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Examining the Synergy between Islamic Values and 21st Century Competencies in Islamic Religious Education: A Mixed-Methods Study

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Abstract

The integration of Islamic ethics with 21st-century competencies is essential to strengthen the relevance of Islamic religious education in responding to contemporary educational challenges. This study aims to describe the implementation of Islamic ethics and 4C competencies integration in PAI learning. A mixed-methods sequential explanatory design was employed. Quantitative data were collected through a four-point Likert-scale questionnaire administered to 24 students to measure five integrated indicators, namely, critical thinking based on Islamic justice, creativity with value (*masalah*), trustworthy collaboration, civilized communication, and ethical decision making, as well as student learning engagement. Qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis involving PAI teachers and selected students. The findings indicate high achievement in trustworthy collaboration and civilized communication, along with a strong linkage between analytical skills and moral principles in critical thinking and ethical decision-making. Creativity with value and affective engagement were relatively lower, suggesting limited innovation and learning variation. The integration of Islamic ethics and 21st-century competencies enhances students' cognitive, affective, and social development. This study implies the need for project-based learning, interactive media, and broader school-community collaboration to strengthen meaningful and contextual PAI learning.

Keywords

21st-Century Competencies, Islamic Ethics Integration, Islamic Religious Education, Student Learning Engagement.

1. Introduction

Islamic Religious Education (*Pendidikan Agama Islam/PAI*) plays a strategic role in shaping a generation that excels not only academically but also possesses noble character in accordance with the principles of *akhlak al-karimah* (Husyaini et al., 2024). Within the framework of the Merdeka curriculum, PAI is expected to integrate Islamic values with 21st-century competencies in a contextual, creative, and collaborative manner (Hadi & Ramdhani, 2025). This principle of curriculum flexibility allows teachers to adapt learning to student characteristics and the socio-cultural environment, as well as align it with the objectives of the Pancasila Student Profile, which include faith, piety, noble character, mutual cooperation, and critical-creative thinking (Afiqah et al., 2025; Sikana et al., 2025).

Various studies have highlighted that the integration of Islamic moral values with 21st-century competencies, particularly the 4Cs critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication, plays a significant role in enhancing students' learning engagement while simultaneously strengthening their moral and character development in the face of the complex challenges of the Society 5.0 era (Sodik, 2025; Hoeruman et al., 2025). In this context, PAI within the Merdeka curriculum framework functions not merely as a subject for religious knowledge transmission but as a strategic pedagogical arena that connects the cultivation of noble moral values with the development of critical reasoning, collaborative interaction, and creative capacities. Through this integrative approach, students are expected to engage more meaningfully in learning processes and to respond adaptively to technological and social transformations characteristic of Society 5.0, while maintaining a strong ethical foundation and spiritual orientation.

Although the urgency of this integration has been recognized, its implementation in schools still faces challenges. Previous research has found limited teacher digital competency, a lack of contextual learning innovation, and low utilization of participatory methods that link Islamic religious education material to students' real lives (Santi & Indrawari, 2022; Wahyudi & Jatun, 2024; Yusuf et al., 2024). Furthermore, the dimension of creativity based on values of welfare (*maslahah*) often receives less attention than cognitive and collaborative skills (Zidni, 2023). Yet, a balanced Islamic education demands the holistic development of reason, heart, and social skills (Syahid, 2024). This gap highlights the need for studies that measure and deeply understand how Islamic values and 21st-century skills synergize in PAI learning practices at the elementary school level.

To address this gap, this study focuses on the integration of Islamic values and 21st-century competencies in grade VII IBS 1 at MTsN1 Tegal, using five integrated indicators derived from theoretical synthesis, namely, critical thinking based on Islamic justice, creativity with beneficial values, trustworthy collaboration, civilized communication, and ethical decision-making. This indicator is designed based on the concepts of *adl* (justice), *maslahah* (benevolence), *amanah* (trustworthiness), and *adab al-kalām* (good character) contained in Islamic sources and is aligned with the 4Cs dimensions recognized as pillars of 21st-century competencies (Hayati, 2020; Fathulloh, 2024; Sikana et al., 2025). This approach aligns with literature recommendations that encourage thematic, interdisciplinary, and collaborative learning to internalize moral values through creative activities, reflective discussions, and problem-based projects.

Based on this framework, this study aims to describe and analyze the synergistic implementation of Islamic ethics and 21st-century competencies in Islamic religious education learning in grade VII IBS 1 at MTsN1 Tegal. Using a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, this study combines quantitative measurements of the achievement of the five indicators and student learning engagement with qualitative exploration of classroom implementation experiences, strategies, and challenges.

The findings of this study are expected to provide theoretical contributions in the development of an integration model of Islamic values and 4C, as well as practical recommendations for teachers and schools to improve the quality of Islamic religious education learning that is in line with the demands of the times and remains based on Islamic values.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Islamic Values in Islamic Religious Education

Islamic values in Islamic religious education encompass the dimensions of faith, worship, and morals, which serve as the moral foundation for students (Yusri, 2024). The goal of Islamic education emphasizes the formation of a perfect human being, a person balanced in spiritual, intellectual, and social aspects (Ilham, 2024; Hoeruman et al., 2025). Within the framework of the Merdeka curriculum, PAI is expected to internalize Islamic values such as *'adl* (justice), trustworthiness, etiquette, and *maslahah* (benefit) through contextual and collaborative learning strategies (Carmidin & Sukron, 2025; Hoeruman et al., 2025). Character education based on Islamic values is also seen as capable of fostering responsible behavior and social empathy (Zain et al., 2024; Firdaus & Suwendi, 2025). Therefore, the internalization of Islamic values in PAI does not stop at the transmission of normative knowledge but rather is directed at cultivating ethical attitudes and practices that guide students in making moral decisions and playing an active role as civilized social subjects.

Studies by Nurjadid et al. (2025) confirm that the application of Islamic values integrated with thematic learning can enhance students' cognitive and affective engagement in classroom activities. Approaches such as dialogical learning, role-playing, and collaborative projects enable students to internalize values of tolerance, solidarity, and respect for diversity while actively participating in the learning process (Kholis, 2025). In addition, this integration contributes to strengthening students' cultural and spiritual identities, particularly within faith-based educational institutions (Yusuf et al., 2024). Empirical findings by Suhartini et al. (2025) suggest that incorporating Islamic values into thematic learning can function as an effective pedagogical mechanism to support the balanced development of cognitive, affective, and spiritual dimensions in pluralistic educational environments. However, a significant research gap remains, as limited studies simultaneously examine the integration of Islamic values and higher-order thinking skills in basic education contexts.

2.3. Integrating 4C Competencies in 21st Century

21st-century competencies are generally formulated within the 4Cs framework: critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication (Sodik, 2025; Hoeruman et al., 2025). In the context of Islamic religious education, the 4Cs can be integrated with Islamic moral values to develop ethically based critical thinking skills, beneficial creativity, trustworthy collaboration, and civilized communication (Jamil & Murniati, 2024). This approach aligns with the principles of the Merdeka curriculum, which emphasizes contextual learning, prioritizes students, and develops the Pancasila Student Profile (Hadi & Ramdhani, 2025).

Numerous studies have explored the integration of the 4Cs into project-based learning, collaborative discussions, and inquiry-based learning in PAI (Hoeruman et al., 2025). These findings demonstrate improved problem-solving and social collaboration skills, but the creativity dimension tied to the principle of *maslahah* (benefit) is often underdeveloped (Zidni, 2023). Another study, by Rasyidi (2024), emphasized the importance of linking critical thinking activities to students' real-life contexts, so that decision-making can be based on logical considerations and moral principles. A research gap that emerged was the lack of an evaluation framework that explicitly combines the 4C indicators with Islamic principles in PAI learning

assessments. This resulted in many measurements being generic and failing to capture ethical, spiritual, and social dimensions in an integrated manner.

2.2. Islamic Values and the 4Cs: Strategies, Challenges, and Opportunities

Integrating Islamic values and 21st-century competencies requires creative, participatory, and context-relevant pedagogical strategies. Various literature recommends the use of project-based learning, role-playing, case studies, and interactive media to internalize Islamic values while honing 21st-century skills (Kholis, 2025). This approach can be enhanced with learning technologies such as book creator, Augmented Reality (AR)/Virtual Reality (VR), or collaborative platforms that enable students to produce work and engage in dialogue across perspectives (Wen et al., 2021; AlGerafi et al., 2023; Inayati et al., 2025).

However, implementation challenges include limited resources, teacher readiness to adopt an integrative approach, and resistance to changes in teaching methods (Carmidin & Sukron, 2025; Hadi & Ramdhani, 2025). Studies such as Anita et al. (2025) emphasize the need for ongoing training to enable teachers to design lesson plans and assessments that integrate Islamic values and the 4Cs. Furthermore, strengthening collaboration between schools, families, and communities is considered crucial for expanding the impact of learning beyond the classroom (Yusri et al., 2023; Rasyidi, 2024). There is still room for research to empirically examine the effectiveness of this integrative strategy in the context of Islamic-based elementary schools, particularly through a mixed-methods sequential explanatory approach that can combine quantitative and qualitative data in a complementary manner. Such studies have the potential to contribute to a conceptual model that is both applicable and theoretically valid.

3. Methods

This study used a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design to examine how the synergy of Islamic ethics and 21st-century competencies is implemented and experienced in Islamic religious education learning in grade VII IBS 1 of MTsN1 Tegal (Creswell & Clark, 2017). This design was chosen to obtain a comprehensive overview, starting from general trends through quantitative data to an in-depth understanding through qualitative data, and ending with an integration stage to combine the findings from both approaches.

The measurement framework in this study is based on integrated indicators derived from the synthesis of Islamic ethical values (*akhlaq al-karimah*) proposed by Hoeruman et al. (2025) and Carmidin and Sukron (2025) with the 4C dimensions of 21st-century competencies. These indicators include critical thinking based on Islamic justice, which emphasizes analytical reasoning grounded in the principle of *'adl* and the avoidance of prejudice, creativity with beneficial value (*maslahah*), referring to the generation of original ideas that provide benefit and prevent harm, trustworthy collaboration, which reflects responsible and respectful cooperation, civilized communication (*adab al-kalām*), involving clear and polite expression while respecting differing views, and ethical decision making, which prioritizes logical choices aligned with Islamic moral principles. These indicators serve as a conceptual foundation for both the quantitative development of research instruments and the qualitative processes of interviews, observations, and document analysis.

This study employed a three-stage mixed-methods sequential explanatory design. The quantitative stage used a four-point Likert-scale questionnaire to measure the integration of Islamic ethics and 21st-century competencies across five indicators and student learning engagement (behavioral, cognitive, and affective) among all seventh-grade students of IBS 1 MTsN1 Tegal (N = 32) using total population sampling. The qualitative stage, guided by quantitative results, explored implementation strategies and experiences through semi-structured interviews with

Islamic education teachers and 6–8 students selected through maximum variation sampling, classroom observations across three sessions, and document analysis based on the five indicators. The final integration stage connected and merged quantitative and qualitative findings to develop a conceptual model for integrating Islamic ethics and 21st-century competencies in Islamic education learning.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to describe the level of integration of Islamic ethics, 21st-century competencies, and student engagement (Ary et al., 2018). Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the stages proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which involve data familiarization, initial coding, theme identification, theme review, theme naming and definition, and report writing. The coding process combined deductive approaches based on the five integrated indicators with inductive approaches derived from emerging field findings. In the qualitative phase, data trustworthiness was ensured through member checking, peer debriefing, and triangulation of data sources. An audit trail was maintained to document and ensure the transparency of the entire research process

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative Results

Descriptive analysis at the quantitative stage was conducted to describe the level of implementation of the integration of Islamic ethics and 21st-century competencies and the learning engagement of class VII IBS 1 students at MTsN1 Tegal. Measurements used a four-point Likert scale (1 = never, 4 = always) that included five integrated indicators resulting from the synthesis of *al-karimah* moral values with the 4C dimensions of 21st-century competencies, as well as three dimensions of student engagement adapted from Fredricks et al. (2004). The results of the analysis are presented in Table 1 below, which contains the average score (mean), Standard Deviation (SD), minimum and maximum scores, and achievement categories for each indicator.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics Quantitative Findings

Construct	Integrated Constructs & Indicators	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Category
Integration of Islamic Ethics and 21st-Century Competencies	Critical Thinking Based on Islamic Justice	3.60	0.28	3.00	4.00	High
	Creativity Oriented Toward Social Benefit (<i>masalahah</i>)	3.55	0.29	3.00	4.00	High
	Trustworthy Collaboration (<i>amanah</i>)	3.68	0.27	3.25	4.00	High
	Ethical Communication (<i>adab al-kalām</i>)	3.62	0.30	3.00	4.00	High
	Ethical Decision-Making	3.58	0.32	3.00	4.00	High
	Average of Islamic Ethics–21st-Century Competency Integration	3.61	0.29	3.00	4.00	High
Student Learning Engagement	Behavioral Engagement	3.48	0.33	2.75	4.00	High
	Cognitive Engagement	3.42	0.34	2.75	4.00	High
	Affective Engagement	3.38	0.37	2.50	4.00	High
	Average of Student Learning Engagement	3.43	0.35	2.67	4.00	High

Category description: Low = 1.00–2.00; Medium = 2.01–3.00; High = 3.01–4.00.

The descriptive analysis results in Table 1 show that all indicators of the integration of Islamic ethics and 21st-century competencies are in the high category (mean 3.55–3.68). The highest achievement was in collaborative trust (M = 3.68, SD = 0.27), indicating students' strong ability to actively collaborate while upholding

trust and valuing the contributions of their peers. This aligns with the character of Islamic religious education learning in schools, which emphasizes group work and fostering the value of shared responsibility. The indicator with the lowest achievement was creativity with beneficial value ($M = 3.55, SD = 0.29$).

Although still in the high category, this score suggests that generating original ideas aligned with beneficial values requires more innovative learning strategies. Approaches such as project-based learning or design thinking based on an Islamic context have the potential to strengthen this dimension so that students' creativity is not only original but also has positive environmental value. In the construct of student learning engagement, all three dimensions were also in the high category ($M = 3.38-3.48$), with behavior being the highest ($M = 3.48, SD = 0.33$) and affective being the lowest ($M = 3.38, SD = 0.37$). These findings indicate that students' active participation in class has been good, but enthusiasm, pride, and intrinsic interest in Islamic religious education materials can still be strengthened. High achievements in almost all indicators indicate the successful integration of Islamic values with 21st-century skills, while highlighting room for development in *maslahah*-based creativity and students' affective engagement.

4.2. Qualitative Results

The qualitative phase of this study aims to explore in-depth the practices and experiences of students and teachers in implementing the integration of Islamic ethics and 21st-century competencies in PAI learning. Analysis was conducted through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and a review of learning documents, with guidelines based on five integrated indicators and three dimensions of student engagement. Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach by Braun and Clarke (2006), which resulted in key themes representing practices, challenges, and strategies for strengthening this integration. These qualitative findings are summarized in Table 2, which contains key themes, descriptions, and representative quotes from participants.

Table 2. Qualitative Findings Based on Thematic Analysis

Indicator/Dimension	Main Theme	Description of Findings	Representative Quotation
Critical Thinking Based on Islamic Justice	Comparing opinions using basic religious references	Students tend to seek simple references from Qur'anic verses or hadith previously taught by the teacher before expressing their answers, and avoid immediately judging differing opinions from peers.	"When there are different opinions, we first ask the teacher or recall the relevant verse before responding." (S2)
Creativity Oriented Toward Social Benefit (<i>maslahah</i>)	Simple ideas that benefit peers	Students propose creative projects such as posters promoting mosque cleanliness and short videos of daily prayers; however, these ideas largely follow examples provided by the teacher.	"Created posters to remind everyone to keep the prayer room clean." (S1)
Trustworthy Collaboration (<i>amanah</i>)	Group work based on individual abilities	Students distribute tasks according to their skills, such as assigning drawing	"One student draws, while another recites the prayer." (S3)

Indicator/Dimension	Main Theme	Description of Findings	Representative Quotation
		tasks to those skilled in art and reading tasks to those fluent in recitation.	
Ethical Communication (<i>adab al-kalām</i>)	Expressing opinions politely	Students take turns speaking, use respectful forms of address, and appreciate differing viewpoints expressed by their peers.	“Agree with that opinion, but would like to add something.” (S1)
Ethical Decision-Making	Choosing actions that do not harm others	During role-play activities, students tend to select solutions they perceive as fair and consistent with the teacher’s guidance.	“Choosing a fair option makes everyone feel comfortable.” (S3)
Behavioral Engagement	Diligence and adherence to classroom rules	Students attend classes on time, bring learning materials, and follow the teacher’s instructions, although some students remain relatively reserved during activities.	“All students brought their books today; none were forgotten.” (Islamic Education Teacher)
Cognitive Engagement	Linking lessons to daily life experiences	Students relate Islamic education lessons to everyday experiences at home or school, such as sharing food with siblings or classmates.	“Sharing food with siblings is considered fair.” (S2)
Affective Engagement	Enjoyment of interactive learning activities	Students show higher enthusiasm during creative activities such as poster-making or role-playing compared to sessions focused solely on reading learning materials.	“Creating posters is enjoyable, while only reading can be tiring.” (S1)

Qualitative findings indicate that the integration of Islamic ethics and 21st-century competencies in Class VII IBS 1 at MTsN1 Tegal is evident in the trustworthy collaboration and civilized communication programs. Classroom observations show that students divide tasks proportionally and carry out their roles responsibly, with one student describing the distribution of duties, such as one drawing while another recites the prayer (S3). During discussions, students respond politely to their peers’ opinions and provide additional input even when perspectives differ (S1). These findings align with the highest quantitative achievement in the collaboration aspect, indicating that the habituation of trustworthy values and polite communication has been effectively internalized.

Creativity with beneficial values is evident, though it still tends to follow the teacher’s examples or patterns (Jamil & Murniati, 2024). Some student outputs, such

as posters on maintaining mosque cleanliness or videos of daily prayers, demonstrate awareness of positive outcomes but are not entirely original. One example described a poster designed to remind everyone to keep the prayer room clean (S1), reflecting good intentions while leaving room for further creative development. This observation corresponds with quantitative results, which show that creativity ranks relatively low compared to other indicators, highlighting the need for learning strategies that better stimulate student exploration and idea generation. In terms of engagement, the behavioral and cognitive dimensions demonstrated considerable strength, with students diligently attending class, bringing necessary supplies, and connecting Islamic religious education material to everyday life, such as linking sharing food at home with fairness (S2). The affective dimension, however, showed variation; students were more enthusiastic during creative activities such as poster making or role-playing, while engagement tended to decrease during reading sessions, as one observation noted that reading alone was less stimulating compared to hands-on activities (S1). These findings suggest that a varied and interactive learning approach is important for maintaining students' emotional engagement.

4.3. Stages of Quantitative and Qualitative Data Integration

The integration phase of this study aims to combine quantitative and qualitative findings to gain a comprehensive understanding of the application of the integration of Islamic ethics and 21st-century competencies in PAI learning in class VII IBS 1 MTsN1 Tegal. The integration process was carried out using a connecting strategy to use quantitative results as the basis for selecting participants and focusing qualitative exploration, and a merging strategy to combine findings from both approaches into a joint display. This approach allows researchers to identify areas that are consistently supported by both data sources as well as areas that require further attention. Table 3 presents the integration results in four columns: indicators or dimensions, quantitative findings, qualitative findings, and integrative interpretation (meta-inference).

Table 3. Integration of the Interpretation of Qualitative and Quantitative Findings

Indicator/Dimension	Integrative Interpretation (Meta-Inference)
Critical Thinking Based on Islamic Justice	High quantitative achievement is reinforced by qualitative practices; habitual reference to simple religious sources forms the foundation of Islamic critical thinking at the elementary level.
Creativity Oriented Toward Social Benefit (<i>maslahah</i>)	Consistency between quantitative and qualitative findings indicates that <i>maslahah</i> -oriented creativity has emerged, but innovation and risk-taking still require further development.
Trustworthy Collaboration (<i>amanah</i>)	Values of <i>amanah</i> and cooperation constitute a major strength of learning, shaped through habitual group work in the classroom.
Ethical Communication (<i>adab al-kalām</i>)	Norms of ethical communication are embedded in student behavior, aligning quantitative outcomes with observable classroom practices.
Ethical Decision-Making	Quantitative and qualitative findings are aligned; the ability to make ethical decisions has developed in accordance with elementary students' cognitive and moral stages.
Behavioral Engagement	Behavioral discipline is strong, but active participation is not yet evenly distributed among students.
Cognitive Engagement	Conceptual understanding is strengthened through connections to students' real-life contexts.
Affective Engagement	Affective engagement requires further strengthening through more varied and interactive learning methods.

Based on Table 3, the integrated analysis revealed strong alignment between quantitative and qualitative findings across most indicators. Trustworthy collaboration ranked highest in the quantitative data ($M = 3.68$) and was clearly reflected in qualitative observations, as students habitually divided roles according to their abilities, reminded each other of deadlines, and completed assignments collaboratively. One example described a student drawing while another recited the prayer, illustrating collaborative skills combined with a sense of responsibility (S3). Civilized communication also demonstrated consistency, with students expressing opinions politely and respecting differing perspectives, as observed in discussions where additional input was provided without disregarding others' views (S1). These findings indicate that the values of trustworthiness and polite communication have been effectively internalized through classroom practices.

On the other hand, creativity with beneficial value and the affective dimension emerged as areas requiring further development. Although creativity scores were in the high category ($M = 3.55$), qualitative observations revealed that students' ideas often followed the teacher's examples, such as creating posters about mosque cleanliness or producing videos of daily prayers. One observation described a poster designed to remind everyone to maintain the prayer room, reflecting a welfare-oriented mindset while indicating that full innovation had not yet been achieved (S1). The affective dimension, which scored lowest in engagement ($M = 3.38$), also showed variations in enthusiasm. Students demonstrated greater interest during creative activities and reduced enthusiasm during passive reading, as noted in observations that hands-on activities were more stimulating than reading alone (S1). These findings suggest the importance of employing varied learning methods to sustain students' emotional engagement.

Other indicators, such as critical thinking based on Islamic justice, ethical decision making, and cognitive skills, showed relatively high results across both quantitative and qualitative data. Observations revealed that students routinely referred to simple arguments before drawing conclusions, consulted religious guidance when opinions differed, made fair decisions to ensure collective satisfaction, and connected Islamic religious education concepts to everyday experiences, such as sharing food at home (S2, S3). The consistency of these findings confirms that Islamic religious education learning in class VII IBS 1 at MTsN1 Tegal has successfully integrated Islamic ethical values with 21st-century competencies, although additional strategies are still needed to further stimulate creativity and sustain students' enthusiasm.

5. Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the integration of Islamic ethics with 21st-century competencies in Islamic religious education learning in grade VII IBS 1 at MTsN1 Tegal has been achieved at a high level across almost all indicators. These findings support the argument put forward by Hayati (2020) and Hadi and Ramdhani (2025) that relevant religious education in the global era should combine moral development with 21st-century skills. Such integration not only enhances cognitive aspects but also fosters character formation, guiding students to make ethical and beneficial decisions.

Trustworthy collaboration and civilized communication are key strengths of the learning process. High quantitative scores align with qualitative data indicating the practice of dividing tasks fairly, respecting differences of opinion, and maintaining good manners in class. This condition aligns with the view that collaboration and communication will be more meaningful when grounded in Islamic trustworthiness and etiquette (Hayati, 2020; Hadi & Ramdhani, 2025). As Jamil and Murniati (2024) noted, collaborative skills go beyond simply sharing tasks, but also fostering shared responsibility aligned with moral values.

Critical thinking based on Islamic justice and ethical decision-making also stands out in both quantitative and qualitative data. Observations indicate that students routinely connect their answers to simple arguments from the Quran or Hadith before drawing conclusions and selecting solutions that avoid causing harm to others. These findings support the view of Zain et al. (2024), Hoeruman et al. (2025), and Carmidin and Sukron (2025) that critical thinking from an Islamic perspective should be grounded in the values of *'adl* (justice) and *maslahah* (benefit). This approach ensures that analytical skills are developed in a manner that is both logically and morally sound.

However, the beneficial and affective creativity dimensions still require further development. Observations indicate that student creativity often follows the teacher's examples and does not yet fully demonstrate original innovation, even though the orientation toward benefit is evident. This aligns with the perspective of Zidni (2023) and Sikana and Zawawi (2025), who emphasize that creativity requires adequate stimulation and the freedom to explore new ideas. In addition, students' affective engagement shows fluctuations: enthusiasm increases during creative activities, such as poster making or role-playing, but tends to decrease during passive activities, such as reading. Employing a variety of creative learning methods can help sustain students' engagement and motivation.

In general, the findings of this study align with PAI learning models that combine the principles of student-centered learning, collaborative projects, and the internalization of moral values (Fathulloh, 2024; Hadi & Ramdhani, 2025). This approach not only prepares students academically but also equips them with the ethical and social skills needed in a pluralistic society (Yusri et al., 2024; Kholis, 2025). Therefore, the integration of Islamic ethics and 21st-century competencies can be considered a relevant and adaptive learning strategy to address today's educational challenges.

These findings imply that teachers should design learning activities that actively stimulate creativity and maintain affective engagement, incorporating hands-on, student-centered projects that encourage original thinking. Curriculum developers are encouraged to integrate Islamic ethical values alongside 21st-century competencies to foster both academic and moral development. Furthermore, future research can explore strategies to enhance creativity and emotional engagement, ensuring that Islamic religious education learning remains effective and relevant in preparing students for contemporary societal challenges.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the integration of Islamic ethics and 21st-century competencies in PAI learning in grade VII IBS 1 at MTsN1 Tegal is largely effective, with high achievement in collaboration, trust, civilized communication, critical thinking based on Islamic justice, and ethical decision-making. These results highlight a strong connection between analytical skills and moral values. However, creativity with beneficial values and affective engagement remain areas requiring improvement, as students often follow teacher examples and show fluctuating enthusiasm for less engaging material.

These findings imply that PAI teachers should actively implement project-based, collaborative, and contextual learning strategies that not only encourage students to generate original ideas but also consistently reinforce the values of *maslahah* and *'adl* in their decision-making processes. Learning activities can be diversified through simulations, interactive digital media, educational games, and other innovative methods to increase students' engagement, particularly in the affective domain. In addition, ongoing professional development and training in digital literacy and 21st-century pedagogical approaches are essential to enhance teachers' capacity to integrate moral education with critical thinking, creativity,

communication, and collaboration skills. Furthermore, schools are encouraged to foster partnerships with parents, guardians, and the wider community to ensure that the internalization of Islamic ethical values continues beyond the classroom and becomes a part of students' daily behavior and social interactions. This study is limited to a single class and school, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Future research could expand the sample across multiple schools and regions, investigate the longitudinal effects of integrating Islamic ethics with 21st-century competencies, and explore specific strategies to enhance creativity and sustained affective engagement.

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Data Disclosure Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.



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