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REORIENTING THE ROLE OF STUDENTS AS SUBJECTS OF LEARNING: A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS BASED ON STUDENT AGENCY AND TA'DIB

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Abstract

Twenty-first-century education requires a transformation from a one-way teaching model toward a learning ecosystem that positions students as active subjects in the learning process. In Islamic secondary schools in Indonesia, the *Kurikulum Merdeka* policy has encouraged flexibility and student-centered learning. However, teacher-centered learning practices remain dominant, so learning initiative, the ability to determine strategies, and self-reflection as the core of student agency are still developing partially and inconsistently. This study aims to examine the misalignment between participatory curriculum design and students' learning experiences at the classroom level, particularly in relation to the concept of *ta'dib* as the ethical-epistemic foundation of Islamic education. The discussion shows that *ta'dib* is often reduced to a set of rules of external compliance, without being accompanied by space for meaningful moral reflection. This condition indicates value disorientation and structural misalignment in educational practice, which affects the instability of students' subjectivity and moral agency. The conclusion of this study emphasizes the importance of reorienting Islamic learning so that it not only stresses formal

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compliance but also develops students' reflective awareness, moral responsibility, and active participation as part of holistic education.

Keywords: Student Agency; *Ta'dib*; *Kurikulum Merdeka*; Islamic Education; Holistic Education.

INTRODUCTION

Education plays a strategic role in shaping character, behavioral orientation, and the construction of students' mindsets. A meaningful educational process provides a foundation for individuals to develop the ability to autonomously assess right and wrong, while facilitating the emergence of a young generation capable of playing a constructive role in their social ecosystem (OECD, 2021). Education in the 21st century faces increasingly complex demands: not only developing students' cognitive competencies, but also their metacognitive, affective, and social abilities to adapt to a global and digital environment. At the international level, studies on student agency, namely the capacity of students to act proactively, make choices, reflect, and have a voice in the learning process, show that active student involvement correlates positively with learning outcomes and motivation (Stenalt & Lassesen, 2022). Meanwhile, in Indonesia, although the national curriculum policy has directed learning to be more participatory, the reality in the field shows that many learning models are still teacher-centered, so that the role of students is more passive.

In the national context, reports and observations in various secondary schools show that many students still wait for instructions from teachers, lack initiative in learning, and have minimal self-reflection skills as learners. For example, qualitative studies in secondary institutions show that collaborative learning approaches that emphasize active student participation result in higher motivation than traditional approaches.

This phenomenon is important because if students are only objects or recipients of knowledge, there is a risk of producing graduates who are less prepared to face social, technological, and global challenges and who lack an identity as lifelong learners. From an Islamic cultural and educational perspective, this is also relevant because it shapes students to be civilized, have moral responsibility, and be able to take on the role of agents of change in society.

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This phenomenon is important because if students are only objects or recipients of knowledge, there is a risk of producing graduates who are less prepared to face social, technological, and global challenges, and who lack an identity as lifelong learners. From an Islamic cultural and educational perspective, this is also relevant because it shapes students to be civilized, have moral responsibility, and be able to take on the role of agents of change in society. However, previous studies have not explored how students truly become subjects of learning in a profound sense: how they experience, reflect, choose, and act in the learning process based on Islamic values such as manners and responsibility. Studies on student agency in much of the literature find that the definition, implementation, and measurement of agency are still limited and have not been widely contextualized into non-Western or Islamic educational cultures (Christopher Brandt, 2024).

On the other hand, studies on Ta'dib, an Islamic educational concept proposed by Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, which emphasizes the integral formation of manners in the educational process, show that the aspect of manners is often marginalized in modern formal school practices (Ahmad, 2021). Furthermore, education in Al-Attas' perspective is positioned as an epistemic reconstruction process that reconnects the structure of knowledge to be in harmony with the Islamic worldview, as well as a mechanism for cultivating adab that serves to organize ethical discipline in the hierarchy of knowledge (Fathul Aziz et al., 2025). The combination of the active role of students as subjects with agency and the foundation of adab in Islamic education is still rarely the focus of empirical or conceptual research in Indonesia.

Based on these conditions, this study aims to conceptually analyze how students can be reoriented as subjects of learning through the integration of the concepts of student agency and Ta'dib, as well as to formulate a conceptual framework relevant to the context of Islamic education in Indonesia. The focus of the study is on the meaning, process, and dynamics of students as agents of learning (students as subjects) within the framework of adab values (ta'dib). Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich the literature on student agency with the perspectives of Islamic education and adab values, while practically providing

recommendations for learning designs that place students as the main actors and support character building through adab in the learning process.

Literature Review

21st century learning requires students to master not only cognitive competencies, but also metacognitive, affective, and social competencies that enable them to become lifelong learners in a global digital environment (Voogt & Roblin, 2012). In this framework, the concept of Student Agency is important because it focuses on the capacity of students to take an active role, choose, reflect on, and direct their own learning process. A systematic review found that student agency is often understood as the ability of students to regulate themselves, set goals, revise strategies, collaborate, and seek feedback in the context of their learning (Christopher Brandt, 2024). Social-constructivist and social-cognitive perspectives view student agency as not emerging independently, but through interactions with teachers, the social environment, and school culture (Christopher Brandt, 2024). In the context of secondary schools in Indonesia, research by Wirastuti (2024) shows that student agency, defined as initiative, responsibility for one's own learning, and control over the learning process, has a positive effect on student engagement and self-motivation (Emmaculata Ella Wirastuti et al., 2024). Thus, the theory of student agency provides a conceptual foundation for understanding how learners can transform from objects to subjects of learning.

Manyukhina and Wyse's (2019) study entitled "Learner Agency and the Curriculum: A Critical Realist Perspective" asserts that learner agency cannot be understood solely as an individual attribute (e.g., motivation or independence), but rather as a relational outcome between student capacity and the curriculum structure that enables or limits it (Manyukhina & Wyse, 2019). Through the lens of critical realism, the authors show how the design of objectives, content, pedagogy, resources, and power relations in schools mediate whether students can make meaningful learning decisions. These conceptual findings are important for Islamic education studies because they argue that reorienting students as subjects requires changes at the structural level (curriculum, classroom culture, and assessment practices), not merely training in independent learning skills.

At the conceptual mapping level, Torres Castro and Pineda-Baez (2023) in their article "How has the conceptualization of student agency in higher education evolved? Mapping the literature from 2000–2022" show a shift in the definition of agency from an individualistic approach to a socio-cultural approach that emphasizes voice, participation,

identity, and negotiation of meaning in learning communities (Torres Castro & Pineda-Báez, 2023). They highlight that much research uses the term agency inconsistently (often equating it with autonomy or self-regulation), so the operationalization and measurement of agency need to be made more explicit and contextual. This mapping forms the basis for conceptual research to use more specific dimensions of agency (e.g., voice/choice, goal setting, strategy regulation, and collaboration) and to place the school-cultural context as a determining variable.

Empirically, Taub et al. (2020) in their article "The agency effect: The impact of student agency on learning, emotions, and problem-solving behaviors in a game-based learning environment" show that when learning designs give students greater control and choice, there is an increase in learning achievement, more positive learning emotions, and more adaptive problem-solving behaviors (Taub et al., 2020). However, this study also indicates that the benefits of agency do not automatically appear; agency needs to be accompanied by scaffolding so that students are able to manage strategies and monitor their progress. These implications are relevant to the context of learning in the digital age, especially for designing learning experiences that provide "directed freedom" so that agency develops without losing learning regularity.

The findings of Taub et al. (2020) are reinforced and clarified by the limitations identified in the systematic review by Stenalt and Lassesen (2022) entitled "Does student agency benefit student learning? A systematic review of higher education research (Stenalt & Lassesen, 2022). The review shows a positive correlation between agency and learning quality, but the effect is highly dependent on the learning design conditions: clarity of objectives, quality of feedback, and the role of lecturers or teachers in facilitating reflection. They also emphasize the need to distinguish agency from mere "freedom of choice" because agency encompasses responsibility, reflection, and the ability to influence the learning process. For conceptual studies, these findings confirm that repositioning students as subjects needs to be built through reflective mechanisms and assessments that appreciate the process, not just cognitive outcomes.

In the Indonesian context, Burhanuddin and Arrafii (2023) through "Unfolding the Typology and Quality of the Learner Agency Practices in the Teachers' Implementation of the 2013 Curriculum in Indonesia: The Normalization Process Theory Perspective" show that agency practices often emerge as agency granted by teachers, so that their quality depends on the teachers' interpretation and the normalization of practices in schools

(Burhanuddin & Arrafii, 2022). Meanwhile, Patoulioti and Nilholm (2023) in "Being Heard?: Identifying Student Subject Positions in Research about School and Classroom Community" remind us that giving students a voice is always related to power relations; students can be positioned as subjects who are heard, restricted, or even silenced by the structure of the classroom community (Patoulioti & Nilholm, 2023). This gap provides an opportunity for the integration of agency with an ethical foundation: international agency literature is strong on the aspects of participation and curriculum design, but relatively rarely links it to an ethical-spiritual framework. on the other hand, ta'dib/adab studies such as Putra, Mawazi, and Hifza (2023) in "Analysis of Adab Education According to Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas" emphasize adab as the structuring of human-knowledge-God relations but have not yet operationalized agency as a reflective-moral competency in learning (Putra et al., 2023). The integration of student agency and ta'dib therefore offers a more complete framework for explaining how freedom of learning can be guided by adab, rather than merely external obedience.

Furthermore, a study by Ahmad (2021) found that the Islamic education framework and the concept of Ta'dib proposed by Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas offer an important philosophical foundation for the development of civilized human beings (insan kamil) through the integration of knowledge, action, and adab (Ahmad, 2021). A study by Anggraini and Dzakky (2024) in Al-Attas found that the term ta'dib goes beyond mere tarbiyah or ta'lim because it includes the development of faith, knowledge, and action, as well as the development of manners as a moral and social foundation (A. In applied research, Ashari (2025) found that the implementation of a ta'dib-based adab curriculum at SDIT Ar-Risalah (Surakarta) includes adab towards oneself, towards others, and towards the environment, which demonstrates the structural implementation of adab values (Ashari et al., 2025). Yunita's (2025) research also confirms that the concepts of manners and knowledge associated with ta'dib are relevant to digital transformation and the moral challenges of modern Islamic education (Yunita et al., 2025). Therefore, the concept of ta'dib provides a normative framework that can be used to ground the value of manners in a learning context that places students as agents of value and not just objects.

The relationship between student agency and ta'dib in the context of Islamic education opens up the possibility of integrating participatory and humanistic learning approaches with the Islamic framework of values. From the perspective of agency theory, students who have control, voice, and active participation in learning are more likely to

develop as independent and reflective learners. Meanwhile, a study by Sani & Achadi (2025) shows that from the perspective of ta'dib, meaningful education not only transfers knowledge but also shapes character, manners, and contextualizes values through habituation and exemplary behavior (Sani et al., 2025). This combination shows that learning that places students as subjects and facilitates their cognitive, affective, social, and spiritual growth will be in a stronger position to produce adaptive, civilized, and responsible graduates. However, although the literature on student agency and ta'dib has developed separately, there is still a theoretical and empirical gap regarding how the two frameworks integrate operationally in the context of Islamic education in Indonesia, particularly in learning design, measurement, and empirical research that includes adab values in the development of student agency.

To bridge this gap, this study uses a conceptual framework in which the independent variable is the dimensions of student agency (voice/choice, self-regulation, goal setting, collaboration) and the moderating or mediating variable is adab values (ta'dib) in the form of adab towards oneself, adab towards others, and adab towards the environment. while the dependent variable is student learning outcomes in terms of engagement, character, and reflective learning. This framework aims to explore how adab values can strengthen or facilitate the formation of student agency in the context of Islamic education in Indonesia. Thus, this theoretical framework establishes that the research will not only focus on student participation, but also on how moral values underpin and strengthen learning agency within the framework of Islamic education.

Table 1. Comparison of Previous Studies and the Present Study on Student Agency and Ta'dib

Aspect	Previous Studies	This Study	Difference
Merdeka Curriculum & Student-Centered Learning	Previous studies explain that the Merdeka Curriculum promotes flexible and student-centered learning, where teachers act as facilitators.	This study argues that although the Merdeka Curriculum supports SCL, classroom practices are still often dominated by teacher-centered learning.	Previous studies focus more on the ideal concept of the curriculum, while this study highlights the mismatch between curriculum policy and classroom practice.
Student Agency	Previous studies define student agency as students' ability to choose learning strategies, regulate learning, set goals, and reflect on their learning process.	This study uses student agency to explain the position of students as active subjects in the learning process.	This study does not only view agency as learning autonomy, but also connects it with Islamic educational values.
	Previous studies on ta'dib mostly focus on adab,	This study positions ta'dib as an ethical foundation that	Previous studies often discuss ta'dib normatively,

Aspect	Previous Studies	This Study	Difference
Ta'dib / Adab	morality, ethical formation, and the relationship between humans, knowledge, and God.	guides students' freedom, responsibility, and moral awareness in learning.	while this study connects ta'dib with student-centered learning and student agency.
Integration of Student Agency and Ta'dib	Previous studies generally discuss student agency and ta'dib separately.	This study integrates both concepts into one framework: students are active learning subjects, but their autonomy is guided by adab and moral responsibility.	This integration becomes the main novelty of this study.

Based on the comparison above, previous studies have discussed student agency and ta'dib separately. Studies on student agency mostly focus on autonomy, participation, self-regulation, and reflection, while studies on ta'dib emphasize adab, morality, and ethical formation in Islamic education. However, limited studies have integrated student agency and ta'dib into one conceptual framework, particularly in the context of Islamic secondary education in Indonesia. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by proposing an integrative framework that positions students as active subjects of learning while grounding their agency in adab, moral responsibility, and Islamic educational values.

METHODS

This study is structured as a conceptual study of qualitative methods with a content analysis approach (content analysis) based on literature, aims to examine the role of learners as subjects of learning through the integration of Student agency and Ta'dib dimensions. Primary Data in the form of empirical journal articles, educational theory books, curriculum policy documents, as well as the results of previous observations referenced in the file. Literature search is done through reputable academic repositories (e.g. campus database, Journal of Educational Psychology, Journal of Islamic education and internationally indexed). The focus of the search is directed to the consistency of the definition of student agency, the philosophical framework of Ta'dib according to al-Attas, as well as the problem of misalignment of curriculum implementation in Indonesian schools, especially the dominance of teachers and the weak internalization of adab in learning evaluation.

The analysis phase was conducted empirically-logically through steps: (1) reduction of relevant literature data, (2) coding open to key themes (voice/choice, self-regulation, goal-

setting, collaboration, self-manners, social manners, environmental manners, and evaluation problems), (3) theoretical comparison to see the wedge point and conceptual structure that has not been gradational. The analysis is directed not at statistical testing, but at the cause-and-effect linkages of empirical arguments between studies, for example the finding that increased agency correlates with motivation and positive emotions when Choice spaces are accompanied by aligned curriculum structures; or that adab is still operationalized as external compliance due to the dominance of teacher-centric pedagogy and Cognitive Assessment. The coding and comparison results are then synthesized to form a cohesive new conceptual proposition.

The final Output of the study is produced in the form of a conceptual integrative model that: (a) asserts the variable meaning of student agency in Indonesian secondary schools, (b) places Ta'dib as an ethical mediator through the adab dimension of self, others, and the environment, and (c) exposes a major structural issue: the disconnect between participatory curriculum design and evaluation practices that do not yet give weight to moral reflection so that student subjectivity is unstable and depends on teacher control. Conceptual conclusions are constructed systematically-normatively to provide learning design recommendations and theoretical implications. The research focuses on the theory of critical behaviorism, social constructivism, and the theory of adab-knowledge hierarchy al-Attas as the basis of argumentative logic in synthesis.

RESULTS

The results of this study are presented based on a conceptual analysis of recent literature on student agency and ta'dib in Islamic education. The findings are organized into five main categories: the main pattern of integration between student agency and ta'dib, the dimensions of student agency, the dimensions of ta'dib, the supporting learning conditions, and the proposed conceptual structure.

1. Main Finding: Student Agency Requires Ethical Direction through Ta'dib

The main finding of this study shows that student agency and ta'dib can be placed in one integrative learning framework. Student agency represents students' active role in learning, while ta'dib provides ethical direction for that active role. The reviewed literature shows that student agency is related to students' ability to make choices, set goals, regulate learning strategies, collaborate, and reflect on learning experiences. A systematic review by

Stenalt and Lassesen found that student agency is connected with learning quality, although its effect depends on how learning activities are designed and assessed.

At the same time, recent studies on ta'dib show that adab is positioned as an important element in reconstructing Islamic education, especially in responding to moral disconnection, digital distraction, and the weakening of ethical awareness in learn (Yunita et al., 2025). Based on the synthesis, the study identifies that student agency and ta'dib are complementary. Student agency gives students space to act as learning subjects, while ta'dib directs that space toward responsibility, self-discipline, respect, and moral awareness.

2. Dimensions of Student Agency Identified in Learning

The study identifies five main dimensions of student agency: voice, choice, goal setting, self-regulation, and reflection. Voice refers to students' opportunity to express opinions, ask questions, and communicate learning needs. Choice refers to students' opportunity to select learning strategies, learning resources, or forms of task completion. Goal setting refers to students' ability to determine learning targets. Self-regulation refers to students' ability to manage learning behavior, time, motivation, and strategy. Reflection refers to students' ability to evaluate learning progress and identify difficulties.

Recent studies show that agency develops when students are not only given freedom, but also supported by curriculum structure. Schoots-Snijder, Tigelaar, and Admiraal reviewed 86 empirical studies and found that student agency in secondary education is influenced by the alignment of curriculum goals, content, learning process, and assessment (Schoots-Snijder et al., 2025). Empirical research in game-based learning also shows that different levels of student agency influence learning, problem-solving behavior, emotion, and engagement. Taub and colleagues examined agency in a game-based learning environment and reported that agency was connected to learning outcomes, problem-solving patterns, and affective responses during learning (Taub et al., 2020).

3. Dimensions of Ta'dib Identified in Islamic Learning

The study identifies five main dimensions of ta'dib in the learning process: *adab toward oneself, adab toward teachers, adab toward knowledge, adab toward peers, and adab toward the environment*.

Adab toward oneself appears in honesty, discipline, responsibility, and self-control. Adab toward teachers appears in respect, attentiveness, and willingness to receive guidance. Adab toward knowledge appears in seriousness, intellectual humility, and proper use of

knowledge. Adab toward peers appears in cooperation, empathy, fairness, and respect for differences. Adab toward the environment appears in care for the learning space and responsible behavior toward the surrounding context.

Recent literature on ta'dib shows that the concept remains relevant for contemporary Islamic education. A 2025 study on the integration of knowledge and adab states that al-Attas' concept of adab is used to respond to moral disconnection, digital distraction, and the commodification of knowledge in modern education (Yunita et al., 2025). Another recent study on ta'dib and contemporary Islamic education also places ta'dib as a framework for connecting knowledge, manners, and ethical formation (Samhudi et al., 2025). The findings show that ta'dib functions as an ethical component in learning. It does not only regulate external behavior, but also directs students' awareness in receiving, using, and applying knowledge.

4. Proposed Conceptual Structure

Based on the findings, this study formulates a conceptual structure consisting of three main components. The first component is student agency, which includes voice, choice, goal setting, self-regulation, collaboration, and reflection. The second component is ta'dib, which includes adab toward oneself, teachers, knowledge, peers, and the environment. The third component is learning outcomes, which include learning engagement, reflective awareness, moral responsibility, and civilized behavior.

The relationship among these components can be described as follows:

Component	Main Indicators	Observable Forms in Learning
Student agency	Voice, choice, goal setting, self-regulation, collaboration, reflection	Asking questions, choosing strategies, setting targets, working with peers, evaluating progress
Ta'dib	Adab toward oneself, teachers, knowledge, peers, environment	Discipline, respect, honesty, responsibility, ethical use of knowledge
Learning outcomes	Engagement, reflective awareness, moral responsibility, civilized behavior	Active participation, self-evaluation, responsible action, respectful interaction

The findings show that the integration of student agency and ta'dib produces a learning structure in which students are positioned as active participants while being guided by ethical values.

DISCUSSION

This study uses a literature-based approach by analyzing recent articles on student agency and ta'dib in the context of Islamic education. The analysis shows that international and national literature is relatively consistent in defining student agency as the capacity of students to set goals, control the learning process, and act reflectively on their learning experiences (Christopher Brandt, 2024). In the context of schools and classrooms, agency is evident through the dimensions of voice/choice, self-regulation, and active student involvement in designing and evaluating their own learning (Emmaculata Ella Wirastuti et al., 2024). Empirical studies in Indonesian schools show that when students are given the space to determine how they learn, they tend to have higher motivation and involvement than when they are merely recipients of teacher instruction (In'Ami et al., 2025)

1. The Unstable Subjectivity Awareness of Learners

The role of learners as subjects of learning is reconstructed in the literature through an emphasis on autonomy, participation, and self-reflection as the core of student agency. Experimental research in game-based learning environments shows that higher levels of agency, for example through freedom to choose activities and learning paths, have a positive impact on students' learning emotions and academic outcomes (Taub et al., 2020). A study conducted by Schoots-Snijder (2025) A systematic review of 86 empirical articles on student agency in secondary education resulted in curriculum guidelines that emphasize the importance of alignment between goals, content, process, and assessment to support student agency in a sustainable manner (Schoots-Snijder et al., 2025). In the context of Indonesian education, studies on the application of emancipatory education principles in the Merdeka Curriculum also emphasize that repositioning students as subjects of learning is at the core of education reform oriented towards justice and social transformation (Sheptian et al., 2026).

The concept of ta'dib as the foundation of manners in Islamic education reorganizes the relationship between students and knowledge, teachers, and social reality (Septoyadi & Akbar, 2023) Studies on the thoughts of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas show that ta'dib is not merely discipline or etiquette, but a process of true recognition of God, oneself, and the world so that students occupy the right position in the order of existence and knowledge (Septoyadi & Akbar, 2023). Conceptual and historical research explains that al-Attas positions ta'dib as a more comprehensive term than tarbiyah and ta'lim because it integrates the dimensions of knowledge, action, and manners simultaneously (Husni & Hayden, 2024) Contemporary studies in Indonesia show that the concept of ta'dib is relevant to the problem

of value disorientation in modern education and can be used as a framework for formulating a more holistic Islamic education centered on the formation of civilized individuals.

2. Integration of Values and Manners That Is Not Yet Substantial

Ta'dib has begun to be implemented in educational practices through manners curricula and value-based learning models in various Islamic educational institutions (Yunita et al., 2025). Research on the ta'dib approach to character building has found that manners towards oneself, others, and the environment are integrated through habituation, role modeling, and systematic behavioral regulation.Other studies show that the concept of integrating knowledge and adab is important in responding to the challenges of digital transformation and moral crisis, so that learning not only transfers knowledge but also instills wisdom and ethical responsibility (Yunita et al., 2025). A literature study on the concepts of ta'dib and peer interaction indicates that manners are not only internalized at the individual level but also regulate the social interaction patterns of students, thereby forming a civilized learning ecosystem (Surya Pratama dan Sri Wahyuni et al., 2023).

However, various recent studies show that the integration of these values and manners is often still normative and has not substantially touched on the structural dimensions of the curriculum. The development of the adab curriculum at the madrasah and elementary school levels, for example, emphasizes the habit of worship, order, and manners, but students' reflective competence, moral decision-making skills, and critical dialogue space are still limited (Uri & Harahap, 2025). Many teachers still position adab as a set of behavioral rules that must be obeyed rather than as a process of cultivating values that strengthen students' moral agency. As a result, adab appears as external obedience that depends on teacher control and formal regulations, rather than as an ethical awareness that grows from within students (Mujib, 2022).

On the other hand, efforts to integrate science and adab at the policy and scientific discourse levels have not been fully realized in the design of everyday learning experiences. Studies on the integration of knowledge and manners from al-Attas' perspective emphasize that the reconstruction of Islamic education in the digital age requires unity between the curriculum structure, pedagogical strategies, and assessment systems that consistently guide students towards recognizing the hierarchy of knowledge, awareness of tawhid, and ethical responsibility in using knowledge (Yunita et al., 2025). However, research on the problems of Islamic religious education in the digital age shows that learning practices still tend to be

cognitively oriented, fixated on completing material and evaluation requirements, while the management of digital literacy, school culture, and family involvement in strengthening manners has not been systematically integrated (Mansir, 2022). In this context, the integration of adab values can be said to be insubstantial because it has not been realized as a curricular framework that unifies objectives, content, processes, and assessment into a holistic educational design.

3. Reconstructing the Meaning of Student Agency in Contemporary Islamic Learning

The concept of student agency in recent literature is understood relatively consistently as the capacity of learners to set learning goals, control the learning process, and reflect on their learning experiences (*Paul Main, 2025*) In the context of Islamic education, this meaning is highly relevant because it positions learners not only as recipients of knowledge, but also as subjects who are self-aware of the learning process. Student agency enables students to view learning as an activity that has personal meaning, not merely a curricular obligation (*Paul Main, 2025*). With the development of educational paradigms that emphasize independence, reflective competence, and character development, student agency has become an important variable in shaping adaptive, critical, and empowered learner profiles.

In the context of schools and classrooms, student agency is evident in students' ability to determine strategies, choose learning activities, and make decisions based on their own self-evaluation (Emmaculata Ella Wirastuti et al., 2024). The interaction between voice, choice, and self-regulation are the main pillars in building this agency. When students are given the opportunity to be involved in learning planning, they find it easier to develop a sense of ownership of the learning process This active involvement creates a more positive environment, where students feel valued, respected, and have the space to develop their creativity and thinking skills independently.

Giving students the space to determine their learning methods and paths can have a direct impact on their motivation and involvement. Students with higher agency usually show greater participation in discussions, take the initiative to explore knowledge further, and are better able to complete learning challenges independently (Emmaculata Ella Wirastuti et al., 2024). Conversely, in a learning pattern that is entirely directed by the teacher, students tend to be passive and rely on instructions without having the internal drive to develop.

Compared to the research conducted by Hikmah (2023), which states that "teachers or educators are the determinants of successful learning, while students are objects to be developed," this study tends to view students as objects of pedagogy. Meanwhile, the findings in this study show a significant paradigm shift. Student agency is an important indicator that learning is no longer one-way, but is developed through dialogue, participation, and reflection (Mastuki Hs; Lathifatul Hasanah, 2011). This thinking is in line with the global direction of placing students as "co-designers" of learning, not just implementers. Philosophically, this brings the principles of Islamic education closer to modern pedagogical developments that value the intellectual freedom and moral awareness of students.

The link between student agency and Islamic learning has the potential to enrich contemporary educational models. The principles of autonomy, participation, and self-reflection are in line with Islamic values that emphasize personal responsibility, active pursuit of knowledge, and the development of one's potential as a trust. Thus, student agency is not only compatible with Islamic education, but can actually strengthen the humanistic vision of Islamic education that is oriented towards the formation of civilized individuals.

4. Subjectivity of learners who have not been stable in the learning process

The results of research by Patoulioti & Nilholm (2023) show that the subjectivity of learners as learning subjects is still in an unstable position, namely how the position of learners as subjects in learning is still in a labile condition or has not been fully actualized (Patoulioti & Nilholm, 2023). Although various literatures emphasize the importance of student autonomy in learning, practice in the field shows that students often switch between active and passive positions. This inconsistency is influenced by the culture of learning in schools, teacher-student relationship patterns, and cognitive and affective readiness of learners. In other words, although the concept of agency has been introduced through policies or curricula, the internalization of agency values has not yet fully penetrated into students ' daily practices (Burhanuddin & Arrafii, 2022).

Experimental research in game - based learning environments shows that freedom to choose activities, learning paths, and task completion strategies can improve positive emotions and academic outcomes (Ilangovan, 2024). But the improvement only persists if the student has good self-regulation ability. Unpreparedness for self-regulation is often the main obstacle that hinders the stability of the agency (Code, 2020). Students who are

accustomed to a teacher-centric approach need time to understand how to make learning decisions independently and responsibly (Purwaningsih et al., 2020).

The systematic study by Schoots-Snijder (2025) provides a new understanding that agency cannot develop simply by giving students freedom (Schoots-Snijder et al., 2025). Agency thrives when that freedom is accompanied by a curriculum structure that is aligned between purpose, content, process, and assessment (Manyukhina & Wyse, 2019). This is relevant to the condition of Indonesia, which often experiences inconsistencies between curriculum policies and their implementation. Students are given room to argue or choose learning strategies, but the assessment system still focuses on cognitive achievement that inhibits the expression of Student agency.

Curriculum Merdeka in Indonesia, for example, promotes education to give flexibility to teachers and schools to design learning according to the context, needs, interests of students, such as the recommended learning approach is Student-Centered Learning (SCL) where students are positioned as the center of the learning process, actively determine learning strategies, work collaboratively, manage learning processes and responsibilities, while teachers act as facilitators (Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar di Sekolah Penggerak Restu Rahayu et al., 2022). However, as in Enelitian conducted Rizal (2025) found that the practice in schools still shows the dominance of teachers in determining the method, material, and form of evaluation (Rizal, 2025)This causes the student's subjectivity not to develop naturally, but to depend on the teacher's instructions. Students become accustomed to being obedient, but not accustomed to making decisions (Lionitha Ibrahim et al., 2025).

This subjectivity instability shows that Indonesian learning is in a transition phase between the old and new paradigms. Paradigm shift requires systemic improvement, ranging from educator-student relationship patterns to evaluation practices that support independence and self-reflection. Without fundamental change, the perspective that learners are the subject of learning will only be discourse, not real practice.

5. Ta'dib as an ethical foundation in the formation of the learner's subject

The concept of Ta'dib developed by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas provides an important perspective in the reconstruction of Islamic education (Ahmad, 2021). Ta'dib is not merely etiquette or physical discipline, but a process of cultivating adab that directs learners to recognize their proper position in relation to God, Science, and social reality (Ahmad, 2021). This perspective makes Ta'dib an ethical foundation that regulates all

learning activities and forms a civilized character. In the realm of modern education, this concept gives direction so that learning is not trapped in technical competence alone, but remains tied to moral and spiritual values.

This literature research confirms that Ta'dib is positioned as a holistic Islamic educational framework with adab as the center of personality formation, beyond the function of Ta'lim as teaching and expanding disciplines, and beyond tarbiyah which is commonly interpreted as spiritual and moral guidance although both remain an important part of the Islamic education system (Saiful Anwar et al., 2025). Ta'dib combines the two in an integrative framework that emphasizes the balance between intellectual ability and ethical awareness. Thus, Ta'dib provides a framework for forming learners who are not only cognitively intelligent, but also characterful and civilized.

In the context of the moral crisis and value disorientation plaguing modern education, the concept of Ta'dib is becoming increasingly relevant. Technology-and competency-based learning tends to ignore affective development, such as empathy, ethics, and human values (Okur-Berberoglu, 2024). Ta'dib offers an approach that humanizes learners through the process of habituation to adab, the formation of self-awareness, as well as the introduction of the correct hierarchy of knowledge. This is especially important in the digital age, where an abundance of information is often not balanced by the ability to sort ethically.

In the context of Islamic learning, Ta'dib makes clear the purpose of education, namely the formation of civilized human beings. To achieve this goal, students need to recognize and respect science as a mandate, understand the role of teachers as moral guides, and integrate ethical values in the use of knowledge. Thus, learning no longer focuses on cognitive achievement, but on the internalization of values that make learners capable of acting ethically in their daily lives. Research findings show that the concept of Ta'dib provides a strong philosophical foundation for the development of student moral agency (Saiful Anwar et al., 2025). In Islamic education, it encourages students to not only receive knowledge through teaching mechanisms, but also to be active independently in seeking, understanding, and applying knowledge ethically as a form of their responsibility to God and society (Sandria et al., 2022). Ta'dib ensures that the agency that develops is not just freedom to choose learning activities, but freedom that is bound by values, ethics, and spiritual awareness.

Thus, Ta'dib can be a reinforcement for learning models that integrate learning autonomy and the formation of morality. Ta'dib not only forms civilized learners, but also directs their freedom so as not to be separated from the values of monotheism. The integration between the student agency and Ta'dib gives a new direction in Islamic education to create independent, critical, and moral learners.

6. Structural gaps in the integration of knowledge and manners in Islamic education

The study of al-Attas ' perspective asserts that the integration of Science and adab should shape the overall design of Islamic education (Surya Pratama dan Sri Wahyuni et al., 2023). Research by Hs & Hasanah (2011) and Sanyoto et al, (2023) that the basis of curriculum development must be oriented to Tawhid, understand the hierarchy of Science, and instill ethical responsibility in the use of knowledge and how the curriculum should be designed with a tawhid orientation so that the moral-spiritual and intellectual aspects are integrated (Mastuki Hs; Lathifatul Hasanah, 2011; Sanyoto et al., 2023). However, this condition has not been reflected in daily learning practices that tend to be pragmatic and oriented towards exam results. The difference between philosophical ideality and the reality of implementation is the main obstacle in the construction of a holistic curriculum (Mahmudulhassan et al., 2025).

Research on the problems of Islamic religious education in the digital age shows that learning still focuses on delivering content without providing a moral context that is relevant to learners ' digital lives (Mansir, 2022). Digital literacy, school culture, and family involvement as important factors in strengthening adab have not been effectively integrated in the education system (Elis Lisyawati, Mohsen, Umul Hidayati, 2023). This leads to learners understanding moral values theoretically, but not being able to apply them in a complex digital environment.

This gap is also evident in the pedagogical strategies that teachers use. Many teachers use lecture or rote methods that emphasize the transfer of information, rather than dialogue or reflection (El-Makrifat| et al., 2023). This method does not provide space for students to experience the integration of science and adab authentically. Whereas such integration can only be realized through learning experiences that require active involvement of students in understanding the meaning of science and the moral responsibility that comes with it.

Assessment systems that tend to prioritize cognitive aspects further widen this structural gap. Ethical values and character do not have significant weight in the evaluation

of learning, so the teacher does not feel obliged to integrate these aspects in depth. This makes adab not part of the indicators of learning success, but only an additional activity. Taking into account these conditions, it can be concluded that the integration of adab values has not yet become a full-fledged and cohesive curricular framework. Islamic education requires a comprehensive reform that includes curriculum, pedagogy, assessment systems, and school culture so that the integration of science and adab can be realized holistically. Without structural reform, the goal of forming a civilized human being that includes intellectual, moral, spiritual, and social dimensions will be difficult to achieve systemically.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study confirms that efforts to reposition students as subjects of learning in Islamic secondary schools in Indonesia have not been implemented systemically, although conceptual support and policy direction have encouraged participatory learning. Empirical evidence shows that learners are still in the pattern of learning waiting for teacher instructions, so that the initiative, regulation strategies, and self-reflection as a core component of the student agency has not developed consistently. This condition indicates the existence of pedagogical cultural barriers and the failure of learning experiences to foster a sense of ownership in the learning process, whereas socio-cognitive and socio-cultural theories assert that students can transform into active subjects when freedom of choice is accompanied by meaningful learning interaction structures.

This study also reveals that Ta'dib as the foundation of ethics in Islamic education, although recognized as the most comprehensive concept in building the integration of science, charity, and adab, is still reduced to external compliance rules at the level of pedagogy and curriculum implementative. Ta'dib has not been placed as an ethical mediator who has equivalent curricular weight in learning design and evaluation, so the internalization of adab has not been connected with the strengthening of the moral agency of learners. The absence of moral-reflective weight in the assessment system and teacher-centric relations makes the student's subjectivity unstable, dependent on external control, and fails to form an authentic ethical-intellectual consciousness.

Theoretically-practically, this study offers a synthesis that student-as-subject Islamic learning can only be realized if the student agency dimension is closely tied to TA'dib within a framework of Curriculum-Pedagogy-evaluation design that is aligned, not as two normative concepts that stand apart. The Islamic education reform Agenda needs to give weight to

moral reflection in assessment, provide critical-dialogical experience in the classroom, and reconstruct the role of teachers as facilitators of culture-adab, not merely the authority of the direction of learning. Without these improvements, student-centered learning and the internalization of adab will continue to be a conceptual discourse, not an empirical reality in Indonesian Islamic secondary schools.

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