

## Curriculum Dynamics and Existence of PAI: Challenges and Synergy Opportunities in Strengthening Student Character

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**Abstract:** Islamic Religious Education (IRE) within the national education system faces structural challenges that are both technical-curricular and ideological-pedagogical. This study analyzes the dynamics of IRE's existence and formulates a synergistic model to strengthen student character development through a Literature Review of 13 selected articles using a Critical Content Analysis lens. Findings reveal that technical challenges include limited instructional time and overlapping values across subjects. Meanwhile, more fundamental ideological challenges stem from the epistemological dichotomy between religious and general sciences and the dominance of transmissive teaching ("banking education"). Consequently, this study proposes the Theme-Based Reciprocal Synergy Model. This model positions IRE and general subjects in a dialogical relationship through cross-subject thematic integration, pedagogical collaboration (team teaching), and holistic character assessment via portfolios. Theoretically, it strengthens the paradigm of knowledge integration, while practically providing an applicable operational framework for character education within the national curriculum by considering teacher administration policy reforms.

**Keywords:** Islamic Religious Education; National Curriculum; Critical Content Analysis; Reciprocal Synergy; Character Education.

**Abstrak:** Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) dalam sistem pendidikan nasional menghadapi tantangan struktural yang bersifat teknis-kurikuler dan ideologis-pedagogis. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis dinamika eksistensi PAI serta merumuskan model sinergi untuk memperkuat pembentukan karakter siswa melalui pendekatan Literature Review terhadap 13 artikel terpilih menggunakan lensa Critical Content Analysis. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa tantangan teknis meliputi keterbatasan alokasi waktu dan tumpang tindih nilai antarmata pelajaran. Sementara itu, tantangan ideologis yang lebih fundamental muncul dari dikotomi epistemologis antara ilmu agama dan umum serta dominasi pengajaran transmisionis ("pendidikan gaya bank"). Sebagai solusi operasional, penelitian ini menawarkan Model Sinergi Resiprokal Berbasis Tema. Model ini menempatkan PAI dan mata pelajaran umum dalam hubungan dialogis yang saling memperkaya melalui integrasi tema lintas disiplin, kolaborasi pedagogis (team teaching), dan evaluasi karakter holistik melalui portofolio. Secara teoretik, model ini memperkuat paradigma integrasi keilmuan, sementara secara praktis menyediakan

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*kerangka kerja yang aplikatif bagi penguatan karakter dalam kurikulum nasional dengan mempertimbangkan reformasi kebijakan administrasi guru.*

*Kata kunci : Pendidikan Agama Islam; Kurikulum Nasional; Analisis Konten Kritis; Sinergi Resiprokal; Pendidikan Karakter.*

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## **Introduction**

The foundation of Indonesia's national education system is built on a grand historical compromise to create individuals who are faithful and devoted to God Almighty and embody the spirit of Pancasila (Nurul Faratunnisa et al., 2024). Since independence until today, the field of education has been the stage for a dialectic between an inclusive national vision and particular religious values (Ismail, 2022). The most obvious manifestation of this dialectic is the dualism of the curriculum, namely, the national curriculum designed as a common umbrella for all citizens (Mahrus, 2021) and the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum that serves as a medium for the internalization of faith and morals for the majority of the population (Isaac, 2025). This dualism, which is legitimized by Law No. 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, is not merely a technical-administrative division, but a reflection of ideological tensions rooted in the history of the formulation of the state's foundations (Muhammad Saifuddin, 2020).

Genealogically, the dualism of the curriculum in Indonesia is a remnant of colonial history, which sharply separated the secular education system from the pesantren tradition. Although Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System has legally united the two entities under one national umbrella, this unification is still considered to be administrative-legalistic rather than integrative-substantive. On the cusp of the Society 5.0 era, the inability to bridge the dichotomy between 'general knowledge' based on rational-empirical principles and 'religious knowledge' that is normative-dogmatic in nature has created acute fragmentation in education (Hasan, 2024). This wide gap has resulted in a dualism of learning experiences, where students often separate critical reasoning in science from spiritual values in social life, thus risking the isolation of PAI as a mere supplement to morality that has lost its intellectual bargaining power amid technological disruption.

Inherently, this dualism creates a paradox. On the one hand, it is a manifestation of the state's recognition of citizens' religious rights and the central role of religion in the life of the nation (Al-Fatih & Aditya, 2021). On the other hand, if not managed properly, it has the potential to create fragmentation in students' learning experiences, as if there is a separation between being a good citizen and a devout

Muslim (Fikri, 2024). Practices in the field often show that the national curriculum and PAI run on two parallel tracks that rarely intersect substantively (Shaleh et al., 2024). The national curriculum focuses on 21st-century competencies and Pancasila values (Tapung, 2025), while PAI sometimes concentrates more on ritual-doctrinal aspects (Faisal et al., 2021). As a result, the noble goal of forming a holistic national character that is both religious and nationalistic risks not being optimally achieved.

Previous studies have consistently emphasized the strategic position of PAI in the national system, its role in shaping morality, and its urgency in responding to the challenges of the times (Hidayat, 2025). Although the 13 pieces of literature reviewed in this study provide an overview of the obstacles to the PAI curriculum, there is a research gap because previous studies tend to separate administrative policy problems from pedagogical problems in the classroom (Hasan & Mutakim, 2019; Hasan & Sintasari, 2025). As a result, there has been no comprehensive analysis of how these technical and ideological challenges intertwine in shaping students' critical awareness amid digital disruption.

The urgency to bridge this gap is becoming increasingly pressing in this era of disruption. The unstoppable tide of globalization, digital penetration that is changing the moral landscape, and the strengthening of narratives of intolerance demand the emergence of a young generation with strong character: adaptive, critical, tolerant, and integrity (All et al., 2025). Government initiatives such as Character Education Strengthening and Pancasila Student Profile are direct responses to these challenges (Henik, 2024). However, the success of these programs is highly dependent on their ability to synergize, rather than compete, with religious education, which has long been the backbone of moral education in schools (Rizka Bidayaratul & Safitri, 2025). Managing curriculum dualism is no longer just an option, but a strategic necessity.

Therefore, this study goes beyond a simple affirmation of the importance of PAI. This article poses a more profound central question: "How can the challenges and opportunities of the dualism between the national curriculum and the PAI curriculum be analyzed to formulate an effective synergy framework for strengthening student character?" Using a qualitative analysis approach to policy and literature, this article argues that by identifying points of friction (e.g., overlapping material, differences in value emphasis) and points of convergence (e.g., common goals in social ethics), curriculum dualism can be transformed. It can shift from a source of potential fragmentation to a mode of enrichment that actually strengthens the foundation of national character in a more comprehensive and relevant way to the challenges of the times.

Although the thirteen pieces of literature reviewed in this study have provided a partial picture of the obstacles to the PAI curriculum, there is a research gap regarding how these technical and ideological challenges intertwine in shaping

student awareness in the era of Society 5.0. Most previous studies tend to separate administrative curriculum problems from pedagogical problems in the classroom. The novelty of this research lies in the use of Critical Content Analysis to synthesize administrative and pedagogical dimensions in order to formulate a theme-based reciprocal synergy model. Unlike conventional curriculum integration models, which tend to be subordinate in nature, where religious values are merely tacked on as a supplement to science, this model offers a two-way dialogical relationship that positions scientific reasoning and theological values as equal partners. This aims to produce grounded operational solutions for cohesively strengthening student character in the era of Society 5.0.

### **Method**

This study uses a qualitative approach with a literature review design placed within a critical paradigm framework. The choice of this approach goes beyond mere description or statistical measurement of the relationship between variables (Sugiyono, 2020; Zed, 2014), but it is aimed at deeply unraveling the conceptual and ideological dynamics that shape the existence of PAI in the national education system. The issues of curriculum dualism, science integration, and character education are not viewed as merely technical problems, but as structural and epistemological phenomena laden with power relations. Therefore, the literature review design in this study was not carried out by passively summarizing the contents of the literature, but rather through a process of dialectics and criticism of the discourse, regulations, and educational practices represented in academic texts in order to find the roots of educational fragmentation.

The research data sources are secondary, in the form of accredited scientific journal articles and academic reference books (anthologies) relevant to the research topic. Literature searches were conducted using Publish or Perish (PoP) software with the Google Scholar database because it has a broad coverage of scientific publications in the field of Islamic education and education policy in Indonesia. In the initial search stage, the researcher used the keywords "Curriculum Dualism," "PAI Integration," "National Education," and "Character Education," which were formulated in the form of Boolean queries. The search settings were set to a maximum of 200 articles and a publication time range of 2015–2025. The next stage was the gradual selection of literature by applying transparent inclusion criteria, namely: 1) accredited scientific journal articles and highly credible academic reference books; 2) published between 2015 and 2025, with priority given to the last five years; and 3) substantively discussing the intersection between state regulations and PAI in a formal context in terms of policy, curriculum, and character building. Literature that was popular opinion, lacked methodological clarity, or was outside

the context of the national system was eliminated until 13 core articles were obtained as units of analysis.

Data from 13 selected articles were analyzed using manual thematic coding techniques, conducted without the assistance of software (such as NVivo or Atlas.ti) to ensure the researcher's in-depth mastery of every unit of information. This manual coding process was executed through three systematic stages:

1. Open Coding: The researcher performed a close reading of the texts across the 13 articles (A1-A13) to label raw information units related to the challenges and solutions of PAI (Islamic Religious Education).
2. Axial Coding: The researcher grouped these initial codes into more specific categories to identify cause-and-effect relationships, which in this study resulted in two major themes: technical-curricular challenges and ideological-pedagogical challenges.
3. Selective Coding: The researcher synthesized all categories to formulate the Reciprocal Synergy Model as the core finding of the study.

This procedure strictly follows the qualitative analysis stages of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which include data reduction, data display, and iterative conclusion drawing (B. Miles et al., 2014). To ensure trustworthiness and interpretative transparency, the researcher implemented an audit trail mechanism by documenting every change in code labels into a coding matrix chronologically, ensuring that the flow of conclusions derived from raw data remains verifiable.

Based on the iterative coding and categorization of issues, this study found that the challenges to the existence of PAI within the national education system are not unitary; rather, they are reduced into two main clusters as empirical findings from the literature reviewed:

1. Technical-Curricular Challenges Cluster: This category emerged from the consolidation of data regarding limited learning time allocation, curriculum density, and the redundancy of overlapping character values across different subjects.
2. Ideological-Pedagogical Challenges Cluster: This category was identified through the exploration of more fundamental issues, namely the epistemological fragmentation between religious and secular sciences, as well as the disharmony of teaching approaches still dominated by transmissionist patterns.

The emergence of these specific categories transcends the four *a priori* dimensions (focus of study, position of PAI, challenges, and solutions) established at the outset, thereby providing a more comprehensive overview of how structural and methodological obstacles intertwine in the field.

To interpret the research findings beyond a descriptive level, a multidisciplinary critical theoretical framework was employed as a concrete analytical lens for the 13 articles reviewed. Methodologically, the Dichotomy of Sciences Critique by Abdullah (2006) was utilized to dissect the epistemological assumptions within the literature that separate religious and secular sciences, aiming to uncover the roots of knowledge fragmentation within the curriculum structure. Furthermore, Apple's (2018) Hidden Curriculum theory was applied to identify power relations and the hegemony of secular knowledge within policy texts, which often result in PAI being marginalized or relegated to a supplementary role compared to general subjects. Meanwhile, Freire's (2000) Critical Pedagogy was used to evaluate the dimension of teacher-student relations in the literature, specifically in dismantling "banking-style education" practices that hinder the growth of critical consciousness and authentic student character. Through this Critical Content Analysis (CCA) approach, these three theories serve not merely as academic legitimacy but as instruments to deconstruct the ideologies and power relations hidden behind curriculum dualism, ensuring that research conclusions are derived systematically and remain verifiable.

To ensure trustworthiness and data validity in this qualitative study, the researcher implemented an audit trail mechanism and theoretical triangulation to guarantee interpretative objectivity. The audit trail was conducted by chronologically documenting every research stage from establishing inclusion criteria and the data labeling process during open coding to the categorization shifts in axial and selective coding, as presented in the coding matrix (Table 1). Through this documentation, the entire trajectory of deriving conclusions from raw literature data can be verified and replicated by others to mitigate researcher subjectivity. Additionally, theoretical triangulation was performed by cross-examining the literature findings through three distinct critical perspectives: the dichotomy of science, the hidden curriculum, and critical pedagogy. This resulted in a comprehensive and profound understanding of the ideologies underlying curriculum dualism. All procedures were aimed at ensuring that the resulting conclusions are genuinely grounded in the reviewed literature data and meet the required standards of academic credibility.

As a form of analysis transparency, the coding results for the 13 selected articles are presented in the form of a coding matrix in Table 1 below.

**Table 1. Literature Coding Matrix (A1-A13)**

<b>Article Code</b>	<b>Focus of Study (FS)</b>	<b>Position of PAI (PP)</b>	<b>Challenges (C)</b>	<b>Solutions (S)</b>	<b>Challenge Clusters</b>
<b>A1</b>	FS1	PP3	C1	S1	Ideological-Pedagogical

A2	FS1	PP2	C3	S1	Technical-Curricular
A3	FS4	PP3	C2	S3	Ideological-Pedagogical
A4	FS1	PP2	C3	S1	Technical-Curricular
A5	FS4	PP4	C2	S3	Ideological-Pedagogical
A6	FS3	PP2	C4	S4	Technical-Curricular
A7	FS2	PP2	C3	S4	Technical-Curricular
A8	FS2	PP2	C3	S4	Technical-Curricular
A9	FS1	PP2	C1	S1	Ideological-Pedagogical
A10	FS4	PP4	C4	S3	Ideological-Pedagogical
A11	FS1	PP3	C1	S1	Ideological-Pedagogical
A12	FS1	PP3	C1	S1	Ideological-Pedagogical
A13	FS1	PP3	C1	S1	Ideological-Pedagogical

### Code Description

**FS:** FS1 Policy & Regulation; FS2 Institutional; FS3 Curriculum & Learning; FS4 Character Education

**PP:** PP1 Subjects; PP2 Institutions; PP3 Value System; PP4 Character Instruments

**C:** C1 Curriculum Dualism; C2 Weak Value Integration; C3 Institutional & Professionalism; C4 Contextual Challenges

**S:** S1 Policy Strengthening; S2 Curriculum Integration; S3 Character Strengthening; S4 Reform & Innovation

An in-depth analysis of the coding matrix (Table 1) reveals significant academic thought trends over the past decade. The cluster of articles focusing on policy (A1, A9, A11, A12, A13) consistently underscores that curriculum dualism is not merely a technical issue of credit hour allocation but rather a manifestation of a value system that has yet to be fully integrated into macro-level policies. Meanwhile, literature centered on institutional aspects (A7, A8) highlights that teacher professionalism is frequently hindered by administrative silos that separate moral responsibility (PAI teachers) from academic responsibility (general subject teachers). This is further corroborated by findings in articles A10 and A12, which specifically dissect how character instruments often fail because they are understood partially by individual educators; consequently, students lack a cohesive role model figure within the school ecosystem.

### Results And Discussion

#### Result

This section presents the primary findings synthesized critically from the 13 selected literature articles. In contrast to previous narratives, the presentation of

these findings refers directly to the coding matrix (Table 1) to demonstrate the transparency of the data reduction process. The findings are categorized into two major clusters: Technical-Curricular Challenges and Ideological-Pedagogical Challenges.

### **1. Cluster I Findings: Technical-Curricular Challenges**

Based on the analysis of the coding matrix, technical challenges represent concrete issues emerging from literature focused on institutional studies (FS2) and curriculum (FS3). The findings in this cluster include:

- a. Marginalization of Time Allocation: Articles A2, A4, A6, A7, and A8 consistently demonstrate that PAI occupies a marginal position within the lesson hour structure. Through C3 coding (Institutional & Professionalism), it was revealed that time constraints (2-3 hours/week) force teachers to prioritize the delivery of factual material to meet administrative targets.
- b. Curriculum Density and Subject Competition: Data from articles coded C4 (Contextual Challenges) indicate academic pressure where schools prioritize subjects focused on national assessments. In this context, PAI is positioned merely as a supplementary subject.
- c. Redundancy of Value Content: Analysis of code C2 (Weak Value Integration) in articles A6 and A8 uncovers an overlap of character values across subjects (PAI, Civic Education/PPKn, Social Studies/IPS) without a clear integration framework. Consequently, the internalization of values for students tends to be superficial and symbolic.

### **2. Cluster II Findings: Ideological-Pedagogical Challenges**

At a deeper level, the coding results reveal latent and structural challenges, particularly in articles focusing on policy (FS1) and character education (FS4):

- a. Epistemological Fragmentation: Articles A1, A3, A5, and A9 through A13, coded C1 (Curriculum Dualism), reveal a sharp separation between general sciences (rational-empirical) and PAI (normative-dogmatic). This fragmentation causes PAI to lose its intellectual bargaining power amidst educational modernization.
- b. Disharmony of Pedagogical Approaches: This finding is rooted in differences in teaching methodologies. While general subjects encourage critical reasoning, PAI is still dominated by transmissionist approaches that emphasize memorization and text reproduction.
- c. Impact on Student Consciousness: Articles A10 and A12 indicate that this dualism forms a split consciousness. Students tend to deactivate their critical thinking abilities when entering the religious classroom, risking the development of an unreflective religious identity.

## **Discussion**

Analysis using the lens of Critical Content Analysis (CCA) reveals that the challenges faced by Islamic Religious Education (PAI) are not isolated technical hurdles, but rather the result of ideological maneuvers and power relations structured within the curriculum.

### **Hegemony and "Selective Tradition" in the National Curriculum**

The findings regarding the marginalization of time allocation and the subordinate position of PAI (A2, A4, A6, A7, A8) are not merely technical scheduling issues, but manifestations of the mechanism of "Selective Tradition." From the perspective of (Apple, 2018) The state selects knowledge deemed to have high economic value and competitiveness, such as science and technology to be prioritized in the national curriculum, while PAI is positioned as a moral support whose teaching hours continue to be eroded.

Data from the article coded C3 (Institutional) shows that this hegemony is legitimized through National Assessment policies, where schools tend to prioritize subjects that are the focus of state evaluation. This creates a hidden curriculum that implicitly sends a message to students that religious values are no more important than market-valued scientific competencies. Due to the low bargaining power of PAI within the curriculum structure, PAI teachers are often trapped in administrative demands to simply complete factual material within a very limited time (2-3 hours/week), instead of performing deep internalizations of values. This condition proves the existence of power relations that marginalize value-based education for the sake of reproducing technical-instrumental knowledge.

### **Epistemological Dichotomy and Split Consciousness**

Analysis of the ideological clusters in the literature (A1, A3, A5, and A9–A13) reinforces the existence of an epistemological dichotomy deeply rooted in national curriculum policy. Referring to the Integration-Interconnection framework (Abdullah, 2006), The phenomenon of *split personality* or divided consciousness in students is not merely an individual pedagogical failure, but a logical consequence of a dualistic curriculum policy that is administrative-legalistic in nature. The sharp separation between general subjects and religious subjects in the national curriculum structure creates an isolation between *hadharah al-ilm* (science/reason) and *hadharah al-nass* (religion/revelation).

Data from the article coded C1 (Curriculum Dualism) indicates that the national curriculum implicitly legitimizes the assumption that science is a rational, empirical, and critical domain, while PAI is placed in a rigid, normative-dogmatic realm. Consequently, an imaginary boundary emerges where students are accustomed to activating their critical reasoning when dealing with science, yet automatically deactivate it when entering the PAI classroom. This systemic fragmentation, as reflected in findings A11 and A12, causes PAI to fail as a dialogic

partner for general sciences. Without *grounded* interconnection, character education will only become a moral appendage because students are forced to live in two intellectual worlds that are mutually alien and do not converse with one another.

### **Criticism of the Banking Concept of Education in PAI**

Pedagogical imbalances identified through the literature reveal a powerful dominance of the transmissionist approach. Utilizing the lens of Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 2000), The PAI learning practices found in the literature data (particularly in articles A10 and A12) operationally resemble the Banking Concept of Education. In this model, teachers position themselves as depositors of knowledge, while students are treated as empty containers whose only task is to receive, memorize, and store doctrinal information without any room for critical reflection.

Data from the article coded C2 (Weak Value Integration) indicates that PAI is frequently reduced to a mere process of storing normative texts that are disconnected from social contexts. This condition risks producing an unreflective form of religiosity, where students are able to reproduce doctrine orally but fail to internalize it as a living moral consciousness (Umam & Hasan, 2025). In the Society 5.0 era, this "banking" style of education is highly dangerous; students become unprepared to face moral disruption and digital penetration because they have never been taught to engage in a dialogue with reality. Consequently, the character formed is merely ritualistic-formal and symbolic, losing its transformative power to respond to contemporary challenges that demand critical reasoning and authentic integrity.

The Reciprocal Synergy Model formulated in this study is not merely a normative framework, but a methodological response to the failure of conventional integration models that tend to be subordinate. Unlike integrated curriculum models that often merely "attach" religious values to science, this model operates through a two-way dialogic relation that positions scientific reasoning and theological values as equal partners (Azizah et al., 2024, 2025).

The novelty of this model lies in its attempt to dismantle the systemic fragmentation identified through code C1 (Curriculum Dualism). Within this framework, PAI functions as a source of value orientation and ethical foundations, while general sciences enrich the empirical understanding of those values. This approach directly rejects the banking-style education practices found in the literature, replacing them with a dialectic that brings students' critical reflection to life.

### **Operationalization of the Reciprocal Synergy Model**

To ensure this model does not remain a theoretical discourse, its operationalization is derived from a synthesis of the needs of 13 literature articles through three levels of integration:

1. **Integration of Learning Themes (Curricular Level):** This synergy responds to findings regarding value-content redundancy (code C2) in articles A6 and A8. PAI teachers and general subject teachers perform a mapping of overlapping Basic Competencies to create adaptive curriculum management. This is in line with the adaptive curriculum management proposed by (Mahrus, 2021).
2. **Pedagogical Collaboration/Team Teaching (Instructional Level):** This model encourages the removal of barriers between religious and general teachers in the classroom through collaborative learning. This approach aims to prove to students that science and religion are a unified whole that mutually confirm one another, as supported by the findings of (Mabunda, 2023; Patria, 2023) Regarding the importance of attending to contextual factors and student happiness in learning. To overcome bureaucratic hurdles, this model recommends integrating workloads into the teacher's administrative system so that cross-disciplinary collaboration is no longer viewed as an additional burden.
3. **Holistic Character Evaluation (Assessment Level):** Assessment is no longer separated into general cognitive scores and standalone religious attitude grades. Instead, evaluation is conducted through a character portfolio that records how the understanding of religious values transforms into moderate attitudes and critical reasoning in the public sphere. The integration of spiritual practices and religious knowledge serves as a crucial foundation for the formation of a positively competitive character (Hidayat, 2025).

As a form of transparency and implementative guidance, the synthesis of these three levels of integration is mapped into the operational matrix in Table 2 below.

**Table 2. Operationalization of the Reciprocal Synergy Model**

<b>Integration Component</b>	<b>Role of PAI</b>	<b>Role of General Subjects</b>	<b>Form of Synergy (Technical Steps)</b>	<b>of Character Output (Measurable)</b>
<b>Learning Themes</b>	Provides value orientation and theological foundations.	Provides scientific analysis, empirical data, and contextual depth.	Cross-Disciplinary BC Mapping: Teachers perform thematic mapping on overlapping Basic	Ethical-Religious Awareness: Students are able to provide theological arguments for natural/social

				Competencies (e.g., Ecological issues).	phenomena data.
<b>Pedagogical Approach</b>	Manages value dialogue, moral reflection, and critiques of dogmatism.	Applies active learning, problem-solving, and critical reasoning.	and	Collaborative Team Teaching: Religious and general teachers in the same classroom to dismantle the dichotomy of knowledge.	Critical-Reflective Reasoning: Students are empowered to engage in dialogue and reject rigid or intolerant religious narratives.
<b>Material &amp; Evaluation</b>	Emphasizes internalization of spiritual values and moderate attitudes.	Focuses on mastery of technical concepts and practical skills.	of	Holistic Character Portfolio: Utilizing cross-subject behavioral records as a replacement for partial academic report scores.	Authentic Character: Real behavioral changes in the public sphere that reflect the integration of values and reasoning.

### Implementative Justification of the Reciprocal Synergy Model

The operationalization of the model in Table 2 demands transformation across three primary, intertwined levels. First, at the Learning Themes level, this integration responds to findings regarding value-content redundancy and weak horizontal integration (A6, A8) through the mapping of overlapping Basic Competencies (BC). For instance, regarding the environmental crisis, PAI provides the *fitrah* perspective (the obligation to preserve nature), while Science provides empirical climate change data. This step methodologically replaces conventional integration models, which are often subordinate to a more adaptive model (Mahrus, 2021).

Second, at the Pedagogical Approach level, this model encourages the implementation of team teaching to dismantle the barriers between religious and

general teachers in the classroom. Pedagogically, this step is a concrete response to the dominance of transmissionist approaches in PAI by introducing dialogic and collaborative learning (Henik, 2024; Rizka Bidayaratul & Safitri, 2025). This aims to demonstrate to students that science and religion are a unified whole that mutually confirm one another, while also considering contextual factors and student happiness in learning (Mabunda, 2023; Patria, 2023).

Third, at the Evaluation level, assessment is transformed from partial cognitive scores into a Holistic Character Portfolio. This instrument records how students' religious understanding transforms into moderate attitudes and critical reasoning in the public sphere, a crucial foundation for forming competitive character in the Society 5.0 era (Hidayat, 2025). The implementation of this synergy model is not merely prescriptive; it aligns with the demands of critical pedagogy in the digital disruption era, which emphasizes the integration of spiritual practices and knowledge (Faisal et al., 2021; Shaleh et al., 2024; Suwendi et al., 2024). Thus, the Reciprocal Synergy Model offers a framework that is not only concise but also grounded in field realities to strengthen the existence of PAI.

## **Conclusion**

This research reveals the crucial finding that the marginalization of Islamic Religious Education (IRE)/PAI within the national education system is not merely an administrative issue, but a manifestation of structural problems intertwined with ideological-pedagogical dimensions. These findings confirm that classic issues, such as limited time allocation and curriculum density, are merely "surface symptoms" of a more fundamental root cause: an acute epistemological fragmentation between religious and general sciences. The current curriculum structure systemically perpetuates pedagogical disharmony, where PAI is isolated in a transmissionist position, detached from the critical reasoning of general subjects, thereby reducing the transformative power of student character education.

Theoretically, this study provides a new scholarly contribution by formulating the Theme-Based Reciprocal Synergy Model as a conceptual breakthrough to bridge the curriculum dichotomy. Unlike previous studies that tend to stop at normative affirmations of PAI's importance, this article offers an operational framework that places PAI and general subjects in a mutually enriching dialogic relationship. This model provides applicative instruments through thematic integration, pedagogical collaboration (team teaching), and holistic evaluation, ensuring that character education is conducted cohesively rather than on two separate tracks.

Practically, this research emphasizes the need for macro-policy reforms that support interdisciplinary curriculum design. Reciprocal synergy will not occur as

long as teacher administrative systems (such as workload/SKP) remain rigidly compartmentalized. Policies are needed to support the integration of character assessment through Holistic Character Portfolios, where students' moral values are no longer fragmented into partial sections of a report card. Without reform at the level of administrative policy and evaluation, any synergy model will remain merely a theoretical discourse. Despite offering a solution-oriented model, this study has limitations as it bases its findings on a literature review of 13 selected articles, meaning the analysis is limited to secondary data. The absence of primary data restricts the generalization of findings across different school demographic variations. Therefore, further empirical research (field research) is highly necessary to test the validity of this Reciprocal Synergy Model to formulate curriculum policies with tangible impact.

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