

## Research Article

# Beyond Exercise: Physical Activity as an Instrument of Holistic Human Development in Contemporary Islamic Education

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**Abstract:** Physical activity is commonly understood as a means of improving physical fitness and preventing disease. However, this perspective often overlooks its broader educational, social, moral, and spiritual dimensions, particularly within the context of Islamic education. This paper examines how physical activity can be reconceptualized as an instrument of holistic human development that integrates physical, intellectual, emotional, social, moral, and spiritual growth. The study addresses the limited integration of contemporary educational theories and Islamic educational philosophy in explaining the multidimensional role of physical activity. Using a qualitative conceptual approach through a critical literature review, this study synthesizes scholarly works published in international journals, books, and policy documents related to physical education, holistic education, Islamic educational philosophy, and human development. The analysis reveals that physical activity in Islamic education extends beyond physical exercise by serving as a medium for cultivating self-discipline, moral responsibility, social cooperation, emotional resilience, and spiritual awareness. Furthermore, the synthesis highlights that integrating Islamic educational values with contemporary perspectives on holistic education provides a more comprehensive framework for designing physical education programs in Islamic schools. The study concludes that physical activity should be repositioned as an integral component of holistic human development rather than merely a health-oriented practice. This conceptual framework contributes to the discourse on contemporary Islamic education by offering a multidisciplinary perspective that may guide curriculum development, educational policy, and future empirical research on physical education in Islamic learning environments.

**Keywords:** Educational Philosophy; Holistic Education; Islamic Education; Physical Activity; Spiritual Awareness.

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## 1. Introduction

Physical activity has traditionally been associated with improving physical fitness, preventing disease, and enhancing motor performance (Dyson & Casey, 2016; Ennis, 2017). Contemporary educational discourse, however, increasingly recognizes that physical activity also contributes to cognitive development, emotional regulation, social interaction, moral formation, and lifelong well-being. This broader understanding reflects the growing shift from a biomedical paradigm toward a holistic educational perspective in which physical activity functions as an integral component of human development rather than merely a health intervention. Recent evidence indicates that school-based physical activity programs designed from a holistic perspective generate broader educational outcomes, particularly in the domains of physical literacy, affective learning, and social development.

Within Islamic education, the concept of holistic human development has long been embedded in the philosophy of *tarbiyah*, which emphasizes the balanced development of intellectual (*'aql*), spiritual (*ruh*), moral (*akhlak*), emotional (*nafs*), social, and physical dimensions of learners. Education is therefore not merely a process of knowledge transmission but a comprehensive effort to cultivate individuals who are physically healthy, spiritually conscious,

morally responsible, and socially engaged. Recent discussions on Islamic educational reform similarly argue that contemporary Islamic education should integrate scientific knowledge, spirituality, and character formation into a coherent educational framework.

Despite this philosophical foundation, research on physical activity within Islamic educational settings remains fragmented. Most empirical studies primarily examine its physiological benefits, physical fitness outcomes, motor skill development, or participation rates. Other studies focus on physical literacy and health promotion but pay comparatively less attention to how physical activity contributes to holistic human development within Islamic educational philosophy. Recent systematic reviews further reveal that although holistic school interventions demonstrate positive outcomes for physical literacy, the social, moral, and spiritual dimensions remain underexplored and inconsistently integrated into educational practice.

A similar gap exists in studies of Islamic education. Current literature predominantly discusses curriculum integration, character education, or holistic educational philosophy, yet relatively few studies explicitly conceptualize physical activity as a multidimensional educational instrument capable of fostering holistic human development. Existing scholarship often treats physical education as a complementary subject rather than as a strategic pedagogical medium for cultivating balanced intellectual, moral, emotional, social, and spiritual competencies.

This conceptual separation creates an important research gap. On the one hand, physical education research increasingly promotes holistic learning outcomes beyond physical competence. On the other hand, Islamic educational philosophy has consistently emphasized balanced human development for centuries. However, these two academic traditions have rarely been synthesized into a unified conceptual framework. Consequently, educators and curriculum developers lack an integrated perspective that explains how physical activity can simultaneously promote health, character formation, social responsibility, emotional resilience, and spiritual awareness within contemporary Islamic education.

To address this gap, this study adopts a qualitative conceptual approach through a critical literature review. Rather than generating new empirical data, the study critically synthesizes recent scholarly literature on physical activity, holistic education, physical education, and Islamic educational philosophy to develop a comprehensive conceptual understanding of physical activity as an instrument of holistic human development. This approach enables the identification of converging ideas across multiple disciplines while highlighting areas requiring further theoretical and empirical development.

The primary contribution of this paper is the development of an interdisciplinary conceptual framework that repositions physical activity beyond its conventional function as exercise or health promotion. Instead, physical activity is conceptualized as an educational practice capable of integrating physical, cognitive, emotional, social, moral, and spiritual dimensions of learning within contemporary Islamic education. This framework is expected to enrich discussions on curriculum development, educational policy, and innovative pedagogical practices in Islamic schools while providing a theoretical foundation for future empirical investigations.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on physical activity, holistic education, and Islamic educational philosophy. Section 3 explains the conceptual methodology employed in this study. Section 4 presents the critical synthesis and discussion of the literature. Finally, Section 5 concludes the paper by outlining theoretical implications, practical recommendations, and directions for future research.

## 2. Preliminaries or Related Work or Literature Review

### Physical Activity and Holistic Human Development

Physical activity has evolved from being viewed solely as a means of improving physical fitness to being recognized as a multidimensional educational practice that supports holistic human development. Contemporary educational research demonstrates that regular physical activity contributes not only to cardiovascular health and motor competence but also to cognitive functioning, emotional regulation, social interaction, resilience, and lifelong well-being

(Silverman & Subramaniam, 2019; Trudeau & Shephard, 2007). This paradigm shift is reflected in the growing adoption of holistic education and physical literacy frameworks, which emphasize the interconnected development of physical, psychological, social, and cognitive capacities (Messing et al., 2021; Piotrowski et al., 2025).

Recent studies indicate that physically active students tend to exhibit stronger executive functioning, greater learning motivation, improved academic engagement, and better psychosocial adjustment than their less active peers. School-based physical activity programs have also been associated with the development of cooperation, empathy, leadership, and communication skills through collaborative movement experiences. Consequently, physical activity is increasingly interpreted as an educational process that facilitates comprehensive human development rather than merely improving physical performance.

Despite these advances, most previous studies continue to examine physical activity from biomedical or psychological perspectives. The dominant focus remains on measurable outcomes such as physical fitness, obesity prevention, academic achievement, or mental health. Comparatively fewer studies investigate physical activity as a medium for moral formation, value internalization, or spiritual growth. This limitation suggests that the educational meaning of physical activity has not yet been fully explored, particularly within faith-based educational environments.

### Holistic Human Development in Contemporary Islamic Education

Holistic human development constitutes one of the fundamental principles of Islamic educational philosophy. The concept of *tarbiyah* emphasizes balanced growth encompassing intellectual (*'aql*), spiritual (*ruh*), moral (*akhlak*), emotional (*nafs*), social, and physical dimensions of human life. Rather than separating physical development from spiritual and moral education, Islamic education considers all dimensions of human existence as complementary components that contribute to the formation of *insan kamil* (the complete human being) (Mangolo & Qomarrullah, 2025; Pakasi & Qomarrullah, 2024).

Within this framework, education aims to cultivate learners who possess knowledge, ethical responsibility, social awareness, physical health, and spiritual consciousness. Physical activity therefore occupies an important position because maintaining physical health is regarded as a religious responsibility that enables individuals to fulfill personal, social, and spiritual obligations effectively.

Contemporary scholarship on Islamic education increasingly promotes integrated educational models that combine religious knowledge, character education, and twenty-first-century competencies. However, discussions concerning physical activity are generally limited to physical education classes or extracurricular sports. Few scholars explicitly position physical activity as an educational instrument capable of simultaneously strengthening cognitive, emotional, moral, social, and spiritual development. Consequently, the educational potential of movement within Islamic educational philosophy remains insufficiently conceptualized.

### State of the Art and Research Gap

The existing body of literature reveals two relatively independent streams of research. The first stream originates from physical education and public health, emphasizing physical activity as a strategy for improving health, motor competence, psychological well-being, and educational outcomes. The second stream emerges from Islamic educational studies, focusing primarily on character education, moral development, Islamic values, and holistic educational philosophy.

Although both streams advocate comprehensive human development, they rarely intersect. Existing physical education research seldom incorporates Islamic educational philosophy as its theoretical foundation, while Islamic education research rarely examines physical activity as an essential pedagogical practice for realizing holistic education. This disciplinary separation has resulted in the absence of an integrated conceptual framework explaining how physical activity may contribute simultaneously to physical health, intellectual growth, emotional maturity, social responsibility, moral integrity, and spiritual development.

Accordingly, this paper addresses an important theoretical gap by synthesizing interdisciplinary perspectives from physical education, holistic education, and Islamic educational philosophy. Rather than treating physical activity merely as exercise or sport participation,

this study conceptualizes it as a multidimensional educational instrument that supports holistic human development within contemporary Islamic education. This conceptual integration represents the principal contribution of the present study and provides a theoretical foundation for future empirical investigations, curriculum innovation, and educational policy development in Islamic schools.

### 3. Proposed Method

#### Research Design

This study employed a qualitative conceptual research design using a Critical Literature Review (CLR) approach. Unlike a traditional narrative review, the CLR method enables researchers to critically evaluate, compare, and synthesize scholarly evidence from multiple disciplines to develop new conceptual insights (Malički et al., 2018; Qomarrullah, 2022). The review focused on the intersection of physical activity, holistic human development, and contemporary Islamic education.

#### Literature Search Strategy

Relevant literature was identified through a systematic search of internationally recognized academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, PubMed, Google Scholar, and Dimensions. The search was conducted using combinations of the following keywords: (1) "physical activity"; (2) "physical education"; (3) "holistic education"; (4) "holistic human development"; (5) "Islamic education"; (6) "character education"; (7) "physical literacy"; (8) "student well-being"; and (9) Boolean operators (AND, OR) were employed to refine the search and improve the relevance of retrieved publications (Muhlisin et al., 2021).

#### Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The literature selection followed predefined inclusion criteria to ensure the credibility and relevance of the review.

##### Inclusion criteria

1. Peer-reviewed journal articles and academic books.
2. Publications written in English.
3. Published between 2015 and 2026.
4. Studies discussing physical activity, holistic education, physical education, or Islamic education.
5. Studies providing theoretical or empirical discussions relevant to holistic human development.

##### Exclusion criteria

1. Conference abstracts without full manuscripts.
2. Opinion articles lacking academic references.
3. Duplicate publications.
4. Studies unrelated to education or human development.

#### Data Analysis

The selected literature was analyzed using **thematic content analysis**. The analysis consisted of four sequential stages.

1. Reading and familiarization with each publication.
2. Coding significant concepts related to physical activity and holistic development.
3. Grouping codes into broader conceptual themes.
4. Synthesizing themes to construct an integrated conceptual framework.

This analytical process enabled the identification of recurring concepts, theoretical convergence, and research gaps across different disciplines.

## Conceptual Synthesis

Rather than statistically aggregating findings, this study synthesized the literature conceptually by integrating perspectives from physical education, holistic education, educational psychology, and Islamic educational philosophy. The synthesis was directed toward answering one central question: “How can physical activity be reconceptualized as an instrument of holistic human development within contemporary Islamic education?”

The outcome of this process is a conceptual framework illustrating the multidimensional contribution of physical activity to physical, cognitive, emotional, social, moral, and spiritual development.



Figure 1. Research Procedure.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### Characteristics of the Reviewed Literature

The critical literature review identified a growing body of scholarship examining physical activity from educational, psychological, and public health perspectives. Most publications emphasized the physiological benefits of physical activity, including improvements in cardiovascular health, motor competence, and physical fitness. Other studies investigated psychological outcomes such as emotional well-being, motivation, and self-esteem, while a smaller number explored the role of physical activity in social interaction, character education, and school engagement.

However, the review also revealed that only a limited number of studies explicitly examined physical activity within the philosophical framework of Islamic education. Existing research generally discussed Islamic values in relation to character education without positioning physical activity as a pedagogical instrument for holistic human development (Knowles et al., 2015; McAuliffe, 2023; Udayani et al., 2021). This finding indicates that the integration

between physical education and Islamic educational philosophy remains theoretically under-developed.

**Table 1.** Main Themes Identified from Previous Studies.

| Research Focus      | Dominant Findings                                    | Research Gap                                                                                    |
|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Physical Fitness    | Improves health and motor competence                 | Limited discussion of moral and spiritual dimensions                                            |
| Mental Health       | Reduces stress and improves emotional well-being     | Rarely connected to Islamic educational philosophy                                              |
| Character Education | Supports discipline, cooperation, and responsibility | Physical activity is often treated as a supporting activity rather than an educational strategy |
| Islamic Education   | Focuses on values, morality, and spirituality        | Limited integration with physical activity as a holistic educational practice                   |

### Reinterpreting Physical Activity as Holistic Human Development

The synthesis demonstrates that physical activity should no longer be viewed merely as structured exercise designed to improve physical health. Instead, it represents a multidimensional educational process that simultaneously develops physical competence, cognitive capacity, emotional intelligence, social responsibility, moral awareness, and spiritual consciousness.

Within contemporary Islamic education, this interpretation aligns closely with the concept of *insan kamil*, which emphasizes balanced human development. Physical movement becomes an educational medium through which learners experience cooperation, self-control, perseverance, honesty, respect, empathy, and responsibility. Consequently, physical activity functions not only as bodily exercise but also as an experiential learning process that internalizes Islamic educational values through meaningful participation (Doležalová & Holátová, 2015; Hasan & Waheed, 2021).

This reinterpretation expands the educational function of physical activity beyond conventional physical education curricula and supports the development of learners capable of responding to contemporary social challenges while maintaining strong ethical and spiritual foundations.

### Conceptual Framework of Holistic Human Development

Based on the synthesis of previous literature, this study proposes a conceptual framework consisting of six interconnected dimensions of holistic human development.

**Table 2.** Conceptual Framework of Holistic Human Development through Physical Activity.

| Dimension                    | Core Components                                                                   | Expected Educational Outcomes                                                                                                         |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Physical Development</b>  | Physical fitness; Motor competence; Healthy lifestyle                             | Improved physical health, movement competence, and lifelong healthy living habits.                                                    |
| <b>Cognitive Development</b> | Decision-making; Critical thinking; Learning engagement                           | Enhanced higher-order thinking skills, problem-solving ability, and active participation in learning.                                 |
| <b>Emotional Development</b> | Self-regulation; Emotional resilience; Self-confidence                            | Greater emotional stability, resilience in facing challenges, and positive self-perception.                                           |
| <b>Social Development</b>    | Communication; Teamwork; Leadership; Respect for diversity                        | Stronger interpersonal relationships, collaboration, leadership capacity, and social inclusion.                                       |
| <b>Moral Development</b>     | Discipline; Responsibility; Honesty; Integrity                                    | Development of ethical behaviour, accountability, self-discipline, and moral character consistent with Islamic educational values.    |
| <b>Spiritual Development</b> | Gratitude; Self-awareness; Stewardship ( <i>Khilafah</i> ); Worship-oriented life | Strengthened spiritual consciousness, gratitude, personal responsibility before God, and the integration of faith into everyday life. |

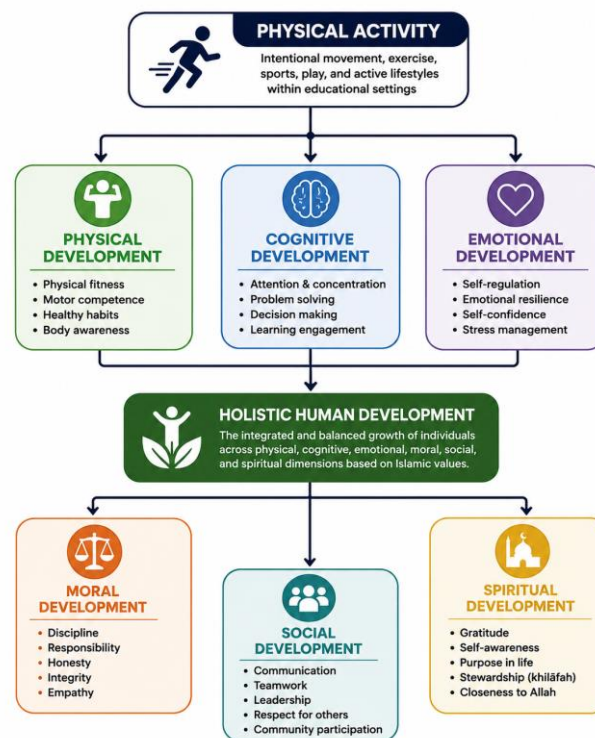
These six dimensions interact dynamically, illustrating that physical activity contributes simultaneously to multiple aspects of learner development rather than operating in isolation.

## Discussion

The present study extends previous scholarship by integrating theories of holistic education with Islamic educational philosophy. While earlier studies primarily evaluated physical activity using biomedical or psychological indicators, this conceptual synthesis demonstrates that physical activity also functions as an educational instrument supporting balanced human development (Hutapea et al., 2021; Rustandi et al., 2021).

The proposed framework contributes theoretically by bridging two academic traditions that have generally developed independently: physical education and Islamic education. It further suggests that curriculum developers should design physical education learning experiences capable of fostering not only physical competence but also cognitive growth, emotional maturity, moral integrity, social responsibility, and spiritual awareness (Hadisi et al., 2025; Rachmawan & Aryani, 2020; Tanamal & Siagian, 2020).

From a practical perspective, this framework encourages Islamic schools to move beyond traditional sport-oriented instruction toward learning experiences that intentionally integrate movement, character education, and spiritual reflection. Such an approach aligns with contemporary educational goals that emphasize learner well-being, lifelong learning, and holistic human development (Kurdi et al., 2020; Sawir et al., 2022; Wandik et al., 2020).



**Figure 2.** Conceptual Framework of Holistic Human Development through Physical Activity.

Figure 2 illustrates the proposed conceptual framework of Physical Activity as an Instrument of Holistic Human Development in Contemporary Islamic Education. The framework demonstrates that physical activity should not be understood merely as exercise aimed at improving physical fitness, but rather as a multidimensional educational practice that contributes to the comprehensive development of learners.

At the first level, Physical Activity functions as the primary educational stimulus. Through structured movement experiences such as physical education, sports, games, and other active learning activities, students engage in meaningful interactions that extend beyond physiological benefits. These experiences stimulate three foundational domains simultaneously: Physical Development, Cognitive Development, and Emotional Development. Physical development includes improvements in physical fitness, motor competence, healthy habits, and body awareness. Cognitive development encompasses attention, problem-solving, decision-making, and learning engagement. Emotional development focuses on self-regulation, emotional resilience, self-confidence, and effective stress management (Yanti Purba et al., 2022).

These three developmental domains interact dynamically and collectively contribute to Holistic Human Development, which forms the central component of the proposed framework. In the context of contemporary Islamic education, holistic human development refers to the balanced integration of physical, intellectual, emotional, moral, social, and spiritual growth. This perspective is consistent with the Islamic educational philosophy of *tarbiyah*, which emphasizes the harmonious development of all human dimensions rather than prioritizing cognitive achievement alone (Lyons et al., 2021; Widyastuti et al., 2021; Zuhdi et al., 2021).

The framework further proposes that holistic human development generates three higher-order educational outcomes. First, Moral Development is reflected through the cultivation of discipline, responsibility, honesty, integrity, and empathy. Second, Social Development is strengthened through communication skills, teamwork, leadership, respect for others, and active participation within the community. Third, Spiritual Development is fostered by nurturing gratitude, self-awareness, stewardship (*khilāfah*), and a stronger relationship with Allah. These three dimensions represent the distinctive contribution of Islamic education, where physical activity serves not only as a medium for health promotion but also as a vehicle for moral and spiritual formation (Setiawan & Sparingga, 2022; Sulistia, 2021).

Overall, the proposed framework highlights that physical activity creates interconnected educational experiences rather than isolated learning outcomes. Improvements in one developmental domain reinforce progress in other domains, resulting in balanced human development (Alsharif & Hnit, 2025; Mathis et al., 2017). Consequently, physical activity should be positioned as a strategic pedagogical instrument capable of supporting the objectives of contemporary Islamic education by integrating health promotion, character education, social responsibility, and spiritual growth within a single holistic educational framework.

### Comparison

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that physical activity contributes to various aspects of human development. However, the majority of existing research has approached physical activity from disciplinary perspectives that remain relatively fragmented. Studies in public health primarily emphasize physiological outcomes such as cardiovascular fitness, obesity prevention, and healthy lifestyles. Research in sport pedagogy generally focuses on motor competence, physical literacy, academic achievement, or psychosocial well-being. Meanwhile, studies in Islamic education predominantly discuss character education, moral development, and spiritual values without explicitly positioning physical activity as a strategic educational instrument.

The present conceptual study differs from these earlier perspectives by integrating physical activity with the philosophy of holistic human development in contemporary Islamic education. Rather than viewing physical activity solely as exercise or a supporting educational activity, this paper conceptualizes it as a multidimensional pedagogical practice that simultaneously develops physical, cognitive, emotional, social, moral, and spiritual capacities. Consequently, this framework bridges the theoretical separation between physical education and Islamic educational philosophy.

**Table 3.** Comparison between Previous Studies and the Proposed Conceptual Framework.

| Aspect                    | Previous Studies                                                | Proposed Conceptual Framework                                            |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Primary Orientation       | Physical fitness, health promotion, and motor competence        | Holistic human development                                               |
| Educational Perspective   | Biomedical or educational psychology                            | Integrated Islamic educational philosophy                                |
| Main Outcomes             | Physical health, academic achievement, psychological well-being | Physical, cognitive, emotional, moral, social, and spiritual development |
| Role of Physical Activity | Exercise and physical education                                 | Multidimensional educational instrument                                  |
| Educational Values        | Mostly implicit                                                 | Explicit integration of Islamic educational values                       |
| Theoretical Contribution  | Discipline-specific explanations                                | Interdisciplinary conceptual framework                                   |

The comparison demonstrates that the proposed framework extends existing scholarship in three significant ways. First, it broadens the educational meaning of physical activity beyond health promotion by emphasizing its role in comprehensive learner development. Second, it integrates contemporary theories of holistic education with Islamic educational philosophy, thereby connecting two bodies of knowledge that have largely evolved independently. Third, it offers a conceptual model that may guide curriculum development, pedagogical innovation, and future empirical research in Islamic schools.

Accordingly, this study contributes to the state-of-the-art by introducing a more comprehensive understanding of physical activity as an educational practice that supports balanced human development. Instead of separating physical, cognitive, moral, social, and spiritual learning, the proposed framework recognizes these dimensions as interconnected educational outcomes that collectively reflect the objectives of contemporary Islamic education.

## 5. Conclusions

This study reconceptualizes physical activity as an educational instrument that extends beyond its traditional role in promoting physical fitness and health. Through a critical synthesis of contemporary literature, the study demonstrates that physical activity contributes to holistic human development by simultaneously fostering physical, cognitive, emotional, social, moral, and spiritual growth. These findings support the primary objective of the study, namely, to develop an integrated conceptual framework that connects physical activity with the philosophical foundations of contemporary Islamic education.

The analysis indicates that previous studies have largely examined physical activity from biomedical, psychological, or sport education perspectives, while relatively few have incorporated Islamic educational philosophy into discussions of holistic human development. By integrating theories of holistic education, physical education, and Islamic educational philosophy, this paper offers a multidisciplinary framework that positions physical activity as a strategic pedagogical practice for cultivating balanced and well-rounded learners. The proposed framework therefore contributes to the advancement of knowledge by bridging two fields that have traditionally been studied separately, providing a stronger theoretical foundation for understanding the educational significance of physical activity in Islamic schools.

From a practical perspective, the framework encourages curriculum developers, educators, and policymakers to design physical education programs that intentionally integrate health promotion, character education, social responsibility, and spiritual formation. Such an approach may strengthen the role of physical activity in achieving the broader educational objectives of contemporary Islamic education and supporting students' lifelong well-being.

This study is not without limitations. As a conceptual paper based on a critical literature review, the proposed framework has not yet been empirically validated in school settings. Furthermore, the interpretation of the literature is influenced by the scope of the selected publications and may not represent all educational contexts. Future research is therefore recommended to empirically examine the proposed framework through qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods studies in Islamic schools across diverse cultural and educational environments. Comparative studies involving different educational systems may also provide deeper insights into the applicability and effectiveness of the framework in promoting holistic human development.

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