet analytically structured synthesis of scholarship on the PAI curriculum, tracing its historical trajectory, examining persistent digital-competency gaps, and identifying recurrent challenges in character education. Based on 25 accredited and methodologically robust studies, the findings delineate clear empirical patterns without conflating results with interpretive commentary.

The reviewed literature consistently reveals a multi-dimensional misalignment between the normative-spiritual mandates of PAI and the practical demands of 21st century learning. This disconnect appears across curricular policies, pedagogical practices, and teacher readiness, indicating that PAI has struggled to integrate digital literacy, critical thinking, and digital ethics in a systematic manner. The findings further demonstrate that although character education remains central to PAI, existing models remain fragmented and heavily normative, lacking operational mechanisms suited to digital learning environments.

These patterns collectively justify the development of the Novel Character Curriculum Integration Model (NCCIM). The model emerges from the empirical synthesis as a conceptual response to the identified gaps; however, at this stage, it remains primarily theoretical. The findings underscore the need for the NCCIM to be more clearly operationalized, with explicit indicators, implementable pathways, and stronger theoretical justification to ensure practical relevance. Such refinement is elaborated in the subsequent discussion, where the model is positioned within broader curriculum-integration theories and digital era competency frameworks.

HISTORICAL DYNAMICS OF PAI CURRICULUM: POLICY TRAJECTORY AND ADAPTATION

Initial thematic analysis outlines how the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) Curriculum has consistently adapted to changes in national education policy, maintaining its core mandate while addressing implementation challenges (Selamet

et al., 2023). This adaptive pattern is characterized by dual pressures: retaining spiritual centrality while meeting fluctuating government standards and national development goals (Salsabila et al., 2025).

1. Policy Trajectory: Chronological Shifts and Curriculum Reformation

The curriculum's historical evolution reflects a continuous effort to align PAI with the sociopolitical climate and the prevailing national education system. This alignment process often dictates the specific focus of PAI, whether it is stability, development, or decentralization.

- a) **The Early Era (Old Order to Early New Order): Centralization and Standardization:** In the period following independence and during the early New Order, PAI curriculum development was highly centralized and driven by political stability concerns (Mawardi, 2016). Changes were frequent but centered on establishing a standardized national religious education framework. For example, the curriculum underwent multiple changes (1947, 1952, 1964) during the Old Order and four major revisions during the New Order (1968, 1975, 1984, 1994) (Selamet et al., 2023). This era prioritized uniformity and ideological indoctrination, defining a rigid structure for religious practice (Aqidah-Ibadah-Akhlak) (Setiawan & Fahriannor, 2024).
- b) **The Reform Era and Decentralization (Post-1998): Autonomy and Local Relevance:** The shift to the Reform era introduced Law No. 20/2003 on the National Education System (SISDIKNAS), which mandated decentralization and competency-based education. This significantly impacted PAI, granting greater autonomy to educators and institutions to integrate local wisdom (local wisdom) and cultural context into teaching materials (Maulida, 2025). The goal was to make PAI more relevant to the student's immediate social environment (Selamet et al., 2023). However, this autonomy created implementation challenges related to quality assurance and consistency across national standards (Winda & Dafiq, 2021).
- c) **Contemporary Focus: The Merdeka Curriculum and Digital Pressure:** The current Merdeka Curriculum represents the most flexible phase, emphasizing student-centered and project-based learning. While this flexibility fosters critical thinking and personalized moral application, the PAI curriculum's adaptation remains primarily focused on structural flexibility rather than a substantive redefinition of moral competence in the digital space (Winda & Dafiq, 2021). The central challenge remains integrating digital competence explicitly into the core mandate of akhlak without diluting its spiritual essence (Sari et al., 2024).

2. The Enduring Core vs. Contemporary Competency Demands

The contemporary curriculum framework introduces tension between the need for localized relevance and the requirement for consistent national competency outcomes, particularly in character formation. Despite the continuous shifts in policy structure, the fundamental tension in PAI is the contradiction between its non-negotiable spiritual mandate and the measurable, competency-based outcomes demanded by modern frameworks.

- a) **The Non-Negotiable Mandate of Akhlak:** Across all curriculum iterations, PAI's ultimate, non-negotiable objective is the cultivation of noble character (akhlak), which is inherently vertical (relationship with God) and moral. This enduring core differentiates PAI from general subjects, creating resistance to fully embracing technical or purely skills-based competencies (Salsabila et al., 2025). This moral centralization often leads to a curriculum that is spiritually rich but technologically isolated, viewing the digital realm as an external threat rather than an ethical domain to be mastered (Setiawan & Fahriannor, 2024).
- b) **The Contradiction of Tacit Moral Reinforcement:** The review identifies a critical failure in character-building mechanisms: PAI often relies on **tacit** (implied) moral reinforcement through general spiritual guidance, rather than **explicit** (structured) skill-based teaching (Sulaiman, 2023). This absence of a structured curriculum mechanism to define and teach critical digital literacy as a measurable outcome of akhlak is the primary weakness. Consequently, while students may grasp general spiritual values, they lack the specific applied ethical frameworks necessary to navigate complex digital issues such as identifying and responding to misinformation or online bullying (Sari et al., 2024).
- c) **Inconsistency in National Standard Alignment (KKNI):** The historical lack of clarity in PAI learning outcomes has carried over into the era of the Indonesian National Qualification Framework (KKNI). PAI syllabi often contain generic learning outcomes (Winda & Dafiq, 2021). This ambiguity prevents a clear, measurable alignment of PAI character goals with specific competency descriptors required by the KKNI for 21st-century readiness, thereby creating a systemic gap in graduate competence (Sulaiman, 2023; Sari et al., 2024).

RELEVANCE GAP AND IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES OF CONTEMPORARY PAI

This section discusses the relevance gap and the implementation challenges of contemporary Islamic Religious Education by examining the interplay between spiritual objectives and digital-era competency demands.

1. The Relevance Gap of Islamic Education in the Context of Contemporary Education

The relevance gap of Islamic education arises from the discrepancy between the demands of the times and the capacity of Islamic education to accommodate the needs of modern students. Salsabila et al. (2025) emphasize that the Islamic education curriculum should be developed dynamically to keep pace with developments in science and technology. However, the facts on the ground show that the development of the PAI curriculum still tends to be static, so it does not fully address the needs of 21st-century competencies.

Ainissyifa, dkk (2020) found a mismatch between the national PAI curriculum and its implementation in schools. Some schools still use traditional learning patterns so that PAI values are not contextualized with modern life. This makes PAI material seem abstract and irrelevant to the digital challenges faced by students.

In addition, Maulida (2025) revealed that teachers' ability to integrate technology with PAI learning is still not optimal. The lack of utilization of digital media in learning causes PAI to lag behind other subjects that have been more adaptive to technological innovations.

2. Challenges in Implementing Contemporary Islamic Education

- a) *Teachers' Limited Competence in Modern Technology and Pedagogy:* Islamic education teachers play a central role in integrating spiritual values with students' digital competency needs. However, Maulida's (2025) research shows that some Islamic education teachers still experience limitations in utilizing modern learning technologies. These limitations cause PAI learning to remain focused on conventional approaches without involving digital media that can improve students' professional literacy. Ainissyifa, dkk (2020) add that uneven teacher capacity also weakens the implementation of the national curriculum, so that the delivery of spiritual values is not in line with 21st-century skill requirements.
- b) *PAI Curriculum Not Yet Integrated with Digital Competencies:* The PAI curriculum still focuses on normative and cognitive aspects, while the integration of Islamic values into the digital context has not been a priority. Salsabila et al. (2025) emphasize that the development of the PAI curriculum must be responsive to developments in science and technology, but in reality, not all educational institutions are able to keep up with these demands. Selamat, Supiana, and Qiqi (2023) also state that the dynamics of Islamic curriculum regulations often lag behind social, technological, and global competency developments, widening the gap between spiritual and digital education.

- c) *The Influence of the Digital Environment that Shifts the Role of PAI: The learning environment of students today is greatly influenced by the digital world, including social media, online games, and global information that is not always in line with Islamic spiritual values. Yusuf, Zeynulloh, and Masruro (2022) reveal that digital social and cultural changes pose a major challenge to the instillation of Islamic values. In this context, students learn more from the digital environment than from formal learning, so spirituality does not get a dominant space in character development.*
- d) *Lack of Spiritual Character Habituation in the Digital Context: Habituation is an important strategy in character building according to Yusuf et al. (2022). However, spiritual character habituation in the digital context is still rarely practiced. Schools have not yet established a culture of digital ethics such as online communication manners, digital literacy ethics, and media responsibility. As a result, spiritual character is only formed in physical spaces, while students' behavior in digital spaces is not touched by PAI values.*
- e) *Disparities in Educational Infrastructure: Ainissyifa et al. (2020) show that the uneven provision of learning facilities widens the gap between PAI objectives and 21st-century competency requirements. Schools with minimal technological infrastructure will find it difficult to integrate spiritual values with digital-based learning. This inequality in facilities causes differences in the quality of digital and professional character among students.*
- f) *Low Collaboration between Schools and Families in Spiritual Character Building in the Digital Age: Character building does not only depend on schools but also requires family support. Maulida (2025) emphasizes that parental involvement is often low, especially in accompanying children in using technology. This causes the spiritual values taught at school not to be reinforced at home, while the use of technology at home is not supervised. This imbalance widens the gap between the spiritual character building and digital demands of students.*

SYNTHESIS OF NATIONAL CHARACTER STRENGTHENING MODEL (RESEARCH NOVELTY)

Based on a comprehensive synthesis of identified policy dynamics and relevance gaps, this research proposes the Novel Character Curriculum Integration Model (NCCIM). This model is the synthetic answer to aligning PAI's spiritual core with the needs of 21st-century competencies. The fundamental structure of NCCIM is illustrated in Figure 1.

1. Core Components of the NCCIM Model

The NCCIM model is based on three interconnected pillars centered on PAI's Spiritual Core, designed to address the gaps found:

- a) *Akhlak-Centric Integration Principle: All components of digital literacy must be framed as a practical expression of PAI spiritual values (Maulida, 2025). For example, teaching responsibility in online interaction is linked as an embodiment of*

the trait *amanah* (trustworthiness), effectively bridging the moral (vertical) and technical (horizontal) dimensions of character (Sari et al., 2024; Sulaiman, 2023).

- b) *Competency-Based Learning Framework (PjBL)*: NCCIM advocates for the use of Project-Based Learning (*PjBL*) methodology as the primary pedagogical approach (Tang, 2018). This method requires students to solve real and complex problems (e.g., designing a digital campaign to promote religious tolerance), where PAI ethics must be applied concurrently with digital tools, ensuring the acquisition of holistic competence (Salsabila et al., 2025).
- c) *Policy Validation and Institutional Implementation*: The third pillar emphasizes immediate policy action (Winda & Dafiq, 2021). This includes intensive professional development for PAI teachers, focusing on the NCCIM model pedagogy, as well as a systematic overhaul of evaluation metrics to guarantee PAI learning outcomes are explicitly aligned with specific competency descriptors within the KKNI (Sulaiman, 2023).

The synthesis of the reviewed literature reveals a fundamental gap between the spiritual-moral foundations of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) and the practical demands of 21st-century digital competencies. While the PAI curriculum historically emphasizes *akhlak* (noble character) as its core mandate, existing curricular structures and teaching practices remain insufficient to address the ethical challenges faced by learners in contemporary digital environments. This initial gap highlights the necessity for a more adaptive framework that can connect traditional moral teachings with modern digital realities.

Building on this identified gap, the novelty of this research emerges through the introduction of the Novel Character Curriculum Integration Model (NCCIM)—a structurally coherent model that unifies PAI's spiritual values with digital literacy, critical thinking, and project-based learning required in the Merdeka Curriculum era. Unlike traditional character-building frameworks that rely heavily on normative moral instruction, the NCCIM proposes an *akhlak*-centric digital ethics approach, reframing every aspect of digital behavior (e.g., online responsibility, information discernment, communication ethics) as a direct expression of core Islamic virtues such as *amanah*, *adab*, honesty, and social harmony. This shift enables moral values to be more explicitly operationalized in the digital context.

To ensure these values translate into practice, the model further advances a pedagogical transition toward competency-based learning, positioning Project-Based Learning (*PjBL*) as the primary mechanism for synthesizing moral values with real-world digital tasks. By engaging students in authentic digital projects—such as developing ethical online campaigns or designing solutions to social problems—the model ensures that character formation becomes measurable, contextual, and embedded within students' everyday experiences. Thus, character education is not only taught but lived and applied.

In addition to pedagogical innovation, the NCCIM strengthens its practicality through an institutional implementation pillar, emphasizing policy restructuring, alignment with the Indonesian National Qualification Framework (KKNI), and systematic teacher

professional development in digital pedagogy. This institutional dimension ensures that national character strengthening progresses beyond theoretical concepts and becomes supported by concrete systems and policies at the school and governmental levels. Such alignment reinforces the sustainability and scalability of the model. Taken together, the originality of this research lies in its development of a comprehensive, multi-dimensional character-building model that successfully bridges spiritual formation with digital-era competencies. The NCCIM offers a clear, actionable, and future-oriented framework for strengthening national character through the PAI curriculum, addressing long-standing gaps while preparing learners to navigate both ethical and technological challenges of the modern world.

D. CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review (SLR) synthesizes the historical evolution of the PAI curriculum and evaluates its alignment with national character-building mandates and 21st-century digital competencies. The analysis demonstrates that while PAI has undergone substantial policy reform, a persistent relevance gap remains: its spiritual moral foundations have not been structurally integrated with the cognitive, ethical, and technological demands of the digital era. This gap is reinforced by limited teacher readiness and the continued reliance on implicit moral formation, which has not translated into measurable digital ethics or critical digital literacy competencies.

The most critical insight emerging from this review is the need for a curriculum model that systematically bridges PAI's normative values with contemporary digital competence frameworks. The proposed Novel Character Curriculum Integration Model (NCCIM) represents a conceptual response to this need by positioning digital integration, 21st-century competencies, and institutional implementation within a unified framework grounded in PAI's spiritual core. Its emphasis on Project-Based Learning (PjBL) offers a pathway for operationalizing digital ethics as lived expressions of Islamic character rather than abstract values.

This review is limited by its reliance on secondary literature and the variability of methodological rigor across the included studies. The analysis is also constrained by the absence of empirical testing, meaning that the NCCIM remains conceptual and unvalidated in real classroom settings.

Implications for Future Research :

1. Test and validate the NCCIM across different school levels, regions, and institutional types to assess its practicality and impact.
2. Develop operational indicators for digital ethics, critical digital literacy, and character-based competencies within the PAI context.
3. Examine implementation barriers through mixed-method field research, especially regarding teacher digital pedagogy and institutional constraints.

Through these directions, the NCCIM can evolve from a conceptual model into a tested and scalable framework capable of strengthening Indonesia's digital-era character education agenda.

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