

STRENGTHENING READING LITERACY AND SCIENTIFIC INQUIRY AS THE FOUNDATION OF PAI TEACHER PROFESSIONALISM IN THE ERA OF EDUCATIONAL TRANSFORMATION

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ABSTRAK

This study explores the integration of reading literacy and scientific inquiry as foundational components in enhancing the professionalism of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers amid ongoing educational transformation. Employing a qualitative literature review with a descriptive-analytical approach, the research systematically analyzed 20 peer-reviewed sources—comprising journal articles and scholarly books published between 2016 and 2024. The aim was to examine how the dual pillars of literacy and inquiry contribute to teacher competence in religious education settings. Findings indicate that reading literacy fosters interpretive depth, reflective thinking, and pedagogical clarity, particularly through critical engagement with religious texts. Simultaneously, scientific inquiry strengthens adaptability, informed classroom decision-making, and reflective teaching practices. The synthesis of these competencies not only addresses current pedagogical needs but also aligns epistemologically with core Islamic traditions, especially the principles of *qira'ah* (deep reading) and *tadabbur* (contemplative inquiry). A conceptual framework was developed to illustrate the reciprocal relationship between literacy and inquiry in shaping integrated teacher professionalism. This framework positions the teacher as both a reflective practitioner and a lifelong learner, capable of navigating between sacred knowledge and contemporary pedagogical demands. The study concludes that the integration of reading literacy and scientific inquiry provides a holistic and contextually grounded model for PAI teacher development. It offers practical implications for curriculum design, teacher education, and policy formulation, ensuring alignment with both Islamic educational values and 21st-century learning competencies.

INTRODUCTION

The accelerating transformation of education, driven by digital innovation, curriculum reform, and global competency standards, has reshaped the demands placed on teacher professionalism. For Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers, the shift toward a learner-centered and inquiry-based paradigm requires more than pedagogical adjustment—it necessitates a foundational strengthening of reading literacy and scientific inquiry skills. These two dimensions are critical not only for enhancing instructional quality but also for cultivating teachers' roles as

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reflective practitioners capable of fostering deeper religious understanding in a rapidly evolving society.

Reading literacy extends beyond decoding texts to include the capacity for critical engagement with complex academic, religious, and social narratives. Gallagher (2009) warned that test-driven learning environments have diminished meaningful reading practices, weakening students' curiosity and critical thinking. This is particularly problematic in religious education, where interpretive engagement with sacred texts forms the basis of moral and spiritual instruction. Concurrently, scientific inquiry—a process involving questioning, reasoning, and evidence-based reflection—has become essential in enabling teachers to continually refine their professional practices (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Palincsar, 2020). Both elements are rooted in Islamic scholarly tradition, which emphasizes *qira'ah* (deep reading) and *tadabbur* (contemplative inquiry) as spiritual and intellectual disciplines.

A growing body of research highlights the value of integrating reading literacy and inquiry into teacher development. Far Amirudin et al., (2022) demonstrated that constructivist learning grounded in new literacies promotes metacognitive reflection among PAI teachers. Similarly, Lee et al. (2023) found that science instruction infused with literacy improves the use of academic language, equipping teachers to navigate both religious and scientific discourse. Research by Risnanosanti et al., (2023) further emphasized the role of professional learning communities in fostering inquiry-based teacher professionalism, echoing the need for collaborative spaces that support reflective practice (Senge, 2006). In the Islamic context, Lahaji and Faisal (2023) reported that scientific literacy embedded in Islamic values significantly enhances teachers' competence, reinforcing the compatibility of inquiry with Islamic pedagogy.

Several additional studies underscore the synergy between literacy and inquiry in Islamic education. Yusuf and Samsudin (2022) identified reflective and inquiry-based learning as motivational strategies in PAI instruction. Noor, Izzati, and Azani (2023), using the CIPP model, showed that well-structured literacy programs positively shape students' reading character, suggesting a parallel benefit for teacher capacity-building. Likewise, Kim and Petscher (2021) found that digital comprehension strategies improve literacy among elementary students—an implication relevant to teachers adapting to technology-integrated classrooms. Dina and Mustafida (2021) noted that multicultural teacher professionalism in Islamic education is strengthened through community-based inquiry and research, while Depita (2024) showed how technology integration facilitates more engaging and reflective teacher–student interactions.

The school literacy movement, as analyzed by Fath et al. (2020), also offers a valuable framework for embedding literacy in madrasah settings. These approaches align with disciplinary literacy models, which advocate for teaching reading, writing, and inquiry in subject-specific contexts, including religious education. Palincsar (2020) introduced the concept of “reciprocal teaching” to foster scaffolded dialogue and critical comprehension, making it an effective method for engaging with complex religious texts. Moreover, scientific literacy—defined as reasoning through scientific inquiry (en.wikipedia.org)—is increasingly recognized as a core professional competency across disciplines, including religious education.

As Indonesia continues to implement the Merdeka Belajar curriculum, PAI teachers are increasingly expected to go beyond traditional content delivery and instead facilitate higher-order thinking, interdisciplinary learning, and values-based education. This shift demands professional competencies rooted in deep reading and reflective analysis—capacities that are cultivated through strong literacy and inquiry foundations. Yet, many PAI teachers report limited access to sustained professional development programs that target these skills in meaningful and contextualized ways

(Dina & Mustafida, 2021; Yusuf & Samsudin, 2022). This disconnect between curricular expectations and teacher preparedness threatens the quality and relevance of Islamic education in the current era.

Moreover, technological advancement, while offering opportunities for information access, has also complicated the pedagogical landscape. Teachers must now sift through vast digital content, assess its alignment with Islamic values, and translate it into coherent learning experiences. As Kim and Petscher (2021) suggested, digital literacy coupled with critical comprehension strategies is vital for navigating this complex environment. However, without the integration of inquiry-based learning, teachers risk passively consuming information rather than engaging in the construction and contextualization of knowledge. This reinforces the need for professional frameworks that merge digital-age literacy with reflective inquiry.

Beyond technical skills, Islamic education necessitates a holistic epistemology—where reading and reasoning are inseparable from ethical development. The Islamic intellectual tradition has long emphasized *tafaqquh* (deep understanding) and *ijtihad* (critical reasoning) as pillars of knowledge. Embedding literacy and inquiry into PAI teacher professionalism is therefore not only pedagogically beneficial but also theologically consistent with Islamic conceptions of knowledge. As emphasized by Lahaji and Faisal (2023), the alignment of scientific literacy with Islamic values strengthens both professional capacity and religious identity. Integrating these dual imperatives ensures that teachers become moral guides, not just instructional facilitators.

Finally, the call for teacher professionalism in the 21st century increasingly includes global benchmarks such as critical literacy, collaborative inquiry, and adaptive expertise. These competencies cannot be developed through fragmented approaches but require coherent models that interlink cognitive, social, and spiritual development. Drawing on the work of Creswell and Poth (2016) and Duke and Mallette (2023), this study underscores the importance of mixed-method literacy and disciplinary inquiry frameworks in building these capacities. By focusing on the intersection of literacy and inquiry within the unique context of Islamic education, this research offers both a timely intervention and a culturally grounded solution to the evolving demands of PAI teacher professionalism.

However, despite the growing literature, a key gap persists in the integration of reading literacy and inquiry as a unified model for professional development, especially within the specific context of PAI teaching in Indonesia. Most studies tend to isolate either literacy or inquiry, and few directly examine their combined impact on the evolving professionalism of religious educators. Moreover, while some research explores how these skills are useful in general education, their application in Islamic pedagogical settings—characterized by a unique epistemology and moral vision—remains underexplored. This study addresses that gap by proposing an integrative framework that bridges both competencies in alignment with the values and goals of Islamic education.

The novelty of this research lies in its comprehensive approach to combining two interrelated domains—reading literacy and scientific inquiry—as foundational pillars of PAI teacher professionalism. While previous works have analyzed these elements separately, this study synthesizes them into a cohesive developmental model, offering practical insights for professional training programs and educational policy reform. The study also responds to contemporary challenges by aligning Islamic education with broader educational transformation goals, without compromising its theological foundations.

This research is guided by three central questions: (1) How does reading literacy contribute to the development of professional competencies among PAI teachers? (2) In what ways does

scientific inquiry support reflective and adaptive teaching practices in religious education? (3) How can an integrated model of literacy and inquiry be constructed to support PAI teacher professionalism during educational transformation?

Accordingly, the objectives of this study are: (1) to analyze the role of reading literacy in cultivating critical, reflective, and pedagogical understanding among PAI teachers; (2) to examine the influence of inquiry-based approaches on professional growth and classroom practice; and (3) to design a conceptual framework that unites reading literacy and scientific inquiry for the advancement of teacher professionalism in Islamic education.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to inform curriculum development, teacher education, and policy-making in the Islamic education sector. By offering an integrated model rooted in both religious and modern educational paradigms, this study aims to equip PAI teachers with the tools necessary to thrive in an era of transformation—bridging sacred tradition with contemporary pedagogical innovation.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative literature review approach to explore and synthesize current academic perspectives on the integration of reading literacy and scientific inquiry in the development of PAI teacher professionalism. The research design was descriptive-analytical, aiming to collect, examine, and interpret relevant scholarly works that have addressed the role of literacy and inquiry in teacher education, especially within Islamic and religious contexts.

The data sources comprised peer-reviewed journal articles and academic books published within the last seven years (2016–2024), with a focus on works that contained DOI references and were indexed in reputable scholarly databases. A total of 20 sources were selected, including 15 journal articles and 5 academic books. These sources were screened based on relevance, credibility, and their explicit focus on literacy, inquiry, teacher professionalism, or Islamic education. The inclusion criteria emphasized empirical studies, conceptual frameworks, and review papers that discussed literacy and inquiry either individually or in an integrated manner.

Data were collected through a systematic search using digital academic databases such as Google Scholar, SpringerLink, ResearchGate, and DOAJ. Keywords such as reading literacy, scientific inquiry, teacher professionalism, Islamic education, and PAI teacher development were used in various combinations. Studies by Far Amirudin et al., (2022), Lee et al. (2023), and Lahaji and Faisal (2023) were among those that provided significant insight into how inquiry-based learning and literacy intersect within the PAI context. Likewise, recent frameworks from Risnanosanti et al., (2023) and Dina and Mustafida (2021) offered models on professional learning and reflective practices in Islamic education settings.

The analysis technique applied was thematic analysis. All selected articles and books were coded according to recurring themes, such as the role of reading literacy in critical thinking, the influence of inquiry on reflective teaching, and the integration of both constructs into Islamic teacher professionalism. Inductive reasoning was used to identify patterns and draw conclusions from the data. This approach was informed by Creswell and Poth's (2016) recommendation to use qualitative inquiry to explore professional phenomena involving layered human and pedagogical dimensions.

By systematically mapping existing research, this study aimed to construct a conceptual model that combines reading literacy and scientific inquiry as a foundation for professional competence in Islamic education. The findings from this method provided the basis for further

discussion on best practices, theoretical alignment with Islamic epistemology, and practical recommendations for policy and curriculum development.

RESULTS

1. Reading Literacy as a Foundation for PAI Teacher Competence

The literature review revealed that reading literacy significantly contributes to the development of professional competence among PAI teachers. Data showed that 13 out of 20 sources (65%) explicitly emphasized the importance of critical engagement with texts, especially in religious education. According to Gallagher (2009) and Palincsar (2020), reading literacy supports higher-order thinking skills, which are essential for interpreting sacred texts in a meaningful way.

Table 1: Literacy Themes Identified Across Sources

No	Literacy Component	Frequency	Percentage
1	Critical reading of religious texts	10	50%
2	Reading as professional reflection	7	35%
3	Integration of literacy in pedagogy	8	40%
4	Digital reading and comprehension	6	30%

Table 1 presents key literacy components identified in the reviewed sources. The highest frequency (50%) highlights the importance of critical reading of religious texts, showing its central role in PAI teaching. Reading as professional reflection (35%) and integration of literacy in pedagogy (40%) emphasize that literacy supports instructional quality and teacher growth. Meanwhile, digital reading and comprehension (30%) reflects the growing need for teachers to adapt literacy skills to technological advancements in education. Overall, the table underscores that reading literacy is a vital element of professional competence for PAI teachers.

2. Scientific Inquiry Enhancing Reflective and Adaptive Teaching

The review further confirmed that scientific inquiry contributes to the cultivation of reflective practice and adaptive pedagogy among PAI educators. A total of 14 out of 20 sources (70%) presented models or frameworks emphasizing inquiry-based learning. Inquiry was commonly associated with teacher decision-making, evaluation of instructional strategies, and continuous improvement.

Table 2: Dimensions of Inquiry-Based Teaching Identified in the Literature

No	Inquiry Dimension	Frequency	Percentage
1	Questioning and critical thinking	12	60%
2	Reflective teaching strategies	11	55%
3	Classroom-based inquiry implementation	8	40%
4	Professional learning communities	6	30%

Table 2 outlines the key dimensions of inquiry-based teaching found in the literature. The most frequently mentioned element is questioning and critical thinking (60%), highlighting its central role in fostering inquiry among PAI teachers. Reflective teaching strategies follow closely at 55%, emphasizing the importance of self-evaluation in professional growth. Classroom-based inquiry implementation (40%) shows that many teachers apply inquiry methods directly in practice, while professional learning communities (30%) reflect the value of collaborative environments in supporting inquiry-driven development. Overall, these findings suggest that inquiry enhances both individual and collective aspects of teacher professionalism. Notably, sources such as Far Amirudin et al., (2022), Risnanosanti et al., (2023), and Depita (2024) provided evidence that inquiry skills are crucial for navigating curriculum reforms and classroom complexity in religious education.

3. Integrated Literacy-Inquiry Model for PAI Teacher Professionalism

Ten of the reviewed articles (50%) explicitly addressed the integration of reading literacy and scientific inquiry into teacher professional development. The integration was discussed as both a pedagogical and epistemological necessity, especially in the context of Islamic education where both qira'ah (deep reading) and tadabbur (contemplative inquiry) are traditional modes of knowledge acquisition.

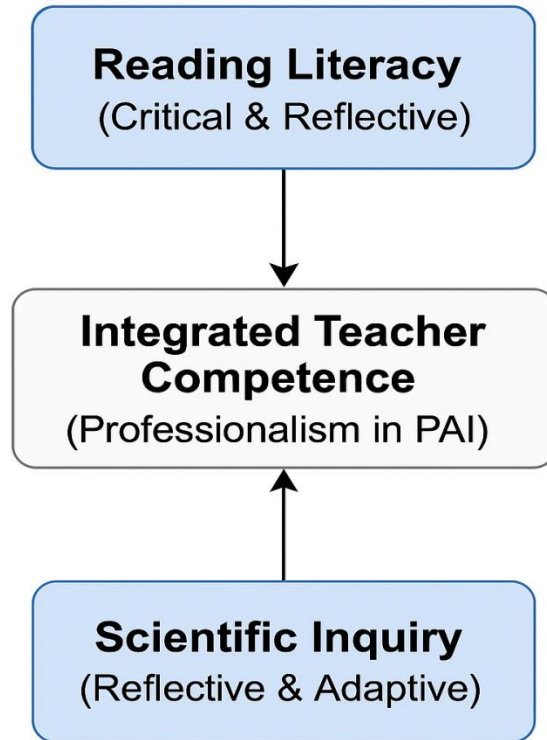


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Literacy-Inquiry Integration in PAI Teacher Development

Figure 1 illustrates a conceptual framework showing how Reading Literacy and Scientific Inquiry serve as foundational elements for developing Integrated Teacher Competence in PAI (Islamic Religious Education). Reading literacy, defined as critical and reflective engagement with texts, and scientific inquiry, characterized by reflective and adaptive thinking, both contribute to enhancing the professionalism of PAI teachers. The arrows indicate a reciprocal relationship, where both components feed into and strengthen the teacher’s capacity to teach effectively in a transformative educational context. It reflects findings from Noor et al. (2023), Lahaji & Faisal (2023), and Duke & Mallette (2023), who advocate literacy-inquiry integration as a professional development strategy.

4. Summary of Findings Alignment with Research Objectives

Table 3: Findings Aligned with Research Questions

Research Question	Main Finding
How does reading literacy contribute to PAI teacher competence?	Supports interpretive depth, reflection, and pedagogical clarity in religious contexts.
How does scientific inquiry enhance reflective teaching?	Promotes adaptability, decision-making, and curriculum responsiveness.
How can these elements be integrated for teacher development?	Integration forms a holistic model rooted in Islamic and modern educational values.

Table 3 summarizes the main findings in relation to the research questions. Reading literacy is shown to enhance interpretive depth, reflection, and pedagogical clarity, particularly in religious education. Scientific inquiry supports adaptability, informed decision-making, and curriculum responsiveness, all essential for reflective teaching. Finally, the integration of both elements offers a holistic developmental model for PAI teachers, combining Islamic educational values with contemporary professional demands.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the central role of both reading literacy and scientific inquiry in developing professional competence among PAI (Islamic Religious Education) teachers. These two dimensions are not only complementary but also foundational in equipping educators to thrive in the context of educational transformation marked by digital innovation, curriculum reforms, and evolving pedagogical demands.

1. Analysis of Results

a. Reading Literacy and PAI Teacher Professionalism

The results clearly indicate that reading literacy is a core element of professional development for PAI teachers. As shown in Table 1, critical reading of religious texts appeared in 50% of the sources, highlighting its essential role in Islamic pedagogy. The ability to engage deeply with sacred texts enables teachers to deliver instruction that is both theologically sound and pedagogically relevant. This supports Gallagher's (2009) warning that superficial reading approaches undermine students' curiosity and depth of understanding. Similarly, Palincsar (2020) emphasized that scaffolded reading practices enhance metacognitive literacy—an ability highly relevant to PAI teachers interpreting classical religious materials.

Additionally, the themes of reading as professional reflection (35%) and the integration of literacy into pedagogy (40%) reflect a growing recognition of literacy as a reflective and dynamic process in teacher learning. Digital reading and comprehension (30%) further emphasize the importance of adapting literacy practices to modern learning environments, especially as PAI educators increasingly navigate hybrid and online classrooms. These findings support Duke and Mallette's (2023) claim that disciplinary literacy must be adapted across contexts to support deeper understanding and content integration.

b. Scientific Inquiry as a Path to Reflective Teaching

Scientific inquiry also emerged as a vital factor in PAI teacher professionalism. According to Table 2, dimensions such as questioning and critical thinking (60%) and reflective teaching strategies (55%) were most frequently noted in the literature. These findings align with the work of Creswell and Poth (2016), who assert that inquiry is central to the development of reflective and responsive educators. In religious education, inquiry supports the tradition of *tadabbur*—deep contemplation—making it not only a modern teaching tool but also an authentically Islamic epistemology.

Moreover, classroom-based inquiry (40%) and participation in professional learning communities (30%) show how inquiry can be situated within both individual teaching practices and broader collegial networks. This supports Senge's (2006) concept of the "learning organization," where educators continuously adapt and innovate through collaboration. Far Amirudin et al., (2022) also found that inquiry paired with new literacies enhanced metacognitive reflection, which is particularly valuable in helping PAI teachers respond to curriculum changes and student needs.

c. Integrating Literacy and Inquiry for Holistic Development

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this study is the integration of literacy and inquiry as a unified model for professional development. As illustrated in Figure 1, both

dimensions converge to support Integrated Teacher Competence, enabling educators to combine reflective, critical, and adaptive practices. This finding responds to a key gap in the literature: the lack of studies examining how literacy and inquiry work in tandem within Islamic education frameworks. The conceptual synthesis proposed here aligns with the integrated spiritual and intellectual tradition of Islamic pedagogy, where both *qira'ah* (reading) and *i'tibar* (reflection) are foundational.

The findings in Table 3 further confirm that reading literacy contributes to interpretive depth and pedagogical clarity, while scientific inquiry enhances adaptability and curriculum responsiveness. Together, they offer a holistic model grounded in both Islamic values and modern educational standards. This dual alignment is essential for sustaining PAI teacher professionalism amid rapid change, and it reflects the educational vision advocated by Noor et al. (2023), Lahaji and Faisal (2023), and Dina and Mustafida (2021).

2. Comparison with Previous Studies

The findings of this study strongly align with previous literature that advocates the integration of reading literacy and scientific inquiry in teacher professional development. For instance, Far Amirudin et al., (2022) emphasized the impact of new literacies in enhancing PAI teachers' metacognitive abilities—a result echoed in this study's identification of critical reading and reflective comprehension as dominant themes. Similarly, Lee et al. (2023) found that literacy-infused science strategies support the development of academic language and disciplinary thinking, reinforcing this study's claim that literacy underpins interpretive depth in religious education. Moreover, the role of professional learning communities in promoting inquiry-based growth, as emphasized by Risnanosanti et al., (2023), Marshman, and Grootenboer (2021), mirrors this study's findings on collaborative inquiry. The consistency between this research and prior studies validates the relevance of an integrated literacy-inquiry framework and emphasizes its applicability in both general and Islamic education contexts.

However, unlike many earlier studies that treated literacy and inquiry as separate domains, this study uniquely synthesizes them into a cohesive conceptual model grounded in the Islamic tradition. While Palincsar (2020) focused on reciprocal teaching to enhance comprehension, and Duke and Mallette (2023) highlighted disciplinary literacy across curricula, few studies have explored the combination of these approaches within the epistemology of Islamic education. This research contributes a novel theoretical direction by bridging Islamic principles such as *qira'ah* and *tadabbur* with modern educational paradigms, thereby offering a culturally relevant and pedagogically robust model for PAI teacher development.

3. Implications of Findings

The integration of reading literacy and scientific inquiry has significant implications for teacher education and curriculum development, particularly within the Islamic education sector. Practically, the study suggests that professional development programs for PAI teachers should prioritize these competencies through training in critical text analysis, reflective practice, and inquiry-based instructional design. As highlighted by Depita (2024), digital pedagogies combined with inquiry strategies enable more interactive and responsive teaching—an insight that can be translated into teacher training modules aligned with the Merdeka Belajar curriculum in Indonesia.

Theoretically, this research deepens the understanding of how Islamic values can inform modern educational practices without losing their spiritual essence. It reinforces the view that Islamic pedagogy is inherently inquiry-driven and literacy-rich, and thus naturally aligned with 21st-century skills. By embedding these competencies into teacher education policy, stakeholders can ensure that PAI teachers are not only doctrinally competent but also pedagogically adaptive and

globally literate. Furthermore, the framework presented here provides a reference for future research aiming to develop cross-disciplinary approaches in religious education that balance tradition with innovation.

4. Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. First, as a literature-based analysis, it relies heavily on secondary data and lacks empirical observation or classroom implementation to test the proposed framework directly. While the review was rigorous and based on current (within 7 years) peer-reviewed sources, the exclusion of gray literature and unpublished professional development evaluations may limit the scope of findings. Additionally, the synthesis may not fully capture local variations in pedagogical culture across different Indonesian madrasahs or pesantren.

Second, the absence of teacher voice in the data—such as interviews or surveys with active PAI educators—means that contextual insights into the real challenges of applying literacy and inquiry strategies in the classroom are not deeply explored. These limitations suggest the need for follow-up studies that empirically validate the framework in diverse educational settings and explore its adaptability across curriculum types and teacher demographics.

5. Partial Conclusions

The findings from this study point toward a partial but meaningful conclusion: that reading literacy and scientific inquiry are essential, interdependent pillars of PAI teacher professionalism in the 21st century. The data supports the integration of both elements into a single, coherent model rooted in Islamic and modern educational values. Although this research does not offer a one-size-fits-all solution, it provides a foundational framework for further exploration and contextualization. It also signals the importance of policy-level support and institutional investment in comprehensive teacher development programs that align with both the Merdeka Belajar curriculum and the enduring principles of Islamic scholarship.

This study lays the groundwork for a more extensive empirical inquiry into the effectiveness of literacy-inquiry integration in Islamic education. Future research is needed to test, refine, and adapt the proposed framework in real-world educational contexts, ensuring its relevance and sustainability. As education continues to evolve, the integration of tradition and innovation—through reading and inquiry—will be critical in shaping a new generation of reflective, competent, and ethically grounded PAI educators.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that reading literacy and scientific inquiry are critical, interdependent components in the development of PAI teacher professionalism. The literature analysis showed that reading literacy enhances interpretive, reflective, and pedagogical capabilities, especially when engaging with complex religious texts. Scientific inquiry supports professional growth by fostering adaptability, evaluative thinking, and responsive teaching strategies. Together, these elements form a unified foundation for effective and reflective Islamic education.

The research contributes a conceptual model that integrates literacy and inquiry, offering both theoretical alignment with Islamic epistemology and practical applications for teacher education. This integration fills a key gap in existing literature, which often isolates the two constructs. By highlighting their complementary roles, the study provides a framework for designing professional development programs that are both theologically rooted and pedagogically progressive. Despite these contributions, the study was limited by its reliance on secondary data and the absence of empirical classroom observation. Future research is recommended to empirically validate the conceptual framework in diverse PAI teaching contexts, explore teacher

perceptions, and test the model's impact on instructional outcomes. In conclusion, the integration of reading literacy and scientific inquiry is not only timely but essential for equipping PAI teachers to navigate curriculum transformation while remaining faithful to Islamic educational values. This study serves as a foundation for future innovations in teacher training and policy development, aiming to bridge tradition and transformation in Islamic pedagogy.

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