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Reading Between the Lines: A Critical Analysis of English-Language Texts on Islamic Education

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Abstract. This systematic literature review (SLR) of 23 texts published in 2021–2026, titled "Reading Between the Lines: A Critical Analysis of English-Language Texts on Islamic Education", asks who speaks, how Islamic education is framed, how key concepts are translated, and what remains invisible. We located texts through a web-based search, screened them against explicit criteria, and synthesized them thematically, using PRISMA 2020 for reporting. Five themes emerge: concentrated production in English, outsider framings, insider texts that are not bias-free, disputed translation of tarbiyah, and three forms of absence. The review concludes that English-language texts should be read as discourse, and proposes five questions for critical reading. Its contribution is a thematic synthesis, a distinction between three forms of absence (topic, voice, meaning), and five guiding questions that remain untested. The findings are limited by a small corpus, a web-based search, a single reviewer, and abstract-level reading of 22 of the 23 texts.

Keywords: Islamic Education; Critical Reading; Systematic Literature Review; Representation.

1. Introduction

Anyone who wants to know what the world says about Islamic education will almost certainly end up reading English-language texts. A bibliometric mapping of 801 Scopus-indexed documents on Islamic education in higher education (2015–2024) reports that English accounts for 92.6 percent of publications, with Indonesia contributing 43.5 percent, followed by Malaysia at 18 percent and Iran at 11 percent (Saleh & Nasution, 2025). Global discourse on Islamic education thus rests on a single language and a handful of production sites. For researchers and students of Islamic Religious Education in Indonesia, the situation is layered: they are at once readers, authors, and objects of discussion in these texts.

These texts are not a clear mirror. A critical discourse analysis of primary school textbooks in Slovenia shows that representations of Islam and Muslims form a lopsided picture through small biases, emphases, and the absence of certain topics (Porić & Črnič, 2021). A study of Religious Education textbooks in England finds gaps in the theological accuracy and historical depth of their presentation of jihad (Hussain, 2025), while a re-examination of studies on the representation of Islam in syllabi and textbooks in England and Wales traces a shift toward religious literacy and hermeneutic approaches (Sabzali & Panjwani, 2024). Introductory works on Islamic history written by American Islamicists in 2010–2025 likewise reveal a tension between command of the Islamic intellectual tradition and a presentation shaped by Western frameworks of knowledge (Parray, 2025). Texts from within the Muslim community are not automatically free of problems: a study of Islamic education textbooks in Indonesia reports content that can foster intolerant beliefs and

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attitudes (Abdullah & Larasati, 2023). At the conceptual level, a review of English- and Arabic-language literature on tarbiyah reveals disagreement among English-language authors over the meaning and interrelation of the basic terms of Islamic education. In contrast, the Arabic literature is comparatively more consistent (Abdalla, 2025).

These two bodies of work have not yet met. Bibliometric studies map how much Islamic education research is published and where (Khumayroh & Lismawati, 2025; Mannan et al., 2025; Nurhidin et al., 2025; Widyaningrum et al., 2023), but they do not ask how these texts frame their object. Representation studies ask how Islam and Muslims are portrayed (Naseef et al., 2024; Kamcili-Yildiz & Keuchen, 2025), but generally examine textbooks and picturebooks in general schooling rather than the scholarly literature on Islamic education itself. One corpus study examines how the word pesantren is portrayed in international scholarly publications (Suhaili et al., 2026). Still, its scope is limited to a single term and one group of journals. In the limited search reported here, we found no systematic review that brings the two together. The article's novelty claim is deliberately limited to that point and to the traceable corpus; it does not claim to represent the whole literature.

These questions matter beyond bibliometrics because the texts that teachers and lecturers read belong to the curriculum chain. A study of Islamic education textbooks in Indonesia reports content that can foster intolerant beliefs and attitudes (Abdullah & Larasati, 2023), and teachers at a madrasah in Manado describe the 2013 Curriculum textbook as too complex but not in-depth, so they look for supplementary resources on the internet (Khoirudin & Sandiah, 2025). Curriculum renewal likewise approaches the teaching of Islam in primary and secondary schools from critical perspectives (Memon et al., 2021), and Şahin (2018) argues that Islamic education studies need stronger theoretical and critical perspectives to guide professional practice and policy development. Texts about Islamic education, including scholarly English-language texts, are therefore plausibly among the sources from which teachers and lecturers draw concepts, examples, and terminology when they interpret curriculum documents, choose materials, and explain key terms in class. We treat this link as a hypothesis motivated by the cited studies, not as something this review demonstrates: none of the 23 texts measures how reading affects classroom practice.

The research questions are: (RQ1) who speaks about Islamic education in English-language texts, and in what configuration of language and geography; (RQ2) how do these texts frame Islamic education; (RQ3) how are key concepts translated and with what consequences; and (RQ4) what remains invisible in these texts. The aim is to answer these four questions through a systematic literature review and to formulate guidelines for critical reading for researchers and students of Islamic education. The article makes three contributions: a thematic synthesis of 23 verified texts, a distinction between three forms of absence (topic, voice, meaning), and five guiding questions offered as an analytical proposal that has not yet been tested.

2. Method

This study is a small-scale qualitative systematic literature review (SLR). The selection flow follows PRISMA 2020 (Page et al., 2021), and the synthesis was conducted thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The analytic questions were inspired by critical discourse analysis, an approach that examines the role of language in society and politics (Machin & Mayr, 2023). The term is used as a source of questions, not as a claim to a linguistic analysis of full texts. Because the search was not conducted in paid bibliographic databases and only one reviewer worked on it, this review is better described as a limited systematic review; no second reviewer checked even a subset of the texts, and its limitations are discussed in Section 4.8.

The search was conducted through a web search engine in October 2026 to build an initial corpus, then supplemented with 10 additional queries on 27 October 2026. The queries were themed as follows: representation of Islam and Muslims in educational textbooks; Orientalism and the Islamic education curriculum; decolonization of Islamic education; translation of the terms tarbiyah, ta'līm, and ta'dīb; the dominance of English in scholarly publishing; critical discourse analysis and representation of madrasah or pesantren; production of Islamic education knowledge in the Global South; and bibliometric mapping of Islamic education. Each candidate was checked on the journal or publisher page to verify the author, title, journal, volume, issue, year, pages, and DOI.

Screening proceeded in four steps. First, candidates were identified from the search-engine results by title and topical fit with the four research questions; the number of results examined at this step was not recorded. Second, we verified each candidate's metadata (author, title, journal or publisher, volume, issue, year, pages, and DOI) on the journal or publisher page. Third, each candidate was assessed against inclusion criteria (a) to (d) below, and candidates that failed a criterion were excluded with the reason noted (Table 1). Fourth, each included text was assigned a reading level (full text or abstract and metadata) and coded to one or more themes. One reviewer carried out all four steps so that no agreement statistics can be reported. Table 2 lists the query themes and the corresponding corpus texts.

Inclusion criteria: (a) published in 2021–2026, that is, the last five calendar years for journal articles and the last ten years for books; (b) an officially published journal article or book; (c) relevant to at least one of the four research questions; and (d) metadata verified on the journal or publisher page. Exclusion criteria: published before 2021, outside the fields of education, language, and religious representation, or metadata that could not be verified. One Slovenian-language article and one German-language article were included as comparisons showing that similar patterns of representation appear outside English; both were read at the abstract level.

Each text was read with four questions: who the author is, where from, and in what language they write; what framework is used to portray Islamic education (security, social class, identity, decolonization, and so on); which terms are translated or left untranslated; and what is not discussed or is acknowledged as a gap. The extracted data include author, year, type, focus, language, and level of reading (T = full text; A = abstract and metadata). Findings were grouped into themes through thematic coding. Quality appraisal was not given a numerical score; instead, every statement about a text's content is limited to what its author states, and the level of reading is reported in Table 3. Short verbatim quotations in Section 3.3 and the Discussion are taken from the abstracts or titles of the source texts and are marked with quotation marks; all other statements are paraphrases.

3. Results

Selection flow

Table 1 reports the selection flow as far as it can be documented. The initial corpus contained 18 texts from the October 2026 search. The additional search yielded seven candidates whose metadata were checked; two were excluded, namely a 2015 book chapter on Religious Education textbooks and a medical editorial on language bias in scholarly publishing. Thus, 23 texts were included in the synthesis.

Table 1. Selection flow (following PRISMA 2020)

Stage	Description	Number of texts
Identification	Initial corpus from the October 2026 search	18
Identification	Additional candidates from 10 queries (27 October 2026) whose metadata were checked	7
Identification	All raw search-engine results before title screening	Not recorded
Eligibility	Texts assessed for eligibility	25
Exclusion	Published before 2021 (1); outside the field, medical editorial (1)	2
Inclusion	Texts included in the synthesis	23

Note: the raw number of search results was not fully recorded and is therefore not reported; the other figures are actual counts from the process described above.

Table 2 summarizes the query themes and the texts retained for each theme. Because the number of hits per query was not recorded, the table reports retained texts only. Assigning a text to a query theme is a post hoc reconstruction by the authors, and a text can match more than one theme; the counts are therefore indicative, and sum to the 23 included texts only because each text is placed under its closest theme.

Table 2. Query themes and corpus texts retained

Query theme	Texts in the final corpus that correspond to the theme	n	Raw results
Representation of Islam and Muslims in educational textbooks	Porić & Črnič (2021); Hussain (2025); Sabzali & Panjwani (2024); Naseef et al. (2024); Kamcili-Yildiz & Keuchen (2025)	5	Not recorded
Orientalism and the Islamic education curriculum	Parray (2025); Memon et al. (2021); Rahman & Nurtawab (2024)	3	Not recorded
Decolonization of Islamic education	Husni et al. (2026); Kurdi (2026); R'boul & Barnawi (2025)	3	Not recorded
Translation of tarbiyah, ta'līm, and ta'dīb	Abdalla (2025)	1	Not recorded
Dominance of English in scholarly publishing	Piller et al. (2022); Drolet et al. (2026)	2	Not recorded
Critical discourse analysis; representation of madrasah or pesantren	Machin & Mayr (2023); Suhaili et al. (2026)	2	Not recorded
Production of Islamic education knowledge in the Global South	Abdullah & Larasati (2023); Wakhidah & Erman (2022)	2	Not recorded
Bibliometric mapping of Islamic education	Saleh & Nasution (2025); Nurhidin et al. (2025); Widyaningrum et al. (2023); Khumayroh & Lismawati (2025); Mannan et al. (2025)	5	Not recorded
Total		23	Not recorded

Note: the initial 18-text corpus came from the October 2026 search and the other seven candidates from the 10 additional queries of 27 October 2026; the table does not separate the two sets.

Corpus characteristics

Of the 23 texts, 21 are journal articles, and two are books (Machin & Mayr, 2023; Memon et al., 2021). The distribution by year of publication is 2021 (2 texts), 2022 (2), 2023 (3), 2024 (3), 2025 (9), and 2026 (4), so the corpus is concentrated in the last three years. Most texts are in English; one is in Indonesian (Mannan et al., 2025), one in Slovenian (Porić & Črnič, 2021), and one in German (Kamcili-Yildiz & Keuchen, 2025). Only one text was read at the full-text level (Abdalla, 2025); the other 22 were read at the abstract and metadata level. Therefore, all findings below should be read as summaries of the source authors' claims, not as the result of full reading.

Table 3. Corpus analyzed (n = 23)

No	Text	Type and focus	Language	Read	Theme
1	Saleh & Nasution (2025)	Article; bibliometric (801 Scopus documents)	English	A	1, 5
2	Nurhidin et al. (2025)	Article; bibliometric (403 Scopus publications)	English	A	1, 5
3	Widyaningrum et al. (2023)	Article; bibliometric (656 Scopus publications)	English	A	1
4	Khumayroh & Lismawati (2025)	Article; bibliometric policy study (Scopus)	English	A	1
5	Mannan et al. (2025)	Article; bibliometric (227 Scopus publications)	Indonesian	A	1, 5
6	Suhaili et al. (2026)	Article; corpus analysis of 6,774 articles (pesantren)	English	A	1, 3
7	Porić & Črnič (2021)	Article; critical discourse analysis of primary school textbooks (Slovenia)	Slovenian	A	2
8	Hussain (2025)	Article; GCSE RE textbooks in England	English	A	2
9	Sabzali & Panjwani (2024)	Article; representation of Islam in RE syllabi and textbooks	English	A	2
10	Naseef et al. (2024)	Article; critical content analysis of picturebooks (US)	English	A	2
11	Kamcili-Yildiz & Keuchen (2025)	Article; Protestant religion textbooks	German	A	2
12	Parray (2025)	Article; content analysis of introductory works on Islamic history	English	A	2
13	Memon et al. (2021)	Edited book; curriculum renewal	English	A	2
14	Abdullah & Larasati (2023)	Article; Islamic education textbooks in Indonesia	English	A	3
15	Wakhidah & Erman (2022)	Article; Islamic Religious Education curriculum in Indonesia	English	A	3
16	Husni et al. (2026)	Article; systematic review of decolonization	English	A	3
17	Kurdi (2026)	Article; discourse on decolonizing tafsir	English	A	3
18	Rahman & Nurtawab (2024)	Article; Western Qur'anic studies at Islamic higher education institutions (PTKI) in Indonesia	English	A	3
19	R'boul & Barnawi (2025)	Article; Islamic Emancipation framework	English	A	3
20	Abdalla (2025)	Article; narrative review of the term tarbiyah	English	T	4, 5
21	Piller et al. (2022)	Article; epistemic inequality in publishing	English	A	Framework
22	Drolet et al. (2026)	Article; language inequality in research	English	A	Framework
23	Machin & Mayr (2023)	Book; multimodal critical discourse analysis	English	A	Framework

Note: T = full text; A = abstract and metadata. Theme grouping is the author's judgment. Theme 1 = who speaks; 2 = outsider framing; 3 = texts from within; 4 = translation; 5 = absence.

Thematic synthesis

Theme 1: who speaks. Four bibliometric mappings show a consistent pattern. A mapping of 403 publications on Islamic education in schools and madrasas (Scopus, 2004–2023) places Indonesia as the top publishing country with a high level of international collaboration (Nurhidin et al., 2025).

A mapping of 656 publications finds Indonesia the most productive with 198 documents (Widyaningrum et al., 2023); research on Islamic education policy ranks Indonesia first, followed by Iran and Malaysia, with a surge after 2020 (Khumayroh & Lismawati, 2025); and a review of digital technology across 227 publications (2019–2024) names Indonesia and Malaysia as the main contributors (Mannan et al., 2025). A corpus analysis of 6,774 articles from Scopus-indexed journals managed by Indonesian Islamic universities (2015–2025) shows that the word pesantren in 2015–2020 was most often associated with traditional Islamic education, institutional identity, and charismatic leadership, then in 2021–2025 shifted to organizational management, higher education, and religious moderation, with a generally positive semantic prosody (Suhaili et al., 2026).

Theme 2: framing by outsiders. The critical discourse analysis of Slovenian textbooks focuses on four themes: security and violence, geographical and cultural placement, the role of women and gender relations, and Muslim contributions to Western civilization (Porić & Črnič, 2021). The security pattern resonates in Religious Education textbooks in England, whose presentation of jihad is judged to contain gaps in theological accuracy and historical context, and whose correction the author links to efforts to improve religious literacy and counter radicalization (Hussain, 2025). Another frame is social class, namely a classism-critical examination of patterns of religious and social interpretation in texts and images about Muslims in German-language Protestant religion textbooks for grades 7 and 8 (Kamcili-Yildiz & Keuchen, 2025), as well as counter-narrative: a critical content analysis of picturebooks in the United States through a postcolonial lens finds that Islamic practices are present in the everyday lives of Muslim child characters, families are portrayed as diverse, and the books function as counter-narratives (Naseef et al., 2024). An edited book on curriculum renewal in Islamic education affirms that the need for renewal applies to both Western schools and schools in Muslim-majority or Muslim-minority countries (Memon et al., 2021).

Theme 3: texts from within are not automatically free of bias. A study of Islamic education textbooks in Indonesia, using content analysis, interviews, and focus group discussions, finds intolerant values in the language, content, and scenarios of the books, concluding that the textbooks "can foster and promote intolerant beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors among students" and that the intolerant narratives "result from negligence during the writing, reviewing, and editing processes," and recommends that new books be written collaboratively by scholars and religious and cultural leaders with a focus on peace (Abdullah & Larasati, 2023). A study of Islamic Religious Education curriculum content shows a different pattern: limited content, with environmental education material appearing only in some basic competencies of the 2013 Curriculum and revolving around personal hygiene (Wakhidah & Erman, 2022). In the decolonization debate, a systematic review of Scopus publications reports four themes of colonial influence on Islamic education: institutional change, educational dualism, Muslim scholars' responses to Western epistemic domination, and the relevance of decolonial perspectives today, which the authors describe as "the growing relevance of decolonial perspectives in contemporary educational debates" (Husni et al., 2026). A discourse study on decolonizing Qur'anic studies and tafsir at Indonesian Islamic universities concludes that the discourse remains "static": Western scholars are widely adopted, especially to strengthen contextual hermeneutics, while classical tafsir and Nusantara tafsir have not been fully recognized as independent sources of knowledge (Kurdi, 2026). Research on lecturers at five Indonesian Islamic universities reports generally open attitudes toward Western Qur'anic studies, accompanied by curricular disputes between academic study and da'wa training (Rahman & Nurtawab, 2024). At the conceptual level, "Islamic Emancipation" is proposed as a decolonial framework based on Islamic philosophy with three educational applications: seeing colonial structures as the imposition

of unequal systems, positioning educators as intellectually free yet responsible for acting, and prioritizing critique and reinterpretation as core cognitive skills (R'boul & Barnawi, 2025).

Theme 4: translation of concepts. A narrative review of more than 40 Arabic- and English-language sources concludes that English-language authors disagree about the meaning of tarbiyah, ta'līm, tadrīs, and ta'dīb, the relationships among these terms, and their ranking. In contrast, the Arabic literature is more consistent and tends to treat tarbiyah as an overarching framework encompassing the other three terms (Abdalla, 2025). The author declines to translate tarbiyah as "education" or "pedagogy," among other reasons, because such equivalents shift the term into a Western framework, and criticizes some English-language authors for accepting particular arguments without testing them or changing term meanings without justification.

Theme 5: what is not visible. A mapping of 801 documents notes that topics such as environmental sustainability and collaboration beyond Southeast Asia and the Middle East remain under-researched. At the same time, prominent themes include gender, public health, digital learning, and artificial intelligence (Saleh & Nasution, 2025). Another mapping identifies tolerance, social media, religious moderation, leadership, and Islamic education management as rising topics (Nurhidin et al., 2025), while the digital technology review reports a surge in publications since 2023 (Mannan et al., 2025). The absence also occurs at the language level: the tarbiyah review covers only Arabic and English literature, so it does not cover other languages of the Muslim world, such as Turkish, Urdu, and French, and the author acknowledges this limitation (Abdalla, 2025). Theme 5 rests on only four texts (Saleh & Nasution, 2025; Nurhidin et al., 2025; Mannan et al., 2025; Abdalla, 2025), three of them bibliometric mappings, so it is the thinnest theme and is presented as a tentative synthesis, not a robust finding.

Table 4. Summary of thematic synthesis

Theme	Main finding	Evidence base in the corpus
1. Who speaks	Production concentrated in English and a few countries; Indonesia is a major contributor; mappings limited to English-language Scopus.	Six bibliometric and corpus studies; two frameworks on language inequality
2. Framing by outsiders	Security and social class frames, and counter-narratives; tension between command of the tradition and Western frameworks	Seven texts (textbooks, picturebooks, introductory works, edited book)
3. Texts from within	Intolerance in textbooks, narrow curriculum content, decolonization that remains static	Six texts; mostly one study per issue
4. Translation	Disagreement among English-language authors over the meaning of tarbiyah and related terms	One narrative review (read in full text)
5. What is not visible	Absence of topics, voices, and meanings	Four texts

Note: the level of evidence is low to moderate because most texts were read only at the abstract level. Theme 5 rests on four texts and should be treated as tentative.

4. Discussion

Who speaks: "outside" voices that turn out to be "inside"

The synthesis of Theme 1 corrects the assumption that English-language texts on Islamic education are always written by "outsiders." The large contribution of Indonesia and Malaysia across all the mappings reviewed means that most English-language voices on Islamic education actually come from Muslim authors in Southeast Asia. However, this picture needs to be read with two caveats. First, all the mappings are limited to Scopus, and Nurhidin et al. (2025) and Khumayroh and Lismawati (2025) explicitly state their reliance on English-language Scopus publications, so

work in Indonesian, Arabic, and other languages is not counted. Second, research on language inequality in academia shows that the dominance of English undermines the credibility of some researchers, reinforces exclusion, and narrows the range of knowledge produced (Drolet et al., 2026), and that researchers from peripheral linguistic communities must work through networks and language mediators to break into global knowledge production (Piller et al., 2022). Drolet et al. (2026) were published in a bioethics journal and concern experiential knowledge in research, and Piller et al. (2022) is a case study of multilingual scholars published in the sociolinguistics journal Multilingua; neither addresses Islamic education. They are included only as a conceptual framework, because they supply a vocabulary of epistemic and linguistic injustice for the language dimension of Theme 1, and not as evidence that the same patterns hold in Islamic education. A question worth asking: who goes unread when knowledge about madrasas and pesantren must pass through English and particular indexes?

Suhaili et al. (2026) add another layer. The generally positive portrayal of pesantren in a corpus of Scopus-indexed journals managed by Indonesian Islamic universities can be read as a sign of progress compared with the security frame found in some of the outsider texts reviewed here. A critical reading also raises another question, and this is our interpretation, not a claim of the source authors: is the positive portrayal the result of scrutiny, or does it reflect the position of authors writing about their own institutions? Because the corpus comes from journals managed by Indonesian institutions themselves, readers should not equate a positive tone with critical quality. This remains a hypothesis, and three observations make it plausible without confirming it. The reported shift from traditional and charismatic associations to management, higher education, and moderation is a change of topics, which by itself says nothing about how critical the portrayal is. The corpus has no comparison group outside Indonesian institutional journals. And Şahin (2018) observes that Islamic education studies have lacked new theoretical insights and critical perspectives, noting that pedagogic practice is "mostly engaged with re-inscribing the existing power relations shaping the society." The hypothesis could be tested by comparing the semantic prosody of pesantren in journals managed by Indonesian institutions with international journals not managed by them, and by reading a sample of the texts in full; until then, we do not treat the positive tone as evidence of either quality or bias.

Framing: threat or life

The difference between the security frame and the everyday-experience frame shows that the same object can be read as a threat or as a life. Analyses of Slovenian textbooks and Religious Education textbooks in England show a security frame (Hussain, 2025; Porić & Črnič, 2021), while the American picture books Naseef et al. (2024) analyzed function as counter-narratives. This reading of readings is what we mean by "reading between the lines." Critical reading must also work in both directions. The author of the article on jihad proposes a correction by referring to the Islamic scholarly tradition, and the choice of a single figure as the benchmark (Ibn Taymiyyah) raises the question of who is given the authority to represent the tradition. This can only be assessed on the full text, which we have not accessed. Sabzali and Panjwani (2024) show that even the assessment frameworks shift over time, from older approaches to religious literacy and hermeneutics, so that critiques of representation are never neutral with respect to the framework they use.

Parray (2025) shifts attention from school textbooks to introductory scholarly works. If its finding is correct, namely a tension between command of the tradition and Western frameworks of knowledge, then the problem of representation does not stop at school books. It also reaches the academic literature that serves as a reference for researchers in Islamic education. Thus, it is not only

a matter of "them" versus "us": Memon et al. (2021) affirm that Muslims themselves also design curricula, and how they design them shapes how Islam is taught.

Texts from within and the limits of decolonization

Abdullah and Larasati's (2023) findings are important for the critical reader: critique of representation must not be directed only outward. That study is only one text in the corpus that directly examines Islamic education textbooks, and it was read at the abstract level, so its findings cannot be generalized to all textbooks. Wakhidah and Erman (2022) show that a topic can appear in curriculum documents with a narrow scope of meaning; critical reading means asking not only whether a topic exists but how it is framed.

The decolonization debate adds another lesson. Kurdi (2026) asserts that decolonization is not a rejection of Western scholars. Still, the building of a pluralistic epistemology, and Rahman and Nurtawab (2024) show lecturers' openness to Western scholarship coexisting with curricular disputes. The "Islamic Emancipation" framework (R'boul & Barnawi, 2025) offers a normative basis for critique, but its formulation remains conceptual and has not been tested in learning practice. The lesson is that writing in English or citing Western sources is not the same as decolonization, and conversely, rejecting Western sources does not solve the problem either. It should be noted that Rahman and Nurtawab (2024) address Western Qur'anic studies, not Islamic education directly; evidence on how Islamic education in Indonesia itself receives or rejects Orientalism remains limited.

Comparison with related reviews. The closest review in the corpus, Husni et al. (2026), applies PRISMA to Scopus publications on Islamic education during the colonial period and reports institutional transformation, educational dualism, scholars' responses, and the relevance of decolonial perspectives. Our review shares this concern with epistemic dominance but differs in object and method: we read English-language texts as discourse, searched the web rather than a single database, and cover representation, translation, and absence as well as decolonization. Beyond Islamic education, Shahjahan et al.'s (2022) comparative review of 207 articles concludes that "the meanings, actualizations, and challenges of DCP are contextual," where DCP stands for decolonizing curriculum and pedagogy in higher education. This aligns with our caution that decolonization cannot be reduced to writing in English or citing Western sources. However, the comparison is thematic, since that review covers higher education across disciplines. We did not find another systematic review that combines bibliometric and representation studies of Islamic education; this is consistent with the novelty claim in the Introduction, but it is bounded by our limited search.

Translation as analytical work

The case of tarbiyah is the clearest example of "between the lines." According to Abdalla (2025), disagreement among English-language authors about the basic terms of Islamic education stems in part from how those terms are translated. This has real implications for Indonesian readers: the terms tarbiyah and ta'dīb appear every day in faculty names, course titles, and policy documents. If the English literature takes the term and renders it "pedagogy," the meaning that remains may differ from what Indonesian readers mean. This is our interpretation of Abdalla's finding, not a claim tested in that study. Caution also applies in the other direction: when Indonesian authors translate concepts into English to publish abroad, the choice of equivalents helps determine how the concept is read. Translation is thus part of analytical work, not a technical step at the end. It must be stressed that only one text in the corpus directly addresses term translation, so evidence for this theme is thin.

Three forms of absence

Theme 5 shows the need to distinguish three forms of absence: absence of topic (what has not yet been studied, for example, environmental sustainability), absence of voice (languages and regions not covered by the indexes), and absence of meaning (concepts that are untranslated or oversimplified). The three reinforce one another: topics rarely written about in English appear as though they do not exist. This distinction is an analytical contribution of the article and has not yet been tested on a larger corpus. Because Theme 5 is supported by only four texts, read the three-way distinction as a conceptual proposal to be tested, not as an empirical finding.

Guidelines for critical reading and their implications

Based on the discussion above, we formulate five questions as an analytical proposal that has not yet been tested. First, who is the author, in what language and index was the text published, and who goes unread? Second, what framework (security, identity, decolonization, class) is used to portray Islamic education, and what does that framework displace? Third, which terms are translated, with what equivalents, and what consequences follow? Fourth, does the author examine texts from within the Muslim community with the same rigor as texts from outside? Fifth, what limitations does the author acknowledge, and do the claims exceed the evidence used?

These guidelines align with the call for multilingual dissemination and deliberate engagement with non-English work (Drolet et al., 2026) and with the principle of linguistic and epistemic citizenship that values knowledge from the periphery (Piller et al., 2022). Theoretically, this review integrates two traditions that have run separately, bibliometrics and representation studies, into a single reading framework. Practically, for Islamic education researchers in Indonesia, the implications are to cite Indonesian- and Arabic-language work where relevant, to give the original term alongside its equivalent when writing in English, and to examine one's own textbooks with the same tools used to examine other people's texts.

Implications for curriculum and instructional practice

The corpus does not measure classroom effects, so the following implications are proposals that follow from the synthesis and have not been tested. First, teachers and lecturers of Islamic education can use the five questions as a short checklist when choosing readings and teaching materials, particularly when English-language texts supply terms and framings that enter lectures and course outlines. Second, because the disagreement over tarbiyah, ta'līm, tadrīs, and ta'dīb is partly a disagreement over translation (Abdalla, 2025), syllabi and course readings can state the original term beside its English equivalent and explain the choice. Third, curriculum and textbook review should examine content as well as framing: the intolerance reported in Indonesian textbooks (Abdullah & Larasati, 2023) and the narrow environmental content in the Islamic Religious Education curriculum (Wakhidah & Erman, 2022) show that gaps can sit inside official materials. Fourth, Khoirudin and Sandiah (2025) report that teachers supplement a textbook they find shallow with online resources; we infer that teacher education could include training to evaluate such resources, including English-language ones, using the same questions.

Limitations

The limitations of this review are clear. The search was conducted through a web search engine, not bibliographic databases, and the raw number of search results was not fully recorded; the corpus is small, so the results cannot be generalized; 22 of the 23 texts were read at the abstract level, which may miss nuances of argument; all screening and coding was done by a single reviewer, and no second reviewer checked even a subset of the texts, so agreement between coders could not be assessed; Theme 5 rests on only four texts; two framework texts (Drolet et al., 2026; Piller et al., 2022) come from outside Islamic education; and because all English-language sources were selected

through English-language searches, this corpus itself reflects the biases discussed in the article. Future research is advised to conduct a systematic review with searches in Scopus, Web of Science, and Garuda, full-text reading and independent coding by more than one reviewer, inclusion of Indonesian- and Arabic-language literature, and testing of the critical reading guidelines on a larger corpus.

5. Conclusion

English-language texts on Islamic education need to be read as discourse shaped by who holds the voice, by framing, by translation, and by absence. First, knowledge production is highly concentrated in English and a few countries, with Indonesia as a major contributor (Nurhidin et al., 2025; Saleh & Nasution, 2025); an English-language text therefore does not always mean an outside voice, but a voice that has passed through particular indexes and languages. Second, Islamic education is framed differently by outsider texts, through security, class, or counter-narrative, and texts from within can also contain biases such as intolerance in textbooks. Third, translating terms such as tarbiyah as "education" or "pedagogy" blurs meaning and shows up in disagreements among English-language authors (Abdalla, 2025). Fourth, the absence of topics, voices, and meanings needs to be read together. This article distinguishes three forms of absence (topic, voice, meaning) and offers five questions for critical reading as proposals to be tested; in practice, these questions can guide how teachers, lecturers, and curriculum designers select and explain texts.

Because the corpus is small, the search was search-engine based, and most texts were read only at the abstract level, these conclusions are limited. Further research should conduct a systematic review with searches in bibliographic databases, full-text reading by more than one reviewer, inclusion of Indonesian- and Arabic-language literature, and testing of the five guiding questions on a larger corpus.

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