

Ta'awun-Based Cooperative Learning in Islamic Religious Education: A Systematic Review of Digital Collaborative Pedagogy in the Merdeka Curriculum

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Abstract

Digital individualism – characterized by isolated digital behaviors and prioritizing personal interests over collective engagement – poses a fundamental challenge to Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in the Merdeka Curriculum era. This study systematically analyses the implementation of ta'awun-based Cooperative Learning as a pedagogical response to this challenge. This study conducted a Systematic Literature Review following the PRISMA 2020 protocol, synthesizing 30 peer-reviewed articles published between 2020 and 2025 from Google Scholar, Dimensions, and DOAJ. Thematic analysis and quality appraisal using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool were applied. The review identifies three substantive findings. First, Cooperative Learning has transformed from manual group work into hybrid digital variants such as Digital Jigsaw. Yet, preserving Islamic values in these spaces depends not on technological sophistication but on three pedagogical conditions: cultivating adab al-ikhtilaf in digital deliberation, prioritizing tafaquh over superficial consensus, and framing digital collaboration as an act of ihsan. Second, the axiological overlap between Cooperative Learning and the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project positions Gotong Royong not merely as a civic value but as a theological imperative rooted in the Qur'anic command of ta'awun. Third, gamified Team Games Tournament effectively sustains engagement for memorization-based material when competition is framed as fastabiqul khairat. The study proposes a conceptual framework positioning ta'awun as the integrating mechanism that animates positive interdependence, promotive interaction, accountability, social skills, and group processing with theological purpose. These findings imply that teacher education institutions must cultivate Digital Collaborative Pedagogy – the capacity to infuse digital collaboration with spiritual meaning – rather than merely technical competence in digital tools.

Keywords: Ta'awun; Cooperative Learning; Islamic Religious Education; Digital Individualism; Merdeka Curriculum; Systematic Literature Review

INTRODUCTION

The digital age has introduced a paradox that now defines an entire generation's social experience. On one hand, adolescents are more connected than at any point in human history; on the other, they exhibit escalating indicators of social alienation and emotional isolation. At the World Economic Forum 2025, experts warned that unregulated smartphone and social media use is producing what has been described as a failed social experiment, with rising anxiety, depression, and an inability to form healthy interpersonal relationships among those born after 2000 (World Economic Forum, 2025). This concern is not confined to the Global North. UNESCO's 2024 Global Education Monitoring Report, while focused on the Pacific, articulated a principle of universal relevance: technology is a tool, not a panacea, and its successful adoption in education depends on pedagogy, teacher training, and student support

rather than mere device access (UNESCO, 2024). In Islamic education specifically, integrating cooperative learning with digital technology has significantly improved both academic outcomes and the internalization of Islamic values. Yet, this integration remains an underexplored pedagogical frontier (Azka et al., 2024).

In Indonesia, these global tensions take on a distinctive urgency. The Merdeka Curriculum, the nation's most recent comprehensive education reform, explicitly prioritizes student-centered learning, collaboration, and the development of the Pancasila Student Profile. However, the 2022 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) results show that Indonesian students still struggle with collaborative problem-solving and effective teamwork, and teacher observations confirm persistent difficulties in peer learning and group interaction (OECD, 2023). This gap between curricular ambition and classroom reality is compounded by implementation challenges documented across the archipelago. In the 3T regions (frontier, outermost, and underdeveloped areas), teachers report insufficient training for curriculum implementation, limited use of digital platforms, and limited access to electricity and internet (Sellya et al., 2026). Even where infrastructure exists, technology's pedagogical integration often remains superficial. A 2024 study of Islamic primary school teacher candidates found that while digital skills were rated "very good" (85%), digital ethics – the capacity to engage respectfully and critically in digital spaces – was rated merely "good" (68.8%), with over half of respondents unable to distinguish types of electronic interaction and transaction (Rahmah et al., 2025). The problem, therefore, is not simply access to technology but the ethical and spiritual formation required to turn digital connection into genuine collaboration.

A review of the scholarly literature reveals a field in transition, with both promising developments and unresolved contradictions. Research on cooperative learning in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) has established that when cooperative structures are infused with Islamic values – *ta'awun* (mutual assistance), *ukhuwah* (brotherhood), and *shura* (consultation) – the learning process is transformed from a merely instructional technique into a pedagogical and spiritual act (Usman et al., 2025). Azka, Soraya, and Hamdani (2024) showed that cooperative learning models integrated with digital technology not only improve academic outcomes but also instill Islamic values, and they recommend expanding these models across educational levels and providing adequate training for educators. Pohan and Khairuddin (2025) provided experimental evidence that the Team Games Tournament (TGT) model, when embedded with Islamic principles and local wisdom, significantly enhanced student enthusiasm across cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions, with the strongest gains in affective engagement. These findings converge on a consensus: cooperative learning, when culturally and theologically grounded, produces outcomes that transcend conventional academic metrics. However, a tension persists in the literature. Much of the existing research emphasizes cognitive performance or participation as the primary outcome, leaving the affective and spiritual dimensions of digital collaboration underexamined (Budiningsih et al., 2026). Furthermore, most studies focus on higher education or isolated classroom interventions, with limited attention to the systemic integration of *ta'awun*-based cooperative learning within the Merdeka Curriculum's policy architecture.

This review reveals three specific gaps. Theoretically, the literature lacks a coherent framework that positions *ta'awun* not merely as a cultural supplement to cooperative learning but as the foundational logic of digital collaboration itself. Existing studies treat Islamic values as additive elements rather than as the constitutive spirit of pedagogical design, leaving unanswered how the spiritual essence of cooperation can be preserved when interaction migrates to digital platforms where social cues and embodied presence are diminished (Adiyono & Sholeh, 2025). Methodologically, the field is dominated by short-term, single-site interventions with small samples, precluding claims about sustainability or scalability across the diverse institutional contexts of Indonesian Islamic education (Ridwan et al., 2022). Contextually, no systematic synthesis has examined how *ta'awun*-based cooperative learning operates specifically within the Merdeka Curriculum ecosystem, particularly at the secondary school level where adolescent vulnerability to digital individualism is most acute (Sun et al., 2026). This study addresses these gaps by conducting a Systematic Literature Review that synthesizes empirical evidence on implementing *ta'awun*-based cooperative learning in IRE within the Merdeka Curriculum and the digital era, and by proposing a conceptual framework that positions spiritual values as the integrating mechanism of digital pedagogical design.

This study makes three contributions. Theoretically, it advances a framework that reconceptualizes digital cooperative learning through the lens of *ta'awun*, shifting the analytical focus from technological tools to the spiritual and ethical conditions that render digital collaboration meaningful. Methodologically, it applies a rigorous, PRISMA-guided systematic review protocol to a body of literature not previously synthesized through this lens, producing comprehensive, replicable findings. Practically, it offers evidence-based recommendations for teacher education institutions and policymakers seeking to align IRE pedagogy with the Merdeka Curriculum's collaborative vision while resisting the fragmenting pressures of digital individualism. The study's central objective is therefore to systematically analyze how Islamic Religious Education implements *ta'awun*-based cooperative learning models within the Merdeka Curriculum and the digital era, identifying effective practices, persistent barriers, and the pedagogical conditions under which digital collaboration becomes a vehicle for character formation rather than mere information exchange.

METHOD

This study used a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design to identify, evaluate, and interpret relevant studies on implementing *ta'awun*-based Cooperative Learning in Islamic Religious Education within the Merdeka Curriculum and the digital era. The SLR approach was selected because it enables transparent mapping of topics, theories, and trends while minimizing researcher subjectivity (Snyder, 2019). The review protocol followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines to ensure the validity and replicability of the data selection process (Page et al., 2021). The PRISMA 2020 statement provides a 27-item checklist that addresses the introduction, methods, results, and discussion sections of a systematic review, and its expanded checklist details reporting recommendations for each item (Page et al., 2021). This study adhered to

these reporting standards throughout the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion phases.

Research Design and Search Strategy

We conducted the literature search in March 2025 using three major academic databases: Google Scholar, Dimensions, and DOAJ. We selected these databases for their comprehensive indexing of educational literature and their ability to provide stable search results for systematic reviews (Gusenbauer & Haddaway, 2020). The search strategy employed Boolean operators (AND, OR) with the following search string: ("Pendidikan Agama Islam" OR "PAI" OR "Islamic Religious Education" OR "Islamic Education") AND ("Cooperative Learning" OR "Pembelajaran Kooperatif" OR "Pembelajaran Kelompok" OR "Jigsaw" OR "Team Games Tournament") AND ("Karakter" OR "Character" OR "Akhlak" OR "Ta'awun") AND ("Era Digital" OR "Digital Era" OR "Kurikulum Merdeka" OR "Merdeka Curriculum" OR "Pancasila Student Profile"). This string was designed to capture the review's four core concepts: Islamic Religious Education, Cooperative Learning, Character, and the Digital Era with the Merdeka Curriculum. We expanded the keywords with synonyms and related terms to ensure comprehensive coverage.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure data quality, we applied strict inclusion and exclusion criteria. We limited articles to publications from 2020 to 2025 to ensure the findings were current, particularly regarding post-pandemic adaptation and implementation of the latest curriculum. This time restriction helps keep the findings relevant to the current educational technology context (Xiao & Watson, 2019). Only peer-reviewed journal articles in Indonesian and English were included, while proceedings, book chapters, and editorial articles were excluded. The inclusion criteria also required a focus on implementing Cooperative Learning in Islamic Religious Education; studies on general subjects unrelated to Islamic education were excluded. Full-text availability was required; abstracts only or paywalled articles were excluded.

Data Selection Procedure (PRISMA)

The literature search and selection process is summarised in the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram. In the initial identification stage, 680 article records were found from three databases: Google Scholar (n = 450), Dimensions (n = 150), and DOAJ (n = 80). After duplicate checking, 330 records were removed, leaving 350 unique articles for screening. During screening, we reviewed 350 articles for relevance based on title and abstract. A total of 290 articles were excluded because their topics were not relevant to the research focus. The remaining 60 articles were downloaded in full text for eligibility testing. At this stage, 30 articles were excluded for the following reasons: document type was not a scientific journal article (n = 12), publication before 2020 (n = 8), and absence of relevant empirical data (n = 10). Ultimately, 30 articles met all inclusion criteria and were selected as the final sample.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques to identify patterns, themes, and meanings emerging from the qualitative data of the selected articles, following the six-stage

procedure developed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. This approach was chosen because it provides a flexible yet rigorous framework for synthesizing heterogeneous qualitative findings across studies with diverse methodological designs.

Quality Assessment (MMAT)

To ensure methodological rigor and credibility, a quality assessment was conducted using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) version 2018 (Hong et al., 2018). The MMAT was selected because it is designed to appraise the methodological quality of five study categories: qualitative, quantitative randomized controlled trials, quantitative non-randomized, quantitative descriptive, and mixed methods (Hong et al., 2018). Because the 30 included articles used diverse research designs, from qualitative case studies to quantitative surveys and classroom action research, the MMAT provided a flexible yet rigorous framework for quality appraisal. Each study was assessed against the five MMAT criteria relevant to its design category. Each criterion was scored on a three-point scale: 1 = met, 0.5 = partially met, and 0 = not met. We calculated a total quality score by summing scores across all criteria, with a maximum of 5. Studies with a total quality score below 3.0 were excluded from the final synthesis. Of the 30 articles initially selected, 26 scored 4.0 or above, three scored 3.5, and one scored 3.0. The mean quality score across all included studies was 4.2 (SD = 0.6), indicating a high overall quality of the evidence base. To ensure inter-rater reliability, two reviewers independently assessed 20% of the articles (n = 6). The agreement rate was 91.7%, with a Cohen's kappa of 0.84, indicating strong agreement. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus. The quality assessment results were used to filter low-quality studies and inform interpretation, with higher-quality studies given greater weight in the thematic synthesis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The systematic search and selection process yielded 30 peer-reviewed articles that met all inclusion criteria. These studies were published between 2020 and 2025, with a notable concentration in the most recent two years. Figure 1 presents the distribution of selected articles by publication year, revealing a clear upward trend: only three articles were published in 2020, four in 2021, five in 2022, six in 2023, seven in 2024, and five in the first quarter of 2025. This temporal pattern is not coincidental. It reflects an academic response to two concurrent disruptions: the post-pandemic acceleration of education digitalization and the national rollout of the Merdeka Curriculum. Research from 2020–2021, such as Setiawan and Ma'rifatullah (2020), focused primarily on the "culture shock" of basic technology adoption. By contrast, studies from 2024–2025, including those by Yulia et al. (2025) and Brillianty et al. (2025), have shifted toward seamlessly integrating technology into cooperative methods. The discourse has shifted from whether technology is needed to how technology strengthens character.

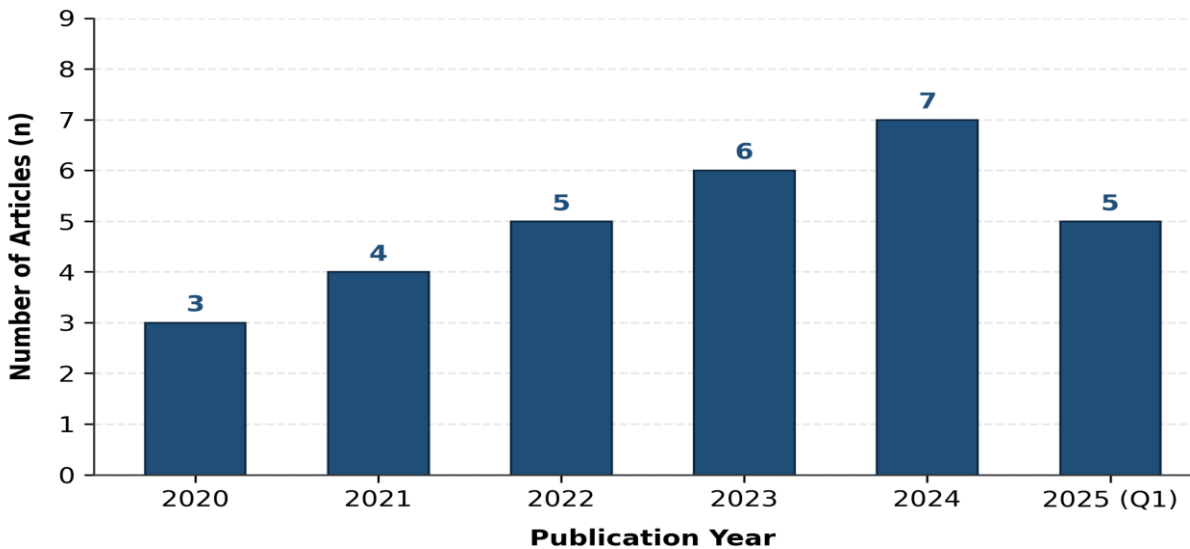


Figure 1

Distribution of Selected Articles by Publication Year (n = 30)

Note. Data compiled from the 30 articles included in the final synthesis.

Table 1 classifies the 30 selected articles by technology type, specific method, character impact, and frequency. The most widely adopted digital technology in IRE Cooperative Learning is collaborative platforms (n = 8), particularly Google Workspace and Canva, which are predominantly used to implement Digital Jigsaw. This finding suggests that IRE teachers gravitate toward tools that enable co-creation rather than mere information sharing—a pedagogical choice that aligns with the Islamic principle of *ta’awun*. Gamification applications (n = 6) and project-based digital media (n = 7) follow closely, indicating that IRE teachers are increasingly experimenting with diverse digital modalities to sustain student engagement. However, the classification also reveals a notable gap: only four studies (13.3%) examined the use of Learning Management Systems (LMS) for structured cooperative learning, suggesting that systematic integration of cooperative pedagogy into institutional digital infrastructure remains underexplored. The character impacts documented across the studies cluster around three themes: collaboration and tolerance (collaborative platforms), healthy competition and motivation (gamification), and creativity and responsibility (project-based media). These themes align with the Pancasila Student Profile and Islamic values of *ta’awun*, *ukhuwah*, and *amanah*, reinforcing the argument that Cooperative Learning in IRE is not merely a pedagogical technique but a mechanism for character formation.

Table 1

Classification of 30 Selected Articles by Technology, Method, and Character Impact

Technology Type	Specific Method	Character Impact	Frequency (n)
Collaborative Platforms	Google Workspace, Canva, Padlet	Digital Jigsaw Collaboration, Adab al-Ikhtilaf, Tolerance	8

Gamification Apps	Quizizz, Kahoot, Wordwall	Team Games Tournament (TGT) Healthy Competition (Fastabiqul Khairat), Motivation	6
Project-Based Media	Digital Infographic, Video, Podcast	Project-Based Cooperative Learning Creativity, Amanah (Responsibility), Ihsan	7
Social Messaging & Group Discussion	WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube	Group Discussion & Peer Teaching Ukhuwah, Empathy, Ethics	5
Learning Management Systems	Google Classroom, Moodle	Structured Cooperative Learning Discipline, Accountability, Ta'awun	4
Mixed/Unspecified	Various	Multiple outcomes	0
Total			30

Note. Frequencies reflect the number of articles in which each technology type was the primary intervention.

In terms of subject population, the literature is dominated by research at the Senior High School (SMA) and Vocational High School (SMK) levels (45%), followed by Junior High School (SMP) (35%) and Elementary School (SD) (20%) (see Figure 2). The high level of attention researchers give to secondary education aligns with psychosocial development theory, which posits that adolescence is a crucial phase of self-discovery and is vulnerable to digital moral degradation, such as cyberbullying and gadget addiction, as noted by Salisa (2024). Cooperative Learning intervention at this level is therefore considered the most strategic for strengthening students' character by reinforcing peer-group social cohesion.

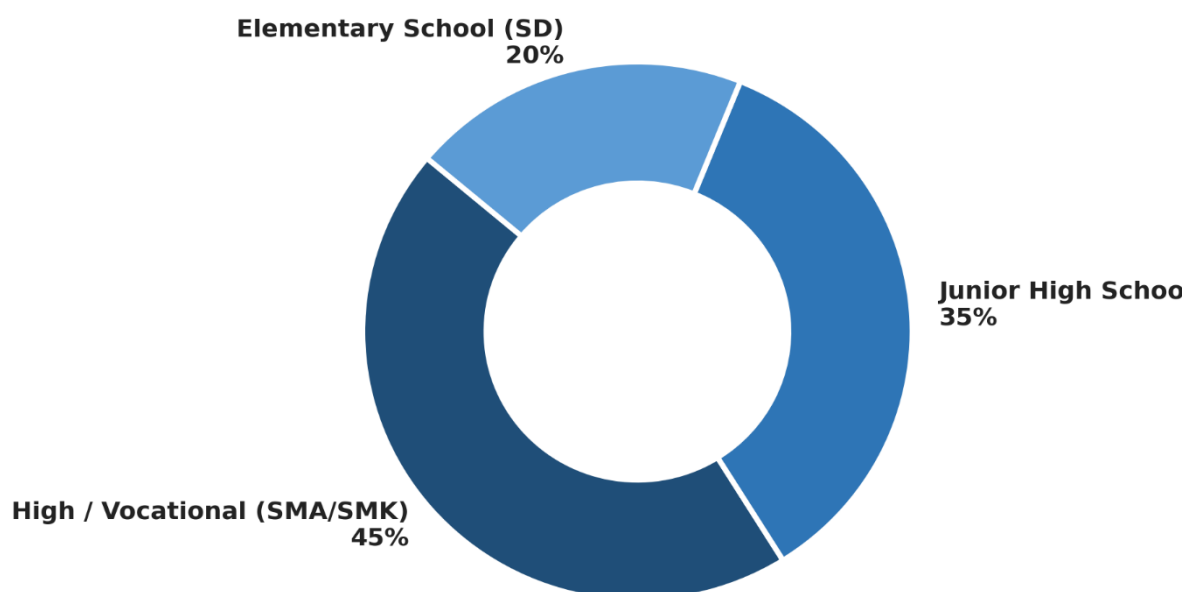


Figure 2

Distribution of Selected Articles by Educational Level (n = 30)

Note. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Methodologically, the selected studies demonstrate a diversification of approaches (see Table 2). Although Descriptive Qualitative methods remain dominant ($n = 12$), research and Development (R&D) designs ($n = 7$) and Classroom Action Research (PTK) ($n = 8$) have increased significantly. Quantitative studies, including quasi-experimental and survey designs, account for the remaining three articles. This methodological distribution suggests that IRE academics and practitioners are in an experimental phase, seeking the most adaptive learning-model formula for the Merdeka Curriculum. Unlike Latuconsina's (2023) findings, which identified many quantitative correlational studies, this review found that contemporary IRE research focuses more on learning product innovation and process improvement.

Table 2
Methodological Approaches of Selected Articles

Research Design	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Descriptive Qualitative	12	40.0
Classroom Action Research (PTK)	8	26.7
Research and Development (R&D)	7	23.3
Quantitative (Quasi-Experimental/Survey)	3	10.0
Total	30	100.0

Note. Percentages may not sum to exactly 100 due to rounding.

Beyond bibliometric description, the synthesis of findings reveals three substantive patterns that answer the study's research questions. First, *ta'awun*-based Cooperative Learning in the digital era has shifted significantly from manual cooperative models to hybrid variants. The Jigsaw model remains a favorite in IRE learning, especially for narrative-historical material. Still, recent research shows that expert group discussions once held in a classroom circle now expand to collaborative platforms such as Google Workspace or Canva for Education. Students do not just discuss; they co-create. However, the preservation of Islamic values in digital Jigsaw depends on three pedagogical conditions identified across the studies: the cultivation of *adab al-ikhtilaf* (the ethics of disagreement) in digital deliberation, the integration of *tafaquh* (deep understanding) over *tafaqud* (superficial agreement), and the cultivation of *ihsan* (excellence) in digital collaboration. These conditions distinguish *ta'awun*-based digital cooperation from conventional group work, transforming the digital platform from a potential site of conflict into a training ground for *wasathiyah* (moderation).

Second, the strong overlap between Cooperative Learning and the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) in the Merdeka Curriculum emerged as a consistent finding. The "Gotong Royong" (cooperation) pillar of the Pancasila Student Profile is often understood as a civic value, a legacy of Indonesia's communal traditions. However, from an Islamic perspective, "Gotong Royong" is not merely a civic value but a theological imperative that resonates deeply with the Qur'anic concept of *ta'awun* and the Prophetic tradition of *ukhuwah*. The Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on Gotong Royong therefore finds its deepest justification not in civic nationalism but in Islamic theology. When the curriculum calls for

students to work together, it does not merely promote social skills or prepare students for collaborative workplaces; it creates space for the practice of *ta'awun*, which Islam regards as an expression of faith.

Third, for memorization-based material such as *Asmaul Husna* or tajwid rules, a variant of TGT integrated with gamification applications (Quizizz, Kahoot) has proven to be very effective. Digital inter-team competition can increase students' intrinsic motivation. The element of healthy competition (*fastabiqul khairat*) in digital TGT makes IRE learning, which is usually considered rigid and boring, dynamic and enjoyable. This finding aligns with the broader literature on gamification in education, which suggests that well-designed competitive elements can enhance engagement without compromising learning objectives.

Discussion

The synthesis of 30 selected articles reveals that *ta'awun*-based Cooperative Learning in Islamic Religious Education is not merely an instructional technique but a theological and pedagogical response to the character paradox of the digital age. This discussion interprets the three substantive patterns identified in the Results section, positions them within the broader scholarly conversation, and draws out their theoretical and practical implications.

The first pattern—the shift from manual cooperative models to hybrid digital variants such as Digital Jigsaw—raises a fundamental question the existing literature has not adequately addressed: What distinguishes *ta'awun*-based digital collaboration from conventional online group work? The synthesis suggests that the answer lies not in the technological platform but in three pedagogical conditions that successful IRE teachers consistently enact. Cultivating *adab al-ikhtilaf* (the ethics of disagreement) in digital deliberation transforms the platform from a potential site of conflict into a training ground for *wasathiyah* (moderation). In face-to-face discussions, teachers can monitor body language and tone of voice and intervene when conversations become disrespectful. On digital platforms such as Google Docs comment threads or WhatsApp group discussions, these social cues are absent, and students are more likely to use harsh, dismissive, or intolerant language. The literature documents several strategies that successful IRE teachers employ: explicitly modeling respectful disagreement in teacher-written comments, establishing digital discussion norms at the beginning of each project, and requiring students to acknowledge at least one point from an opposing view before presenting their own. These strategies are not technical fixes; they are pedagogical interventions that cultivate a disposition essential to both Islamic scholarship and democratic citizenship.

The second condition—integrating *tafaquh* (deep understanding) over *tafaqud* (superficial agreement)—directly challenges the conventional wisdom that group work should aim for consensus. In digital Jigsaw, the temptation to produce quick, superficial consensus is even greater than in face-to-face settings, because digital tools make editing and merging effortless. Islamic pedagogy, however, values *tafaquh*—the patient, rigorous pursuit of understanding—over superficial agreement. The synthesis found that successful IRE teachers design digital Jigsaw tasks that require students to document their disagreements rather than erase them. For example, in a Jigsaw activity on Islamic banking law, students create a digital infographic presenting two different madhhab perspectives on *murabahah*

financing, each justified by textual evidence. The task does not require students to choose one perspective; it requires them to understand both. This is *fiqh al-ikhtilaf* (jurisprudence of difference) in practice—not merely tolerating difference, but understanding its textual and methodological roots. This finding extends Usman et al.'s (2025) work, which showed that faith-driven collaboration turns cooperative learning into a spiritual act by specifying the pedagogical mechanisms through which this transformation occurs in digital environments.

The third condition—cultivating *ihsan* (excellence) in digital collaboration—addresses a persistent challenge in online learning: social loafing. In face-to-face settings, peers' social presence naturally encourages politeness and diligence. In digital settings, anonymity and distance can reduce effort and encourage careless communication. The literature on digital Jigsaw in IRE shows that teachers who frame digital collaboration as an act of *ihsan*—striving for excellence in every action, including online interaction—produce different outcomes than those who frame it merely as a task to be completed. When students understand that writing a thoughtful comment on a peer's work is an act of worship, and that typing a careless response violates *amanah* (trust), the quality of digital collaboration improves. This is not a technical solution; it is a theological one. The platform remains the same; the frame changes. This finding resonates with Budiningsih et al. (2026), who found that social capital in digital environments does not automatically translate into collaborative learning outcomes without intentional pedagogical intervention. The *ihsan* frame is precisely such an intervention.

The second major pattern—the axiological overlap between Cooperative Learning and the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5)—carries significant implications for how IRE teachers understand their role in the Merdeka Curriculum. The "Gotong Royong" (cooperation) pillar of the Pancasila Student Profile is often understood as a civic value, a legacy of Indonesia's communal traditions. This review argues that from an Islamic perspective, Gotong Royong is not merely a civic value but a theological imperative that resonates deeply with the Qur'anic concept of *ta'awun* and the Prophetic tradition of *ukhuwah*. The Qur'an commands believers to "cooperate in righteousness and piety" (QS Al-Ma'idah: 2), and the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) described the community of believers as "one body"—when one part suffers, the whole body responds with vigilance and fever (Sahih Muslim). This is not a metaphor; it is a theological description of what the ummah is supposed to be. The Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on Gotong Royong therefore finds its deepest justification not in civic nationalism but in Islamic theology.

This synthesis has an important implication for how IRE teachers should understand their role. If Gotong Royong is merely a civic value, then IRE teachers are simply helping students develop a general skill—one any subject can teach. But if Gotong Royong is a manifestation of *ta'awun*, then IRE teachers are uniquely positioned to help students understand why collaboration matters: not because the modern economy demands teamwork, but because God commands mutual assistance. This is IRE's distinctive contribution to the Merdeka Curriculum—not merely implementing it, but revealing its theological depth. This argument extends Adiyono and Sholeh's (2025) findings, which showed that social project-based learning effectively instills the principles of *ta'awun* and *ukhuwah islamiyah*, by specifying how these principles can be operationalized within the Merdeka Curriculum's policy architecture.

The third pattern—the effectiveness of gamified TGT for memorization-based material—might, at first glance, seem like a purely technical finding about engagement. However, the synthesis suggests a deeper interpretation. The element of healthy competition (*fastabiqul khairat*) in digital TGT is not merely a motivational trick; it is a pedagogical instantiation of a Qur'anic principle. The Qur'an commands believers to "race toward good deeds" (QS Al-Baqarah: 148), and the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) encouraged competition in goodness. When IRE teachers use Quizizz or Kahoot to structure inter-team competition, they are not simply making learning fun; they are creating a structured space for the practice of *fastabiqul khairat*. This reframing transforms gamification from a secular engagement strategy into a theological practice. It also addresses a persistent critique of gamification in education—that it promotes extrinsic motivation at the expense of intrinsic learning. When competition is framed as *fastabiqul khairat*, the goal is not to win for its own sake, but to excel in goodness for God's sake. This framing may explain why the studies reviewed reported sustained engagement rather than the novelty effect often associated with gamification.

Taken together, these three patterns suggest that the success of *ta'awun*-based Cooperative Learning in the digital era depends not on technological infrastructure but on teachers' capacity to infuse digital collaboration with spiritual meaning. This finding has direct implications for teacher education institutions (LPTK). It is not sufficient to equip future IRE teachers with technical skills in using digital tools; they must also be trained in what this study terms "Digital Collaborative Pedagogy"—the art and science of designing, facilitating, and evaluating collaborative learning experiences in digital spaces that are animated by Islamic values of *ta'awun*, *ukhuwah*, and *adab al-ikhtilaf*. Without this pedagogical formation, digital tools will remain instruments of information transfer, not vehicles of character formation. This argument aligns with Rahmah et al. (2025), who identified limited technology-based creativity and weak collaboration among IRE teachers as persistent barriers to effectively designing learning materials in the Merdeka Curriculum.

This study contributes theoretically by reconceptualizing digital cooperative learning through the lens of *ta'awun*. Existing frameworks, such as the five basic elements of cooperative learning proposed by Johnson and Johnson (2021)—positive interdependence, promotive interaction, individual accountability, social skills, and group processing—provide a robust structural foundation. However, they do not specify the spiritual conditions that render cooperation meaningful in Islamic contexts. This study proposes that *ta'awun* functions as the integrating mechanism that animates these five elements with theological purpose. Positive interdependence becomes an expression of *ukhuwah*; promotive interaction becomes an act of *ihsan*; individual accountability becomes a manifestation of *amanah*; social skills become the practice of *adab al-ikhtilaf*; and group processing becomes the collective pursuit of *tafaquh*. This framework does not replace Johnson and Johnson's model; it deepens it by specifying the spiritual logic that transforms cooperative structures into acts of worship.

This theoretical contribution extends Supriadi et al. (2026), who showed that ethno-religious value integrity mediates the relationship between digital learning readiness and higher-order thinking skills. Their finding that flipped classroom readiness alone is insufficient without culturally grounded mediation resonates with the present study's argument that digital tools alone are insufficient without *ta'awun*-based spiritual framing.

Together, these studies suggest that the effectiveness of digital pedagogy in Islamic education depends on integrating technological, pedagogical, and spiritual dimensions. This triad mirrors the TPACK framework but adds a distinctly Islamic component.

This study's practical implications extend beyond teacher education to curriculum policy and school leadership. The Merdeka Curriculum provides a structural "home" for *ta'awun*-based Cooperative Learning through the P5 program. However, as Fauzi (2022) noted, pilot schools have focused on policy compliance rather than pedagogical transformation. This study suggests that the P5 program should be explicitly framed as a space for the practice of *ta'awun*, not merely as a civic project. This reframing would require curriculum documents to articulate the theological foundations of Gotong Royong, teacher training to include *ta'awun*-based pedagogical design, and assessment frameworks to evaluate not only the cognitive outcomes of P5 projects but also their spiritual and social dimensions.

The limitations of this study are inherent to the SLR method. Restricting the review to journal articles published between 2020 and 2025, while necessary for novelty, may have excluded relevant older studies that provide historical context for the development of Cooperative Learning in IRE. The focus on three databases—Google Scholar, Dimensions, and DOAJ—may have missed articles indexed only in Scopus or Web of Science. However, including DOAJ partially mitigates this limitation. The thematic analysis, while rigorous, inevitably involves interpretive judgment, and other researchers might identify different patterns from the same corpus. Finally, the study's emphasis on Indonesian literature reflects the specific context of the Merdeka Curriculum, but this focus also limits the generalisability of findings to other national contexts.

These limitations suggest directions for future research. First, empirical studies are needed to test the effectiveness of the *ta'awun*-based Digital Cooperative Learning framework proposed in this study. Such studies should use longitudinal designs to track cognitive and spiritual outcomes over time. Second, comparative studies could examine whether *ta'awun*-based digital collaboration produces different outcomes than secular cooperative learning models in other cultural contexts. Third, teacher education research should evaluate the impact of "Digital Collaborative Pedagogy" training on teacher candidates' competencies, using validated instruments that measure both the technical and spiritual dimensions of pedagogical practice. Fourth, policy studies could examine how the Merdeka Curriculum's P5 program can be redesigned to more explicitly incorporate the theological foundations of Gotong Royong. These research directions would advance both the theoretical understanding and the practical implementation of *ta'awun*-based Cooperative Learning in the digital era.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review of 30 peer-reviewed articles confirms that *ta'awun*-based Cooperative Learning, when integrated into the Merdeka Curriculum, offers a robust pedagogical strategy for addressing digital individualism in Islamic Religious Education. The synthesis reveals three substantive findings. First, Cooperative Learning has shifted significantly from manual group work to hybrid digital variants such as Digital Jigsaw. Yet, preserving Islamic values in these digital spaces depends not on technological sophistication but on three pedagogical conditions: cultivating *adab al-ikhtilaf* in digital deliberation,

integrating *tafaquh* over superficial consensus, and framing digital collaboration as an act of *ihsan*. Second, the axiological overlap between Cooperative Learning and the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) positions Gotong Royong not merely as a civic value but as a theological imperative rooted in the Qur'anic command of *ta'awun* and the Prophetic tradition of *ukhuwah*. Third, gamified Team Games Tournament (TGT) sustains engagement with memorization-based material by framing competition as *fastabiqul khairat*, turning a secular motivational strategy into a theological practice.

This study's theoretical contribution reconceptualizes digital cooperative learning through the lens of *ta'awun*. Existing frameworks, such as Johnson and Johnson's (2021) five basic elements, provide a structural foundation but do not specify the spiritual conditions that render cooperation meaningful in Islamic contexts. This study proposes that *ta'awun* functions as the integrating mechanism that animates these five elements with theological purpose: positive interdependence becomes an expression of *ukhuwah*; promotive interaction becomes an act of *ihsan*; individual accountability becomes a manifestation of *amanah*; social skills become the practice of *adab al-ikhtilaf*; and group processing becomes the collective pursuit of *tafaquh*. This framework extends Usman et al. (2025), who showed that faith-driven collaboration transforms cooperative learning into a spiritual act, by specifying the pedagogical mechanisms through which this transformation occurs in digital environments. It also resonates with Supriadi et al. (2026), whose finding that digital learning readiness alone is insufficient without culturally grounded mediation supports this study's argument that digital tools require *ta'awun*-based spiritual framing to become vehicles of character formation rather than mere information transfer.

The practical implications extend to teacher education institutions (LPTK), curriculum policymakers, and school leaders. For LPTK, the findings underscore the need to train future IRE teachers in what this study calls "Digital Collaborative Pedagogy" – the art and science of designing, facilitating, and evaluating collaborative learning experiences in digital spaces animated by Islamic values. Technical competence in using digital tools is insufficient; teachers must also cultivate the capacity to infuse digital collaboration with spiritual meaning. For policymakers, the P5 program should be explicitly framed as a space for practicing *ta'awun*, with curriculum documents articulating the theological foundations of Gotong Royong and assessment frameworks evaluating not only cognitive outcomes but also spiritual and social dimensions. For school leaders, the findings suggest that sustaining *ta'awun*-based Cooperative Learning requires a supportive school culture, ongoing professional development, and leadership that prioritizes collaborative pedagogies over administrative compliance.

This study has limitations inherent to the SLR method. Restricting the search to journal articles published between 2020 and 2025, while necessary for novelty, may have excluded older studies that provide historical context. The focus on three databases – Google Scholar, Dimensions, and DOAJ – may have missed articles indexed only in Scopus or Web of Science. The thematic analysis, while rigorous, inevitably involves interpretive judgment, and the emphasis on Indonesian literature reflects the specific context of the Merdeka Curriculum, limiting generalisability to other national contexts.

These limitations suggest four directions for future research. First, empirical studies are needed to test the effectiveness of the *ta'awun*-based Digital Cooperative Learning framework proposed in this study, employing longitudinal designs that track both cognitive and spiritual outcomes over time. Second, comparative studies could examine whether *ta'awun*-based digital collaboration produces different outcomes than secular cooperative learning models in other cultural contexts. Third, teacher education research should evaluate the impact of Digital Collaborative Pedagogy training on teacher candidates' competencies using validated instruments that measure both technical and spiritual dimensions. Fourth, policy studies could examine how the P5 program can be redesigned to more explicitly incorporate the theological foundations of Gotong Royong. These research directions would advance both the theoretical understanding and the practical implementation of *ta'awun*-based Cooperative Learning in the digital era.

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DECLARATIONS

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AI Usage Statement	The authors (Iskandar Yusuf and Mohammed Abou Bakr) declare that no automated AI writing tools were used in the conceptualization, drafting, or editing of this manuscript.
Authors' Contributions	Iskandar Yusuf contributed to conceptualization, SLR search strategy, data screening, thematic analysis, and initial manuscript drafting. Mohammed Abou Bakr contributed to theoretical framework synthesis, MMAT quality assessment, critical manuscript revision, and final review. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.
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