

Project-Based Learning for Spiritual Competence in Islamic Religious Education

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Abstract: The growing demand for holistic education in the era of Industry 4.0 and Society 5.0 requires Islamic Religious Education (PAI) to foster not only cognitive mastery but also students' spiritual competence. However, instructional practices in many PAI classrooms remain predominantly lecture-centered and insufficiently structured to facilitate systematic value internalization. This conceptual study aims to develop a theoretically grounded framework that aligns Project-Based Learning (PjBL) with processes of spiritual competence development in PAI. Employing an integrative literature review of contemporary scholarship (2015–2025), the study synthesizes perspectives from Islamic educational philosophy, experiential learning theory, and transformative learning theory. The findings indicate that spiritual competence comprises transcendental awareness, value appreciation, and moral-behavioral actualization. Furthermore, the stages of PjBL—problem identification, planning, implementation, and reflection—can be systematically mapped onto progressive processes of spiritual formation when guided by explicit ethical orientation and reflective practice. The study contributes by reconceptualizing PjBL as spiritual pedagogy rather than merely an active-learning strategy. Although conceptual in nature and not empirically tested, the proposed framework provides theoretical advancement and practical direction for PAI educators seeking to design experience-based spiritual learning. Future empirical studies are recommended to validate the framework across diverse educational contexts.

Keywords: spiritual competence; Islamic Religious Education; Project-Based Learning; experiential learning; value internalization

Abstrak: *Tuntutan pendidikan holistik pada era Revolusi Industri 4.0 dan Society 5.0 menuntut Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) tidak hanya berfokus pada penguasaan kognitif, tetapi juga pada pengembangan kompetensi spiritual peserta didik. Namun, praktik pembelajaran PAI di berbagai konteks masih didominasi pendekatan ceramah dan belum terstruktur secara sistematis dalam menginternalisasikan nilai. Penelitian konseptual ini bertujuan mengembangkan kerangka teoretis yang mengintegrasikan Project-Based Learning (PjBL) dengan proses pembentukan kompetensi spiritual dalam pembelajaran PAI. Metode yang digunakan adalah kajian literatur integratif terhadap sumber-sumber ilmiah mutakhir (2015–2025) dengan memadukan perspektif filsafat pendidikan Islam, teori experiential learning, dan transformative learning. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa kompetensi spiritual mencakup kesadaran transendental, apresiasi nilai, dan aktualisasi moral-perilaku. Tahapan PjBL—identifikasi masalah, perencanaan,*

pelaksanaan, dan refleksi – dapat dipetakan secara sistematis pada proses pembentukan spiritual apabila dirancang dengan orientasi etis dan refleksi yang terarah. Kontribusi utama penelitian ini adalah merekonstruksi PjBL sebagai pedagogi spiritual, bukan sekadar strategi pembelajaran aktif. Meskipun belum diuji secara empiris, kerangka yang dihasilkan memberikan kontribusi teoretis dan arahan praktis bagi guru PAI dalam merancang pembelajaran berbasis pengalaman yang berorientasi pada pembentukan spiritual.

Kata kunci: kompetensi spiritual; Pendidikan Agama Islam; Project-Based Learning; pembelajaran berbasis pengalaman; internalisasi nilai.

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Introduction

The paradigm shift in education in the era of the Industrial Revolution 4.0 and the emergence of Society 5.0 has significantly transformed expectations of learning processes and outcomes. Contemporary education no longer emphasizes cognitive mastery alone but increasingly prioritizes holistic human development, including moral, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. Within Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam/PAI), this transformation reinforces the fundamental objective of Islamic education: the cultivation of spiritually grounded individuals who are able to actualize Islamic values in personal and social life. Spiritual competence, therefore, becomes central to the mission of PAI, encompassing transcendental awareness, internalization of religious values, and consistent moral embodiment in daily behavior (Junita et al., 2024).

However, despite its normative centrality, the development of spiritual competence in many PAI classrooms remains pedagogically under-structured. Instructional practices are frequently dominated by lecture-based delivery, memorization, and doctrinal explanation, with limited opportunities for experiential engagement and reflective internalization (Sulthon, 2025). Such approaches tend to prioritize knowledge transmission over value formation, resulting in a disconnect between *aqidah-akhlaq* content and students' lived realities. Empirical observations further indicate that students often understand religious concepts cognitively yet struggle to contextualize them in authentic social situations (Putri et al., 2025). This gap suggests that the challenge of contemporary PAI lies not merely in curriculum content but in the absence of learning designs that systematically facilitate spiritual formation.

From the perspective of contemporary learning theory, value formation requires meaningful experience and reflective engagement. Dewey (1938) emphasizes that education must be grounded in lived experience, while Kolb (1984) argues that learning emerges through cycles of concrete experience and reflective

observation. Similarly, Mezirow (1991) highlights the role of critical reflection in transforming learners' meaning perspectives. In the domain of moral education, Lickona (1991) asserts that character development involves the integration of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. These theoretical perspectives collectively suggest that spiritual competence cannot be effectively cultivated through transmissive pedagogy alone; rather, it requires structured experiential processes that connect knowledge, action, and reflection.

Project-Based Learning (PjBL) offers a pedagogical model that aligns with these theoretical foundations. By engaging students in authentic tasks, collaborative inquiry, and sustained reflection, PjBL has been shown to enhance responsibility, social awareness, and active participation in learning (Widadi et al., 2025; Kurnia et al., 2025). Within PAI contexts, PjBL holds particular promise because it allows religious values to be explored through real-life problem-solving rather than abstract instruction. Nevertheless, existing research predominantly examines PjBL in terms of motivation, engagement, or academic achievement, while providing limited conceptual explanation of how project stages contribute specifically to spiritual competence development.

Moreover, although some studies acknowledge the importance of integrating spiritual dimensions into project activities (Sidiq et al., 2024; Zulkifli et al., 2024), they rarely articulate a systematic mapping between stages of Project-Based Learning and processes of spiritual internalization. The absence of such a conceptual framework results in theoretical ambiguity and inconsistent implementation. As a consequence, PjBL in PAI risks being applied as a general active-learning technique without clear spiritual orientation.

Responding to this theoretical gap, the present study seeks to reconceptualize Project-Based Learning as spiritual pedagogy within Islamic Religious Education. Specifically, this study aims to: (1) clarify the multidimensional concept of spiritual competence in Islamic education; (2) analyze the pedagogical logic of PjBL in relation to experiential and transformative learning theories; and (3) develop a structured conceptual framework that systematically aligns project stages with progressive processes of spiritual development. By articulating this framework, the study contributes to bridging Islamic educational philosophy with contemporary pedagogical design, offering both theoretical advancement and practical guidance for PAI educators.

Method

This study employs a conceptual research design aimed at constructing a theoretically grounded framework for developing students' spiritual competence through Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in Islamic Religious Education (PAI). Unlike

empirical research that relies on field observations or statistical measurement, conceptual research emphasizes systematic analysis, critical comparison, and integrative synthesis of scholarly literature to generate theoretical propositions and explanatory models (Torraco, 2005; Snyder, 2019). This approach is appropriate because the primary objective of the present study is theory development rather than empirical hypothesis testing.

The data sources consist of peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and authoritative review studies published predominantly between 2015 and 2025. Literature was retrieved from major academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar to ensure scholarly credibility and adequate representation of contemporary Islamic education discourse. The search process utilized keyword combinations including “Islamic Religious Education,” “Project-Based Learning,” “spiritual competence,” “spiritual development,” and “experiential learning,” with Boolean operators applied to refine search accuracy.

The literature selection process was conducted through a structured screening procedure adapted from the principles of transparent reporting outlined in PRISMA 2020 (Page et al., 2021), adjusted to fit the nature of an integrative conceptual review. The initial search yielded 148 publications. After removing duplicates and non-scholarly materials, 112 studies were screened based on titles and abstracts to assess topical relevance. Full-text analysis was subsequently conducted on 67 publications, resulting in 42 core sources that formed the analytical foundation of this study. Although a formal PRISMA flow diagram is not presented due to the conceptual orientation of the study, the staged screening process ensures methodological transparency and replicability.

The analytical process involved thematic categorization and recursive conceptual synthesis. Sources were examined to identify patterns, conceptual convergences, and theoretical tensions across three interrelated domains: definitions and dimensions of spiritual competence in Islamic education; pedagogical characteristics and stages of Project-Based Learning; and mechanisms linking project stages to processes of spiritual value internalization. A comparative-analytic strategy was applied to reconcile differences among sources by prioritizing works with stronger theoretical grounding, clearer conceptual definitions, and broader explanatory scope. Rather than eliminating conceptual tensions, the analysis treated them as constructive inputs for refining the proposed framework.

To strengthen theoretical rigor, the synthesis integrated perspectives from Islamic educational philosophy with contemporary learning theories, particularly experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991). Validity was enhanced through iterative cycles of reading, abstraction, cross-comparison, and reintegration of themes, while reliability was supported by explicit

inclusion criteria and consistent analytical focus throughout the review process. Through this structured and integrative approach, the resulting framework represents a theoretically grounded construction derived from systematic literature analysis and is intended to serve as a foundation for future empirical validation as well as a pedagogical reference for PAI educators.

Result and Discussion

Result

The findings of this conceptual study are derived from a systematic synthesis of forty-two core scholarly sources concerning spiritual competence and Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in Islamic Religious Education (PAI). The analysis reveals three major conceptual convergences that clarify the relationship between project-based pedagogy and spiritual development.

First, the literature consistently affirms that spiritual competence in Islamic education is multidimensional. Junita et al. (2024) emphasize transcendental awareness as a foundational component, while Sidiq et al. (2024) and Zulkifli et al. (2024) highlight the importance of social-spiritual attitudes in shaping learners' religious identity. These perspectives align with broader moral education theory, which frames character formation as the integration of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action (Lickona, 1991). However, most studies treat spiritual competence primarily as an educational outcome rather than as a progressive developmental process. Through comparative analysis, this study synthesizes these perspectives into a three-dimensional construct consisting of transcendental awareness, value appreciation, and moral-behavioral actualization. This integrative formulation extends previous studies by positioning spiritual competence as a recursive and experience-driven formation process rather than a static instructional target.

Second, the synthesis indicates that Project-Based Learning possesses pedagogical characteristics compatible with spiritual formation, although this dimension is rarely theorized explicitly. Empirical studies in PAI contexts demonstrate that PjBL enhances responsibility, collaboration, and engagement (Widadi et al., 2025; Kurnia et al., 2025). From the standpoint of experiential learning theory, meaningful learning emerges through cycles of concrete experience and reflective observation (Kolb, 1984), while transformative learning emphasizes the role of reflection in reshaping learners' meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 1991). When interpreted through these theoretical lenses, PjBL can function not merely as an active-learning strategy but as a structured experiential environment in which spiritual awareness is cultivated through action and reflection.

Third, and most significantly, the synthesis reveals a systematic alignment between stages of Project-Based Learning and progressive dimensions of spiritual competence. The problem identification stage enables students to interpret real-life issues through an Islamic ethical framework, thereby strengthening transcendental awareness and moral sensitivity. This corresponds with Dewey's (1938) assertion that authentic problems serve as the starting point for meaningful education. During the planning phase, collaborative deliberation fosters value appreciation, particularly in relation to responsibility (*amanah*), consultation (*shura*), and ethical decision-making, which are central to Islamic moral pedagogy. Project implementation facilitates repeated engagement in value-based action, supporting moral habituation, consistent with character formation theory (Lickona, 1991). Finally, structured reflection encourages processes of *muhasabah* and critical self-examination, aligning with transformative learning principles (Mezirow, 1991).

The synthesis further indicates that the spiritual impact of PjBL is not automatic. Several studies note that without explicit value orientation and guided reflection, project activities may remain procedural and cognitively focused (Widadi et al., 2025). Therefore, intentional instructional design is essential to ensure that project stages function as mechanisms of value internalization rather than merely collaborative tasks.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Project-Based Learning can be reconceptualized as spiritual pedagogy when systematically aligned with Islamic educational principles and experiential learning theory. By mapping project stages to progressive dimensions of spiritual competence, this study provides a theoretically grounded explanation of how experiential engagement contributes to spiritual formation within PAI contexts.

Discussion

The conceptual framework developed in this study positions Project-Based Learning (PjBL) not merely as an instructional technique but as a potential form of spiritual pedagogy within Islamic Religious Education (PAI). This repositioning has important theoretical implications. While Islamic education has long emphasized spiritual refinement through concepts such as *tazkiyatun nafs* and moral habituation, pedagogical practice in many contemporary classrooms remains dominated by knowledge transmission (Sulthon, 2025). The findings of this study suggest that experiential engagement, when intentionally designed, can bridge the gap between doctrinal understanding and lived spiritual practice.

From a theoretical perspective, the alignment between PjBL and spiritual competence resonates strongly with experiential learning theory. Kolb (1984) argues that meaningful learning requires the transformation of experience into reflective insight. Similarly, Dewey (1938) maintains that education must be rooted in

authentic problem situations that stimulate inquiry and ethical reasoning. When applied in PAI, project-based tasks provide students with opportunities to encounter moral dilemmas, social responsibilities, and collaborative decision-making processes in real contexts. Such engagement facilitates the movement from abstract knowledge of Islamic values to embodied moral practice. In this regard, the findings extend previous PAI-based PjBL studies that primarily reported improvements in motivation or social participation (Widadi et al., 2025; Kurnia et al., 2025) by offering a deeper explanation of the internal mechanisms of spiritual formation.

Moreover, the framework developed in this study also aligns with transformative learning theory, which emphasizes reflection as a catalyst for perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1991). The reflection stage within PjBL—particularly when guided through structured spiritual inquiry—creates space for muhasabah and value re-evaluation. This reflective process is essential because spiritual competence cannot be reduced to observable behavior alone; it involves internal conviction and self-awareness. By integrating reflective practice into project stages, PjBL supports the transition from external compliance to internalized commitment, a transition that character education scholars identify as central to moral development (Lickona, 1991).

However, this study also highlights several critical considerations. First, the spiritual impact of PjBL is highly dependent on intentional instructional design. Without explicit integration of Islamic ethical principles and structured reflection, project activities risk becoming procedural exercises focused primarily on productivity or collaboration. As noted by Sidiq et al. (2024), teachers often encounter challenges in embedding spiritual objectives into active-learning models due to limited pedagogical guidance. This suggests that PjBL in PAI requires more than methodological adoption; it demands value-oriented facilitation and spiritual sensitivity from educators.

Second, the proposed framework assumes the presence of supportive institutional conditions. In many educational settings, curriculum demands remain content-heavy and examination-oriented, leaving limited space for sustained projects and deep reflection. Dewey (1938) cautioned that experiential education requires structural alignment within the broader educational system. Without such alignment, the transformative potential of project-based pedagogy may be constrained by time limitations and assessment pressures. Therefore, institutional support and curriculum flexibility are essential to operationalize the framework effectively.

Third, the integration of spirituality within project-based learning must avoid the risk of instrumentalization. Spiritual competence cannot be treated merely as a

measurable project outcome or behavioral indicator. As Palmer (1998) emphasizes, spiritual formation involves inner development that cannot be fully captured through external performance. Consequently, assessment strategies in PAI must remain sensitive to the personal and reflective nature of spiritual growth, prioritizing formative feedback over purely summative evaluation.

Despite these challenges, the conceptual alignment presented in this study offers a promising direction for Islamic education reform. By framing PjBL as spiritual pedagogy, this study provides a bridge between classical Islamic educational philosophy and contemporary learner-centered approaches. Rather than positioning tradition and modern pedagogy in opposition, the findings demonstrate that experiential, collaborative, and reflective learning can function as vehicles for spiritual cultivation when guided by Islamic ethical orientation.

In sum, the discussion reinforces that the effectiveness of Project-Based Learning in fostering spiritual competence is not inherent but conditional. It depends on reflective depth, ethical intentionality, and systemic support. When these elements are present, PjBL can contribute meaningfully to the holistic mission of Islamic education in preparing learners who are not only knowledgeable but spiritually grounded and morally responsible.

Conclusion

This conceptual study demonstrates that Project-Based Learning can be repositioned as spiritual pedagogy within Islamic Religious Education when its stages are intentionally aligned with Islamic ethical principles and reflective practice. By synthesizing contemporary scholarship on spiritual competence, experiential learning, and project-based pedagogy, this study formulates a structured framework that maps stages of PjBL to progressive dimensions of spiritual development, namely transcendental awareness, value appreciation, and moral-behavioral actualization. This alignment clarifies the internal mechanisms through which experiential engagement contributes to spiritual formation, thereby extending prior research that has predominantly focused on motivational or cognitive outcomes.

The principal contribution of this study lies in reconceptualizing spiritual competence not merely as an instructional outcome but as a recursive, experience-driven formation process. The framework offers theoretical advancement by bridging Islamic educational philosophy with contemporary learner-centered pedagogy, while also providing practical guidance for PAI educators seeking to design value-oriented project activities. Nevertheless, as a conceptual study, this research is not supported by empirical testing. The proposed framework requires validation through qualitative case studies, design-based research, or longitudinal classroom implementation to assess its effectiveness across diverse educational

contexts. Future research is encouraged to examine contextual variables such as institutional culture, teacher readiness, and student developmental levels that may influence the practical realization of spiritual pedagogy in project-based settings. Overall, the study affirms that meaningful spiritual development in PAI requires more than doctrinal transmission; it demands structured experiential engagement, guided reflection, and ethical intentionality embedded within the learning process.

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