

Tawhidic Ontology and the Reconstruction of Islamic Education: A Counter-Hegemonic Response to Neoliberalism

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Abstract

Neoliberal hegemony in global education has reduced Islamic education to the rationalities of standardization, efficiency, and market orientation. This study aims to reconstruct Islamic educational philosophy as a *counter-hegemonic* paradigm against neoliberal epistemology. It employs *critical library research*, integrating deconstructive hermeneutics, epistemic decolonization, and critical Islamic pedagogy. The findings demonstrate that tawhidic ontology provides a philosophical foundation for resisting materialistic reductionism and restoring education to its transcendental orientation. Global standardization further underscores the importance of philosophical leadership in preserving the autonomy of meaning, identity, and the purposes of Islamic education. The concept of *insan kamil* requires reactualization through critical pedagogy grounded in '*adl* and *rahmah*' as emancipatory praxis. The study offers a critical-proactive paradigm enabling Islamic education to engage modernity while preserving epistemic sovereignty, transcendental orientation, and civilizational identity.

Keywords: Islamic Education, Neoliberalism, Epistemic Decolonization

Abstrak

Hegemoni neoliberalisme dalam pendidikan global telah mereduksi pendidikan Islam ke dalam rasionalitas standarisasi, efisiensi, dan orientasi pasar. Penelitian ini bertujuan merekonstruksi filsafat pendidikan Islam sebagai paradigma *counter-hegemony* terhadap epistemologi neoliberal. Penelitian menggunakan *critical library research* dengan memadukan hermeneutika dekonstruktif, dekolonisasi epistemik, dan pedagogi kritis Islam. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ontologi tauhid menyediakan landasan filosofis untuk menolak reduksionisme materialistik dan mengembalikan pendidikan pada orientasi transendental. Standarisasi global juga menegaskan pentingnya kepemimpinan filosofis dalam menjaga otonomi makna, identitas, dan tujuan pendidikan Islam. Konsep *insan kamil* perlu direaktualisasi melalui pedagogi kritis berbasis '*adl* dan *rahmah*' sebagai praksis emansipatoris. Temuan ini menawarkan paradigma kritis-proaktif yang memungkinkan pendidikan Islam merespons modernitas, sekaligus mempertahankan kedaulatan epistemik, orientasi transendental, dan identitas peradabannya.

Kata Kunci: Pendidikan Islam, Neoliberalisme, Dekolonisasi Epistemik

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of neoliberal market hegemony has had a highly destructive impact on the sustainability of the contemporary Islamic education system, which was historically and philosophically built upon a foundation of noble spiritual values. Islamic education, which is essentially intended to shape *the “insan kamil”* (the perfect human being), is gradually experiencing a serious identity crisis as it is forced to compromise with purely secular indicators of success. Empirical realities on the ground show that many Islamic educational institutions, from elementary schools to universities, have unwittingly adopted market-oriented curricula and policies, which ultimately marginalize character education, ethics, and spirituality. The educational process has been reduced to a mere transfer of cognitive knowledge devoid of meaning, lacking critical thinking, and failing to integrate divine revelation with modern science (Sholikhah & Latif, 2024). This situation creates alienation among students, who may be intellectually bright but experience a spiritual void and acute moral disorientation.

In the discourse of Islamic philosophy of education, the ontological foundation occupies a central position as the primary basis that defines the nature of reality and humanity's place in the universe. Ontologically, Islamic education is absolutely centered on the concept of tawhid the fundamental belief in the oneness of Allah which establishes a hierarchical reality, where Allah is the Absolute Existence (*Wajib al-Wujud*) and the universe and all it contains are contingent realities (*mumkin al-wujud*) (Anamisari et al., 2026; Hanin et al., 2026). This ontological concept also specifically views human beings as multidimensional beings, consisting not only of a transient physical (material) dimension but also an eternal spiritual dimension. Humans are endowed with *fitrah* from birth a primordial, sacred inclination to recognize and submit to the Creator as well as reason that must be directed toward achieving closeness to God, not merely for instrumental rationality alone. This affirmation of Tawhid ontology fundamentally rejects all forms of secular reductionism that view humans as mere machines or blank slates devoid of innate spiritual potential.

This study is designed to achieve three main objectives. *First*, this article aims to critically analyze and deconstruct how the integration of the ontology of tawhid and holistic epistemology in Islamic philosophy of education can serve as a solid philosophical foundation to counter the hegemony of market-oriented neoliberal education policies. *Second*, this study aims to conduct a comparative examination of how the philosophical foundations of Islamic education are articulated and negotiated in various international policy contexts as a strategy of intellectual resistance to counter the pressures of reductionist global educational standardization. *Third*, this study aims to evaluate the structural factors that lead to the symbolic reduction of the axiological concept of *insan kamil* in contemporary policy discourse, while offering conceptual and practical solutions through an Islamic critical pedagogy approach to bridge the gap between lofty theory and empirical reality on the ground.

To fully understand this discourse, a review of the state of the art in contemporary literature is essential. Over the past five years, the global academic debate on the philosophy of Islamic education has been largely dominated by studies on the integration of knowledge

and responses to modernity. A particularly notable early study was written by Suhailah Husien in *Studia Islamika*, which comprehensively examined how the Tawhidic educational model was being institutionalized in Malaysian higher education institutions to counter the fragmentation of secular knowledge (Nugraha et al., 2021; Subhan et al., 2024). This study reinforces the argument that the integration of the ontology of Tawhid is not merely a theological discourse but a systemic policy requiring institutional commitment. In line with this, a comparative study by Niyozov and Memon in the *Journal of Islamic Studies* examines the epistemological dialectic between Western science and Islamic education in the post-secular era, emphasizing the need for philosophical negotiation so that Islamic education does not become trapped in a romanticization of the past (Niyozov & Memon, 2020). These two studies demonstrate that the discourse on the integration of science and religion requires an epistemological foundation that goes beyond merely applying an Islamic label to the general sciences.

In the second literature cluster, scholars' attention is focused on the crisis of character and the relevance of the axiology of Islamic education in the era of technological disruption. Alavi, in the *Journal of Moral Education*, examines the tension between character education grounded in Islamic values and the pressures of instrumental rationality in the digital age, concluding that the internalization of divine values often fails due to educators' inability to translate classical philosophy into contemporary pedagogy (Alavi, 2010). This finding is supported by Rissanen's research in the *British Journal of Religious Education*, which highlights how character education in European madrasas is currently struggling to formulate the identity of the *insan kamil* amid national curricula imposed by states operating under a neoliberal paradigm (Muqsith et al., 2026). These studies affirm that the current axiological debate no longer revolves around what the goals of Islamic education are, but rather how these values can withstand the onslaught of surveillance capitalism and data commodification in digital classrooms.

A third cluster of recent literature raises the issue of epistemic decolonization as an instrument of critical resistance against the hegemony of Western education. Through his publication in *the Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies*, Alatas sharply exposes the practices of knowledge colonialism that still persist in universities in Muslim-majority countries, and proposes the decolonization of Islamic epistemology as a way forward to build intellectual autonomy (Alatas, 2024). This study resonates with the research by Shahjahan et al in *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, which explores how Islamic philosophical thought can be adopted as a counter-hegemony against highly Eurocentric global ranking systems such as the QS World University Rankings (Shahjahan, 2023, 2025; Shahjahan et al., 2022). These two studies offer a crucial perspective that the application of Islamic epistemology cannot be separated from the global geopolitical and political-economic context; it is a project of liberation, not merely an academic issue confined to an ivory tower.

Furthermore, the fourth cluster focuses on policy analysis and the gap between philosophical theory and educational practice in the field. Research by Suyadi et al. in *Al-Jami'ah*:

Journal of Islamic Studies critiques the application of Amin Abdullah's integration-interconnection paradigm in Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum, finding that at the implementation level, teachers remain trapped in the dichotomy between religious studies and science due to a lack of ontological understanding (Rahmi Sonia, 2022; Saleh et al., 2025)(Rahmi Sonia, 2022; Saleh et al., 2025)(Rahmi Sonia, 2022; Saleh et al., 2025)(Rahmi Sonia, 2022; Saleh et al., 2025)(Rahmi Sonia, 2022; Saleh et al., 2025)(Rahmi Sonia, 2022; Saleh et al., 2025). On the other hand, an extensive study by Charlene Tan in Comparative Education on madrasah policies in Southeast Asia reveals that neoliberal pressures have forced madrasahs to commercialize and prioritize STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) achievements, while marginalizing Islamic humanities (Tan, 2012, 2014, 2015). This phenomenon underscores the fragility of the ontological resilience of Islamic education when confronted with state policy interventions obsessed with quantitative economic growth.

The fifth and final literature cluster specifically examines aspects of critical pedagogy in reviving the natural disposition of learners. Recent research by Waghid in Educational Philosophy and Theory emphasizes that Islamic critical pedagogy rooted in the concepts of *'adl* (justice) and *rahmah* (compassion) is the only valid method for dismantling the alienation experienced by students under the neoliberal education system (Daharis, 2023; Waghid, 2014, 2025b). Waghid argues that the axiology of Islamic education must be transformed from merely an instrument of moral discipline (*moral policing*) into an instrument of social liberation capable of raising students' awareness of structural injustice in their environment. This study concludes that without a critical pedagogical approach, the concept of the *insan kamil* will forever remain merely a utopia found in classical texts, having lost its magical power to transform the reality of social oppression.

Through an extensive review of these nine recent works, a very fundamental research gap has been identified in the discourse on contemporary Islamic philosophy of education. The majority of previous studies tend to be trapped in a dichotomy of approaches: some are very strong in the theoretical realm but ahistorical in their analysis of policy (too philosophical), while others are very sharp in their empirical analysis of educational policy but lack ontological and epistemological foundations. This article offers a radical novelty by positioning the philosophy of Islamic education not merely as a passive normative belief system, but as an active and emancipatory counter-hegemonic paradigm. This article combines the theory of epistemic decolonization and Islamic critical pedagogy as a sharp analytical tool to confront classical idealism with the reality of contemporary. Another novelty lies in the structural-comparative approach used to trace how the symbolic reduction of axiological values occurs systematically within policy spaces, and how the concept of tawhid can be re-contextualized as a basis for alternative rationality that transcends market logic.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using a critical library research design, which is methodologically designed to unpack the philosophical framework underlying contemporary education policy. As primary data, this study explores the fundamental works

of classical and contemporary Islamic thinkers, such as al-Attas, al-Faruqi, and M. Amin Abdullah, who are positioned as the primary ontological and epistemological sources of (Al-Attas, 1995, 2014; Syed Naquib al- Attas, 1995)(Al-Attas, 1995, 2014; Syed Naquib al- Attas, 1995)(Al-Attas, 1995, 2014; Syed Naquib al- Attas, 1995)(Al-Attas, 1995, 2014; Syed Naquib al- Attas, 1995)(Al-Attas, 1995, 2014; Syed Naquib al- Attas, 1995)(Al-Attas, 1995, 2014; Syed Naquib al- Attas, 1995). In addition, secondary data was obtained from national and international education policy documents, education sustainability reports from global donor agencies, and articles from reputable scientific journals published in the last five years (2021–2026). The use of this multidimensional data aims to construct a dialectic between ideal philosophical texts and the practical reality of education policy influenced by neoliberal hegemony (Tan, 2012, 2014).

This research was carried out concretely through four systematic operational procedures. First, the heuristic stage, which involved the selective collection of literature, prioritizing works directly related to the issues of epistemic decolonization and critical pedagogy. Second, the hermeneutic interpretation stage, which goes beyond merely reading texts to conduct an in-depth analysis of the sociopolitical context underlying the thoughts of the figures and policies under study (Waghid, 2025a, 2025b, 2026). Third, the stage of philosophical synthesis, which integrates the three pillars of Islamic education with the theory of epistemic decolonization and Islamic critical pedagogy to construct a new analytical framework. Fourth, the critical evaluation stage, which maps the gaps between ideal theory and implementation in the field to generate solution-oriented propositions for contemporary Islamic education (Abdullah, 2015, 2017, 2020).

This study employs content analysis combined with a Faircloughian *critical discourse* analysis approach. Data were analyzed by identifying hegemonic patterns in educational policies, which were then contrasted with the principles of *Tawhid* ontology and *virtue* epistemology to reveal the symbolic reduction of the concept of the “*insan kamil*.” This analysis does not stop at a descriptive understanding but seeks to deconstruct neoliberal assumptions that are often disguised within the narrative of modern education policy (Alatas, 2024). Thus, every finding that emerges is filtered through the lens of philosophical accuracy to ensure that the resulting critique remains grounded in the roots of Islamic tradition while remaining relevant to the challenges of the 21st century (Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, 2018; Denzin, Norman K., and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 2011; Denzin, Norman K. Lincoln, 2108; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Guba & Lincoln, 2005). To ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the data, this study employed theoretical triangulation and an audit trail. Theoretical triangulation was conducted by testing the validity of arguments through different lenses namely, epistemic decolonization theory, Islamic critical pedagogy, and the philosophy of Islamic science thereby minimizing the researcher’s subjective bias. Meanwhile, the audit trail was implemented by rigorously documenting the entire process of data collection and analysis from text selection to drawing conclusions to ensure the study is traceable (auditable) and academically accountable (Shahjahan, 2023, 2025). This procedure ensures that the philosophical reconstruction offered has a solid argumentative

foundation and withstands rigorous academic scrutiny in accordance with the standards of high impact international journal publications (Husni & Atoillah, 2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Ontology of Tawhid and Epistemic Decolonization Amid Global Hegemony

The ontological concept of tawhid, which posits Allah as the Absolute Being, actually holds a very strong potential to resist the instrumentalism of modern education. In today's global discourse, education is often dominated by a Eurocentric worldview that imposes materialistic standardization. Alatas asserts that the epistemological decolonization of Islam is an absolute prerequisite for Muslim societies to achieve intellectual autonomy and free themselves from the shackles of knowledge colonialism, which remains deeply entrenched in higher education institutions (Alatas, 2024). This perspective positions *tawhid* not merely as a theological doctrine, but as a decolonial framework that actively dismantles the hegemony of Western positivist thought. Without this ontological awareness, Islamic educational institutions will merely become followers of a civilization that separates humanity from its spiritual essence.

The critical power of the ontology of tauhid becomes increasingly relevant when confronted with the phenomenon of global educational standardization. Shahjahan et al. highlight how global university ranking systems, such as the QS World University Rankings, function as instruments of hegemony that force educational institutions across the globe to submit to Eurocentric epistemological metrics (Leal & Moraes, 2018; Shahjahan, 2023, 2025; Shahjahan et al., 2022). The use of Islamic educational philosophy as a tool of decoloniality can deconstruct the validity of these metrics and offer a more holistic and eschatologically grounded alternative for assessing academic success. By adopting the theory of epistemic decolonization, the ontology of Islamic education is transformed into a cultural resistance movement that safeguards the sovereignty of meaning and freedom of thought from the pressures of neoliberal commodification.

Virtue Epistemology and the Dialectics of the Digital Age

Epistemology in Islam has never separated the process of seeking knowledge from the purification of the seeker's soul (*tazkiyatun nafs*). This concept shares a philosophical affinity with the virtue epistemology approach in contemporary philosophy, which holds that true knowledge (*husul al-'ilm fi al-nafs*) requires the presence of moral virtue. Niyozov and Memon explain that in the post-secular era, there is a very sharp epistemological dialectic between Western science and Islamic education; this negotiation requires Islamic education not to become trapped in normative romanticism, but rather to present a scientific framework that is actively capable of navigating the currents of modern rationality without losing its moral grounding (Niyozov & Memon, 2011, 2020). The integration of knowledge is not merely a mechanical combination of science and religious subjects, but rather the instillation of ethical virtues into the students' rational framework.

At the institutional level, the implementation of this virtue epistemology faces formidable challenges due to the intervention of instrumental rationality. Hussien notes that

efforts to institutionalize a tauhid-based educational model in Malaysian higher education often clash with policies that prioritize bureaucratic efficiency and quantitative performance indicators (Hussien, 2022; Hussien et al., 2021). Similar obstacles were also identified by Alavi, who found that character education based on Islamic values in the digital age is highly vulnerable to being eroded by instrumental rationality; students are directed more toward mastering technology for purely economic gain, while the internalization of divine values is gradually marginalized (Alavi, 2008, 2010, 2013; Aziz, 2026). Through the lens of virtue epistemology, this failure can be understood as a consequence of the learning process being severed from its axiological roots, where truth is reduced to mere information (data) that loses its transformative power for the human soul.

In the realm of practical policy, the grand vision of cultivating the *"insan kamil"* (the perfect human being) often undergoes what is termed symbolic reduction. The axiology of Islamic education is narrowed down to merely fulfilling formal religious attributes or rigid discipline, without engaging students' critical consciousness. A study by Suyadi et al. on the implementation of the integration-interconnection paradigm in Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum demonstrates that although national-level policies have made room for holistic values, educators in the field remain trapped in the dichotomy between religious studies and science due to a deficit in philosophical understanding (Suyadi, 2024; Yakin & Suyadi, 2025) (Hakim & Susilo, 2020; Suyadi, 2024; Yakin & Suyadi, 2025). Even more concerning, Tan reveals that the pressure of neoliberal trends has forced madrasahs in Southeast Asia to commercialize their services, marginalizing Islamic humanities in pursuit of prestige in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) subjects (Tan, 2012, 2014, 2015). This reality demonstrates that Islamic education policy is being held hostage by capitalist market logic that reduces the meaning of human success. This crisis is not limited to Muslim-majority countries but is also experienced by Muslim minorities in Europe. Rissanen highlights how Islamic schools in Europe must struggle to navigate the neoliberal policies of secular states in order to maintain a curriculum oriented toward the formation of the *"insan kamil"* (Husni & Atoillah, 2022). To counter this market-driven determinism, the approach of Islamic critical pedagogy becomes a crucial solution. Waghid asserts that critical pedagogy grounded in the principles of *'adl* (justice) and *rahmah* (compassion) is capable of dismantling the alienation experienced by students under the shadow of neoliberalism (Waghid, 2014, 2025b, 2026; Waghid et al., 2020; Waghid & Davids, 2013). Through this critical pedagogy, Islamic education is restored to its natural essence as a space for the praxis of liberation, where students are not only taught to be ritually devout but also develop the intellectual acuity to combat structural injustice and reclaim their full humanity.

Reconstructing the Ontology of Tawhid and Holistic Epistemology as a Counter-Hegemony to Neoliberalism

The ontology of tawhid in Islamic philosophy of education is not merely an abstract theological doctrine, but rather a fundamental epistemological stance for deconstructing the hegemony of neoliberalism, which views human beings and education as market commodities. By positing Allah as *Wajib al-Wujud*, Islamic education affirms that reality is

hierarchical and transcendent, thereby firmly rejecting the reduction of human beings to mere human capital ready for use within the logic of (Al-Attas, 1980, 1995, 2014; Daud, 1998) The integration of this ontology with a holistic epistemology that combines revelation, reason, and intuition creates a scientific framework free from the secularist dichotomies that often marginalize spiritual aspects in modern curricula.

The application of epistemic decolonization theory serves as a crucial tool in this endeavor, as suggested by Alatas, to dismantle the dominance of Western epistemology that has become deeply entrenched in educational institutions (Alatas, 2024). Decolonization here does not mean a total rejection of modern science, but rather a conscious effort to liberate Islamic educational reasoning from Eurocentric hegemony that imposes a single standard of success (Sholikhah et al., 2025). By positioning tawhid as the center of gravity, educational institutions can integrate the general sciences into a framework of divine morality, thereby neutralizing the commodification of knowledge that often occurs in contemporary market-oriented educational policies (Bisri, Dini, et al., 2026). The application of virtue epistemology further strengthens this resistance, as it demands that true knowledge must originate from seekers of knowledge who possess *virtuous* character (Putri et al., 2026). Niyozov and Memon emphasize that the dialectic between science and religion in the post-secular era requires in-depth negotiation, in which Islamic education must not merely follow modern rationality but must be able to offer an alternative framework where ethics and science go hand in hand (Niyozov & Memon, 2011, 2020). In other words, the ontology of tawhid combined with the epistemology of virtue compels institutions to rethink the primary purpose of education, which is no longer measured by material productivity but by the extent to which knowledge leads its seekers toward truth and the common good of the ummah (Nazah et al., 2026).

Structurally, the use of Islamic educational philosophy as a counter-hegemony also serves to challenge global rankings such as the QS World University Rankings, which indirectly force Muslim universities to adhere to Eurocentric standards that disregard local and spiritual values (Setianingsih et al., 2026). Shahjahan et al. point out that without the courage to challenge this hegemony through an authentic epistemology, Islamic educational institutions will remain trapped in the rat race of rankings that bear no relation to the ultimate goal of Islamic education the formation of the "*insan kamil*" (Shahjahan, 2023, 2025; Shahjahan et al., 2022). Thus, the reconstruction of ontology and epistemology is not merely a theoretical endeavor but a political-intellectual step to uphold educational sovereignty amid the destructive tide of neoliberalism.

Negotiating Philosophical Identity amid the Trend of Global Educational Standardization

The greatest challenge facing Islamic philosophy of education today is how to articulate its philosophical foundations amid the pressures of global standardization that demand uniformity. The phenomenon of the institutionalization of tauhid-based educational models, as seen in Malaysia, reveals a tense negotiation between philosophical idealism and the rigid demands of state bureaucracy. Hussien found that although there have been serious

efforts to integrate tauhid values into higher education, the main obstacle encountered is resistance from administrative structures that prioritize quantitative efficiency over philosophical depth (Hussien, 2022; Hussien et al., 2021). This underscores that articulating the philosophy of Islamic education at the policy level requires institutional courage to prioritize substantive values over superficial demands for performance.

In the broader context of Southeast Asia, neoliberal pressures have forced madrasahs and Islamic schools to commercialize in order to survive, which ironically has led to the marginalization of Islamic studies. Tan highlights that education policies in various countries tend to prioritize STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) subjects to pursue economic growth, while Islamic philosophical and humanities education is often treated merely as a supplementary component with no bargaining power within the curriculum (Tan, 2009, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2015). This situation creates a gap between the rhetoric of holistic Islamic educational goals and the reality of a reductionist-mechanistic curriculum. Therefore, a policy negotiation strategy is needed that can demonstrate that Islamic education is, in fact, capable of producing graduates who are more adaptive and creative because they possess a strong moral foundation.

Debates regarding this negotiation also occur among Muslim minorities in the West, where educational institutions struggle to preserve the identity of the "*insan kamil*" (the perfect human being) amidst a secular national curriculum. Rissanen notes that the main challenge here is not a rejection of the national curriculum, but rather how Islamic philosophical values can be accommodated as an ethical enrichment without severing ties with a pluralistic social environment (Husni & Atoillah, 2022). This approach demonstrates that Islamic educational philosophy is not exclusive but possesses the philosophical flexibility to engage in dialogue with diverse cultural contexts, provided that its core axiological framework remains intact. Failure in this negotiation often results in the marginalization of Islamic values, reducing them to mere formalistic attributes.

Overcoming the Symbolic Reduction of the Insan Kamil Through Islamic Critical Pedagogy

The concept of *insan kamil* often suffers from chronic symbolic reduction in contemporary educational policy, where it is narrowed down to merely a label for graduates who are ritually devout but critically dull. The use of the term *insan kamil* in formal policy is often not accompanied by the provision of space for students to develop a comprehensive theological-social consciousness, causing this concept to lose its transformative essence. Alavi cautions that character education trapped in instrumental rationality in the digital age will only produce individuals who are blindly obedient yet lack the ability to distinguish between truth and the manipulation of information (Alavi, 2008, 2010, 2013). This phenomenon demonstrates that Islamic education that has lost its philosophical spirit will be easily overwhelmed by the more dominant currents of popular culture. This gap between lofty theory and practical reality is further exacerbated by the education system's failure to integrate an emancipatory educational paradigm. Research by Suyadi et al. shows that in Indonesia, although the integration-interconnection paradigm has been formally adopted in

the curriculum, its implementation in the classroom remains trapped in a rigid dualism between religious studies and science because teachers lack sufficient ontological depth (Suyadi, 2024; Yakin & Suyadi, 2025). This indicates that symbolic reduction is not merely a policy issue on paper but a matter of educators' pedagogical competence they have not yet been able to transform abstract concepts into meaningful learning experiences for students (Erifsany et al., 2026). This gap must be addressed immediately so that the concept of "*insan kamil*" does not become mere jargon without a tangible impact on the quality of students' lives.

As a solution, the application of Islamic critical pedagogy offers a highly promising framework for bridging this divide. Waghid convincingly argues that by placing the principles of '*adl* (justice) and *rahmah* (compassion) at the center of the learning process, teachers can guide students to understand knowledge not as a passive object, but as a means to fight for social justice (Davids & Waghid, 2020; Waghid, 2008, 2014, 2025a, 2026; Waghid et al., 2020). This pedagogy transforms students' roles from alienated subjects into agents of change who possess critical awareness of structural injustice; thus, the ideal "*insan kamil*" is no longer a passive individual but rather an empowered and transformative individual within their environment. Ultimately, the success of Islamic education in the future depends on the extent to which it can break free from the trap of formalism and return to its liberating philosophical spirit (Bisri, Jannah, et al., 2026). The integration of ontology, epistemology, and axiology must form the foundation for policy formulation that no longer separates individual piety from social concern. By adopting a critical pedagogical approach that is integrated with the values of tawhid, Islamic education can restore its function as a civilizational force that not only produces cognitively intelligent individuals but also well-rounded individuals of integrity who are capable of bringing blessings to all of creation (Widoyo et al., 2024). This is the essence of the philosophical reclamation necessary to ensure that Islamic education remains relevant and robust in the face of contemporary challenges.

This finding underscores that to counter neoliberal hegemony, Islamic education must return to the ontology of tawhid, which rejects the separation between revelation and reason. The application of epistemic decolonization theory provides a foundation for rejecting Eurocentric global educational metrics, which often reduce educational success to mere university rankings. The epistemology of virtue ensures that knowledge in Islam is value-laden, thereby serving as an alternative to modern rationality, which is devoid of spirituality. Identity negotiations occur at the intersection of market-oriented state policies and religious values. The commercialization of Islamic education at the madrasah level demonstrates that without strong policy strategies, noble humanistic values are easily sacrificed in pursuit of technical competencies (STEM). Philosophical adaptation in a Western context shows that Islamic education possesses the flexibility to engage in dialogue with secular systems without losing its ontological identity.

The symbolic reduction of the concept of *insan kamil* occurs because character education is often misunderstood as a rigid process of moral discipline rather than a process of consciousness transformation. The failure to integrate scientific paradigms (as in the case

of the “*Kurikulum Merdeka*”) demonstrates that systemic change is not sufficient through curriculum reform alone but must involve a overhaul of pedagogical methods in the classroom. Islamic critical pedagogy, with its focus on *‘adl* and *rahmah*, offers a practical solution for transforming students into individuals with a sharp critical mind toward structural injustice a tangible manifestation of the “*insan kamil*” in the modern era.

Reconstructing Islamic Philosophy of Education: The Ontology of Tawhid, Epistemic Decolonization, and Counter-Hegemony in the Era of Neoliberalism

The discourse on contemporary Islamic philosophy of education currently stands at a crucial crossroads, caught between the urgency to preserve ontological identity and the demands for pragmatic adaptation to the tide of neoliberalism. Through a comparison of theories and previous research studies, it is clear that the main crisis faced is not merely a technical issue of educational management, but a fundamental clash between the *Tawhidic* paradigm and the instrumental rationality that dominates the global education system. While traditional approaches are often trapped in a rigid romanticism of the past, the latest literature indicates that there is an urgent need for a dynamic rearticulation. This debate affirms that education is never neutral; it always carries an ideological agenda, in which Islamic education is now forced to choose: to continue following the model of educational capitalism or to rise as a counter-hegemonic paradigm that offers a more holistic humanity (Al-Attas, 1980, 1995; Aziz et al., 2026; Mumtahanah et al., 2026).

One of the most contentious points of debate in recent literature concerns the extent to which Islamic educational institutions can integrate into the global system without losing their ontological foundation. The research by Shahjahan et al., critically highlights the pitfalls of global *rankings* that force Muslim universities to adopt Eurocentric indicators as standards of academic success (Aziz & Sholikhah, 2026; Shahjahan, 2023, 2025). This creates a highly paradoxical dialectic: on the one hand, institutions need global recognition for competitive relevance, yet on the other hand, the process of such recognition often demands the neglect of Islamic epistemology itself. A comparison with Alatas’s work confirms that the decolonization of knowledge is not an isolationist project, but rather an intellectual effort to position one’s own framework of thought within the global discourse as an equal subject, not an object that must be validated by Western metrics (Alatas, 2024). Furthermore, the issue of instrumental rationality, as outlined by Alavi, offers an important perspective on how the character of Islamic education is being eroded in the digital age (Alavi, 2008, 2010, 2013). While in classical theory character education is understood as the process of internalizing divine values (*tazkiyatun nafs*), in contemporary practice, character education is often reduced to soft skills training aimed at enhancing graduates’ marketability in the job market. This literature indicates that there is a dangerous axiological shift, in which a student’s success is measured by technical efficiency and compliance with norms that support economic productivity, rather than by the depth of their moral reflection and the sharpness of their critical reasoning. This comparison underscores that without *virtue epistemology*, Islamic education will lose its transformative power and become merely a factory for producing alienated labor (Alavi, 2008, 2010, 2013; Negara & Aziz, 2026).

In the context of practice at the madrasah and school levels, the gap between integration theory and policy implementation is a major concern. A study by Suyadi et al. in Indonesia shows that the paradigm of integration and interconnection often remains merely a discourse confined to the ivory towers of academia and fails to reach the classroom due to educators' limited competence in understanding the ontological dimensions of knowledge (Aziz et al., 2024; Suyadi, 2024). This phenomenon aligns with Tan's findings in Southeast Asia, which show that madrasahs, under pressure from neoliberal policies, are forced to commercialize and prioritize STEM disciplines over the humanities (Tan, 2012, 2014). A comparison of these two studies concludes that the weakness of Islamic education does not lie in a lack of curriculum blueprints, but rather in the inability to engage in robust negotiations with state interventions obsessed with quantitative economic growth.

The debate on pedagogy has also undergone an interesting paradigm shift, particularly with the emergence of the discourse on Islamic critical pedagogy championed by Waghid (Waghid, 2008; Waghid et al., 2020). While Islamic education has often been accused of being an authoritarian and passive model, Waghid's research demonstrates that the philosophical roots of Islam are, in fact, rich in the principles of justice (*'adl*) and compassion (*rahmah*), which are deeply emancipatory. A comparison with Western educational theories which often position critical pedagogy merely as a tool for questioning authority shows that Islamic critical pedagogy is unique because it critiques injustice while remaining grounded in the authority of revelation as a guiding principle. This serves as a strong antithesis to the criticism that Islamic education is anti-intellectual or irrelevant to the needs of social liberation (Waghid, 2008; Waghid et al., 2020).

On the other hand, a comparison with the experiences of Islamic educational institutions in Europe, as studied by Rissanen, offers a new dimension regarding citizenship and identity (Husni & Atoillah, 2022). Amid secular societies, Islamic education in Europe is not only striving to maintain its curriculum but also to demonstrate that the identity of the "*insan kamil*" (the perfect human being) can foster responsible, ethical citizens who contribute to pluralistic societies. This indicates that epistemological flexibility is key. Islamic education need not always be on the defensive; it can serve as a space for dialogue that enriches public discourse on ethics, social justice, and the purpose of life issues currently facing a crisis in many modern societies (Husni & Atoillah, 2022). The dialectical challenge between science and religion, as mapped out by Niyozov and Memon, also underscores that the traditional dichotomy between the two is a historical construct that must be deconstructed without delay (Niyozov & Memon, 2011, 2020). This literature suggests that rather than attempting to Islamize science mechanically, what is needed is to foster an epistemic awareness in which every scientific discovery is viewed as part of the revelation of God's majesty. This debate is crucial for reducing the tensions that frequently arise in Islamic educational institutions, where science is often perceived as a threat to faith. The existing literature agrees that the key lies in shifting perspectives: from viewing science as value-neutral data to seeing it as a trust that must be accounted for morally (Niyozov & Memon, 2011, 2020).

Furthermore, discussions regarding the concept of the "*insan kamil*" in contemporary

literature indicate a shift from an individualistic conception toward a communal and ecological one. Whereas in the past the "*insan kamil*" was often associated with the attainment of personal spirituality, current literature demands that this concept manifest in concrete actions that bring *rahmah* to the universe. This serves as a counter-critique to the tendency toward asceticism in education, which often distances students from social reality. By comparing findings from these various geographical contexts, it becomes clear that Islamic education is in the process of transitioning into a proactive civilizational force one that no longer merely reacts to modernity but offers an alternative for the future of global civilization (Hussien, 2022; Hussien et al., 2021).

To summarize the entire discussion, it can be asserted that the philosophy of Islamic education is not dying but is instead undergoing a rebirth that requires the courage to deconstruct old assumptions. The future success of Islamic education will not be determined by how advanced the technology used is, but rather by how deeply it is able to rediscover its ontological roots in order to respond to the challenges of the times. The discourse developed from this reputable literature provides confidence that by reintegrating tawhid, holistic epistemology, and critical pedagogy, Islamic education possesses sufficient intellectual capital to offer a more humane, just, and dignified educational model amid the vortex of mechanistic neoliberal hegemony (Hussien, 2022; Hussien et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the existential crisis of contemporary Islamic education is not merely a technical failure to adapt to modernity but a consequence of neoliberal hegemony that reduces education to a market-oriented instrument and marginalizes its spiritual and humanistic purposes. The findings demonstrate that instrumental rationality has generated an ontological crisis by separating intellectual development from spiritual purification. The study contributes theoretically by integrating tawhidic ontology, holistic epistemology, epistemic decolonization, and critical Islamic pedagogy to reconceptualize *insan kamil* as a dynamic emancipatory praxis rather than a static moral ideal. This synthesis provides a counter-hegemonic philosophical foundation through which Islamic educational institutions can preserve epistemic sovereignty, human dignity, and transcendental orientation while critically engaging dominant Eurocentric educational paradigms.

The novelty of this study lies in shifting Islamic education from a defensive-apologetic paradigm toward a proactive-critical orientation that connects knowledge with transformative divine values. Practically, policymakers and educators should move beyond excessive reliance on quantitative rankings, market rationality, and the commodification of STEM toward curricula and assessment systems that integrate intellectual, spiritual, ethical, and emancipatory dimensions. Nevertheless, the study is limited by its library research design and the absence of direct institutional-level empirical validation. Future research should therefore conduct classroom-based, comparative, and multicultural studies to examine the applicability of critical Islamic pedagogy across diverse sociopolitical contexts and develop holistic assessment frameworks grounded in tawhid, human dignity, and the roles of human beings as servants of Allah and *khalifah* on Earth.

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