

STRATEGIC INTEGRATION OF THE CAMBRIDGE CURRICULUM FOR CHARACTER BUILDING IN ISLAMIC EDUCATION: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

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Abstract:

This study aims to analyze the strategy of integrating the Cambridge Curriculum into character building within Islamic education, with a case study at Madrasah Mu'allimin Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta. The study is motivated by the urgent need for an educational model that balances academic excellence with strong moral formation, especially amid increasing cases of juvenile delinquency in Indonesia. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis. The findings show that curriculum integration is carried out systematically through three stages: planning, implementation, and evaluation. Planning includes vision alignment, curriculum mapping, and teacher capacity building; implementation integrates Cambridge subjects with Islamic values across intracurricular, co-curricular, and boarding programs; and evaluation applies multi-layered monitoring at both unit and foundation levels, combining academic outcomes with behavioral evidence. This model creates a holistic learning ecosystem that enhances academic performance while fostering discipline, responsibility, reflective thinking, social awareness, and leadership skills. Theoretically, the study contributes to the literature on curriculum adaptation and character education, while practically offering a transferable framework for policymakers and Islamic institutions to contextualize global curricula without compromising their local identity.

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis strategi integrasi Kurikulum Cambridge dalam pembentukan karakter pada pendidikan Islam dengan studi kasus di Madrasah Mu'allimin Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta. Latar belakang penelitian ini adalah kebutuhan mendesak akan model pendidikan yang mampu menyeimbangkan keunggulan akademik dengan pembentukan moral yang kuat, di tengah meningkatnya kasus kenakalan remaja di Indonesia. Pendekatan yang digunakan adalah kualitatif dengan metode studi kasus, melalui wawancara, observasi, dan telaah dokumen. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa integrasi kurikulum dilakukan secara sistematis melalui tiga tahap: perencanaan, pelaksanaan, dan evaluasi. Tahap perencanaan mencakup penyelarasan visi, pemetaan kurikulum, dan penguatan kapasitas guru; tahap pelaksanaan mengintegrasikan mata pelajaran Cambridge dengan nilai-nilai Islam melalui kegiatan intrakurikuler, kokurikuler, dan program asrama; sedangkan tahap evaluasi dilakukan secara berlapis pada tingkat unit dan yayasan dengan mengombinasikan capaian akademik dan bukti perilaku. Model ini membentuk ekosistem pembelajaran holistik yang tidak hanya meningkatkan prestasi akademik, tetapi juga menumbuhkan disiplin, tanggung jawab, kemampuan reflektif, kesadaran sosial, dan keterampilan kepemimpinan. Secara teoretis, penelitian ini memperkaya kajian tentang adaptasi kurikulum dan pendidikan karakter, sedangkan secara praktis menawarkan kerangka kerja yang dapat ditransfer bagi pembuat kebijakan dan lembaga pendidikan Islam dalam mengontekstualisasikan kurikulum global tanpa kehilangan identitas lokal.

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INTRODUCTION

In the global era, education demands a curriculum that not only prioritizes academic excellence but also emphasizes the holistic formation of student character. The curriculum functions as a strategic instrument to guide learning objectives, structure competencies, and embed values to be nurtured in students (Karim, 2021; Martínez-Bravo et al., 2022). Internationally, the Cambridge International Curriculum is widely recognized as a competency-based framework that promotes critical, reflective, and creative thinking skills (Cambridge Assessment International Education, 2023; IGCSE, 2022; Mu'ti, 2025), and has been successfully implemented in diverse educational contexts, including religious-based institutions.

While the Cambridge Curriculum offers a comprehensive framework covering lesson planning, learning design, and authentic assessment, its implementation in Islamic educational institutions often faces challenges in aligning with local religious and cultural values (Assalihee et al., 2024; Moslimany et al., 2024; Supriatna, 2021). This aligns with global findings that curriculum cultural adaptation is essential for relevance and effectiveness, especially in value-based education systems (Cameron et al., 2024; Norman et al., 2024), which emphasizes that successful implementation depends on contextualization to community norms and belief systems.

Madrasah Mu'allimin Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta stands as a responsive example of such adaptation. The institution integrates the Cambridge Curriculum into its Islamic education system while retaining Muhammadiyah values, Indonesian cultural heritage, and a high academic standard (Toni, 2022). As a regeneration center for scholars and leaders, it positions local and religious values not as obstacles but as core strengths in shaping character education, with parallels in educational leadership models found in Islamic institutions (Abdillah, 2025). And the integrated project-based learning approach documented in Ar-Rosikhun, and the management framework for Islamic boarding schools (Nasir et al., 2025).

The urgency of this integration is intensified by emerging trends of moral decline among youth. Official data from the National Criminal Information Center (Pusiknas) reports that in 2024, 8,351 minors were involved in criminal offenses, and by February 2025, an additional 437 were implicated in theft cases (POLRI, 2025). Such troubling figures support observations by Waziana et al. (2021) that moral decline is unlikely to be effectively addressed through formal education alone unless it is accompanied by deliberate, well-structured character education. This view aligns with international research by Berkowitz et al. (2020), which emphasizes that formal schooling often fails to fully internalize moral and social values in students without intentional, value-based curriculum design.

The novelty of this study lies in documenting how Madrasah Mu'allimin adapts the Cambridge Curriculum through structural and cultural transformation, making it a tool for strengthening students' identity and moral integrity (Ansori, 2021; Isno, 2019). This approach aligns with character education theories that stress moral internalization via habituation, reflection, and community engagement (Mau, 2024; Park, 2024). Integration at the madrasah proceeds through three main stages: planning based on its vision and mission, implementation with thematic learning strategies, and holistic evaluation involving teachers, leaders, and the foundation.

In the planning stage, integration involves synchronizing learning documents, formulating character achievement standards, and preparing an integrated learning administration system (Hajita, 2024). In the implementation stage, Cambridge content, such as Science and Mathematics, is blended with Islamic values of divinity, social responsibility, and

discipline through intracurricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular activities. One notable example is the embedding of leadership training within dormitory life, turning the boarding environment into a living laboratory for character formation (Alfarisi, 2020). This is the integrative power that not only shapes students to excel academically, but also spiritually, emotionally, and socially.

This study aims to describe the strategic integration of the Cambridge Curriculum within Islamic education at Madrasah Mu'allimin Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, analyze its theoretical contributions to integrative, character-based curriculum models, and Identify practical implications for policymakers and Islamic educational institutions in adapting global curricula without compromising local identity.

By adopting a qualitative case study approach, this research not only explores the technical and pedagogical practices of curriculum integration but also examines the interaction between educational actors, institutional policies, and contextual factors shaping successful implementation. The findings are expected to contribute both conceptually to the literature on curriculum integration in faith-based schools and practically to policy design in similar educational contexts worldwide.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study method. (Tharaba, 2024) This approach was chosen to deeply understand the process and strategy of Cambridge Curriculum integration in the character building of students at Madrasah Mu'allimin Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta. The main focus of the research is to explore the meanings, values, and experiences of subjects in a unique institutional context, so as to obtain a complete and contextualized picture of the ongoing educational practices.

The type of data used in this research is qualitative data presented in descriptive narrative form. Data sources consist of two types, namely primary data and secondary data. Primary data was obtained directly from in-depth interviews with teachers, madrasah heads, and curriculum managers, and supported by direct observation of the learning process, dormitory activities, and intracurricular and extracurricular activities related to character building. Meanwhile, secondary data was collected through analyzing official documents such as syllabus, lesson plans, madrasah curriculum policies, learning evaluation reports, as well as school and student profile documents (Panjaitan, 2017:81).

This study involved a total of 12 participants, consisting of 1 principal, 2 vice principals, 5 subject teachers, 2 dormitory supervisors, and 2 curriculum managers. Participants were selected using purposive sampling with inclusion criteria: (a) a minimum of three years of teaching or administrative experience at Madrasah Mu'allimin Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, and (b) direct involvement in the implementation of the Cambridge Curriculum. Fieldwork was conducted over four months (January–April 2024), enabling repeated observations and follow-up interviews. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, indicated by the absence of new codes or categories in the analysis (Guest et al., 2020).

Data collection was conducted through several main techniques, namely: (1) participatory observations that reflect real and natural learning conditions; (2) semi-structured interviews to obtain rich and in-depth narratives; and (3) documentation studies of various relevant institutional documents. In addition, a scientific literature search was also conducted by accessing peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and digital documents relevant to the topic of the Cambridge curriculum and madrasah education. The time limit for literature publication was set from 2022 to ensure that the references used remain current and contextual, especially in responding to technological challenges and psychological approaches in today's education.

Data analysis was conducted interactively with the Miles and Huberman model, through

three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2018). Data reduction was done by selecting relevant information according to the research focus. Data presentation was arranged in the form of thematic narratives describing field findings, while conclusion drawing was done inductively through categorizing and interpreting patterns that emerged from the data.

To maintain the validity of the data, triangulation of sources and methods, member checking with informants, and intensive discussions with co-researchers were conducted. Ethical considerations were prioritized: all participants provided informed consent before data collection, and anonymity was maintained in reporting to protect the confidentiality of participants' identities (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach is expected to not only produce meaningful empirical findings but also make theoretical contributions to the development of innovative and adaptive educational service designs. This research aims to answer the practical needs of educators and policymakers in designing educational models that are relevant to the digital era, without neglecting the foundation of strong student character.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

The results showed that the integration of the Cambridge Curriculum at Madrasah Mu'allimin Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta successfully strengthened both students' academic performance and character formation. This integration is realized through three structured phases: 1) planning, 2) implementation, and 3) evaluation that synchronize international standards with Islamic values and Indonesian culture. Similar evidence is found in recent research emphasizing that global curriculum adoption must be contextualized within local religious-cultural frameworks to ensure sustainable and holistic outcomes (Imron et al., 2024; Norman et al., 2024).

Planning

The planning phase at Mu'allimin is not limited to curriculum mapping but is a strategic orchestration of institutional vision, human resource readiness, and pedagogical alignment. Concretely, the process involved:

Vision & Mission Alignment, All curriculum plans were checked against Mu'allimin's identity as a *center for the regeneration of scholars and leaders*. Academic goals were tied explicitly to the values of *amanah* (trust), discipline, and leadership responsibility.

Review of Prior Curriculum, Results from previous years (Cambridge IGCSE and local curricula) were analyzed to identify gaps in both academic mastery and student behavior.

Organizational Preparation: A joint integration team was formed, consisting of Cambridge subject teachers, Islamic education teachers, dormitory supervisors, and curriculum managers. Roles were distributed based on expertise.

Curriculum Mapping, Subject matter experts mapped Cambridge content (Science, Math, English) against Islamic values, highlighting entry points where concepts could be contextualized (e.g., Physics laws linked to tawhid). Mapping also includes detailed allocation of time, KKM standards, and character infusion checkpoints.

Capacity Building, Teacher workshops, and coordination meetings were organized to socialize the integration blueprint. Lesson plan templates, rubrics, and character evaluation formats were standardized. This resembles Sugito, who stressed that hybrid systems must embed both academic and value competencies from the outset through structured planning.

Implementation

Implementation at Mu'allimin encompasses three interrelated domains: 1) intracurricular, 2) co-curricular, and 3) boarding program. These three implementations make

the madrasah a holistic ecosystem.

Intracurricular, Cambridge subjects are not taught in isolation, but are integrated with character building. For example, implementations at Madrasah Mu'allimin include: Science lessons incorporate reflection on the greatness of God in natural law, Mathematics exercises emphasize honesty in calculation, and English debates foster self-confidence and respect for the opinions of others.

Co-curricular (Project-Based Learning), Cross-subject projects encourage collaboration, innovation, and accountability. Examples of co-curricular learning at Madrasah Mu'allimin include: A science fair project that requires students to explain phenomena both scientifically and through an Islamic worldview. A community service project that integrates Cambridge research skills with Muhammadiyah's ethos of social responsibility. This aligns with Imron et.al., who found that PjBL combined with character education fostered critical thinking and moral reflection.

Boarding Program Activities, Boarding routines (*halaqah*, leadership training, evening discussions) are formalized as part of the curriculum. Supervisors act as role models and mentors, guiding students in practicing the Cambridge Learner Attributes (confidence, responsibility, innovation, reflection, engagement) in a faith-based environment. Similar to Sobon et.al. Such a living laboratory approach in the boarding context has proven effective in instilling resilience and social responsibility. Teachers consistently observed that combining project-based assignments with boarding guidance not only improves Cambridge exam performance but also strengthens etiquette, teamwork, and discipline in daily life.

Evaluation

The evaluation stage at Madrasah Mu'allimin Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta is designed gradually and systematically through two levels of implementation. First, the evaluation is carried out by sub-units of the madrasah covering academic fields, boarding school guidance, and co-curricular activities. The focus of assessment at this level includes student learning outcomes, the quality of teacher teaching practices, and the effectiveness of curriculum integration implementation in each unit. Second, evaluation continues at the core foundation level, where reports from all sub-units are compiled and analyzed to produce recommendations for improvements that apply to the entire madrasah system.

The evaluation instruments used include classroom artifacts (student work, assessment rubrics), field notes from observations of learning activities and dormitory life, and student behavior logs that monitor the development of habits such as discipline, responsibility, and teamwork skills. The data obtained indicate that academic achievement improvement parallels the development of positive habits among students. These findings suggest that layered evaluation not only monitors progress but also serves as an effective feedback mechanism for adjusting learning strategies and character development in subsequent periods.

Program evaluation at Mu'allimin is conducted in a multi-layered and continuous manner, consisting of:

Sub-Unit Evaluation: Each unit (academic, dormitory, co-curricular) undergoes periodic assessments. Academic achievement is monitored through tests and projects, while dormitory supervisors use behavioral records to record discipline, punctuality, and teamwork.

Foundation-level Evaluation: Reports from all units are compiled and reviewed at the Muhammadiyah Foundation level. Recommendations are fed back into policy and planning for the following semester.

Instruments, Data, & Triangulation: Classroom artifacts (assignments, portfolios, project reports), Observation notes by teachers and supervisors. Character checklists to measure honesty, leadership, and responsibility.

Findings show parallel improvements, suggesting that improvements in Cambridge

academic outcomes are accompanied by measurable growth in students' discipline, reflective thinking, and social awareness. This aligns with the *Systems Approach for Better Education Results (SABER)* framework (The World Bank, 2023), which emphasizes that multi-layered monitoring systems spanning classroom observation, school-level management, and system-wide policy review are crucial for maintaining curriculum fidelity, especially in LMIC contexts.

International Context

Several studies show that the implementation of the Cambridge curriculum integration has great potential in shaping students' character to be resilient and able to compete in the global arena. Table 1. Cambridge Curriculum Integration in World Education is retained as in the original manuscript to provide international comparisons and contextual references from various countries.

Table. 1 Cambridge Curriculum Integration in World Education

No	Country	Research Results
1.	Singapura	Education in Singapore, with the Cambridge curriculum, students focus on studying English and Mother Tongue, Mathematics, Science, and Culture (Social). Schools are allowed to offer Applied Grade Subjects (AGS) in addition to or instead of the curriculum to offer students a range of options. AGS generally invites students to train or be oriented towards an education such as a polytechnic.
2.	China	The curriculum is formulated by the State Education Commission and is flexible and varied based on the capabilities and characteristics of regions, towns and villages, and allows regions to add local curricula. With the following references: Primary schools contain 10 subjects that differ between towns and villages. For rural primary schools, for example, agricultural subjects are included in addition to core subjects, morals, math, and Chinese. Urban primary schools are required to teach sports. Junior high schools provide 13 subjects, including: moral education, politics, Chinese, foreign languages, and math. As for high school, it is adjusted according to the wishes of the students (adjusted to the needs of the community, as well as the conditions of local institutions).
3.	Amerika Serikat	The curriculum in Elementary School is Basic Arithmetic, Mathematics, English (such as Grammar, Spelling, and vocabulary), and other subjects such as social studies, natural science, physical development, arts, and reading. While in Junior and Senior High School, the basic curriculum is Natural Science (Biology, Chemistry, and Physics), Mathematics (Algebra, Geometry, pre-Calculus, Statistics, and Calculus), English (Literature, Humanities, Composition, and spoken language), Social Science (History, Government, and Economics). High School students also have elective subjects such as Athletics, Career and Technical Education, Computer lessons, Foreign Languages, and several other subjects that can support the success of the child and are of interest to the student.
4.	Finlandia	In terms of curriculum, the government only makes general guidelines in the form of targets (goals). And teachers are given

freedom on how to achieve these targets. Teachers are free to use any teaching method or textbook. There is no standardization of education in Finland because it goes against creativity. They believe that the more standardization is emphasized, the narrower the space for creativity.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study confirm that the integration of the Cambridge Curriculum at Madrasah Mu'allimin Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta is systematically realized through planning, implementation, and evaluation, which together produce improvements in both academic achievement and character formation. This indicates that curriculum adaptation in faith-based schools requires not only structural adjustment of learning content but also cultural alignment with institutional values (Imron et al., 2024; Norman et al., 2024).

Planning

The planning stage at Mu'allimin demonstrates that successful curriculum integration begins with aligning the institution's vision and mission with international standards while preserving its Islamic identity. The formation of a joint integration team and the mapping between Cambridge subjects and local values illustrate a hybrid curriculum design: embedding global competencies within moral frameworks from the start. Evidence from recent Islamic education research supports this approach. For example, Sugito (2024) Discusses a hybrid learning model in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) that integrates digital pedagogy with Islamic values to develop 21st-century competencies such as collaboration and problem-solving without sacrificing religious character.(Sugito, 2024) Similarly, Sholihah & Zaenurrosyid (2025) Examine curriculum design in two elementary schools, one pesantren-based and one Cambridge-oriented, and highlight how successful institutions align global educational approaches with pesantren values through a deliberate hybrid framework. (Sholihah & Zaenurrosyid, 2025)

Implementation

The implementation phase at Mu'allimin encompasses three domains: 1) intracurricular lessons, 2) co-curricular projects, and 3) boarding program activities, which form a holistic ecosystem. In intracurricular learning, Cambridge content, such as Science and Mathematics, is contextualized with the values of monotheism, honesty, and responsibility. This aligns with Moslimany et al(2024), who argue that holistic curriculum design requires the direct instillation of ethical dimensions into subject teaching.

Co-curricular projects such as science exhibitions and community service are examples of Project-Based Learning (PBL) that foster collaboration, innovation, and moral reflection. These findings align with Imron et al (2024), who found that PjBL combined with values-based education significantly strengthens critical thinking and accountability.

Boarding activities at Mu'allimin expand the learning space into a living laboratory for character development. Halaqah (Islamic circles), leadership mentoring, and structured routines foster Cambridge Learner Attributes while grounding them in Islamic ethics. Similar evidence is reported in Sobon et al (2025), which highlights that the boarding program provides a strong environment for instilling resilience, social responsibility, and reflective practice among students.

Evaluation

Evaluation at Mu'allimin is conducted at two levels: sub-unit evaluations (academic,

boarding, and co-curricular) and elementary-level evaluations. The use of various instruments, such as classroom artifacts, behavior records, and observation notes, ensures that academic outcomes and character growth are systematically tracked. This dual evidence system addresses McGrath's (2022) Criticism that many character education initiatives fail due to weak monitoring frameworks. By triangulating academic and behavioral data, Mu'allimin creates a feedback mechanism that not only measures outcomes but also drives continuous curriculum improvement.

International Contextualization

When compared internationally, the Mu'allimin model demonstrates both convergence and divergence. Singapore emphasizes structured pathways and elective courses, China incorporates local curriculum flexibility, the US offers extensive elective courses to encourage student-centered learning, and Finland prioritizes teacher autonomy without strict standardization. Mu'allimin incorporates elements of a structured planning system (Singapore), contextualization (China), a learner-centered ethos (USA), and teacher agency (Finland), but integrates these with explicit religious objectives and dormitory routines. This makes the Mu'allimin model unique in balancing global competencies with faith-based identities.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, these findings support the proposition that curriculum adaptation is most effective when structural and cultural alignment occur simultaneously (Cameron et al., 2024). The integration of Cambridge Learner Attributes with Islamic values at Mu'allimin illustrates how global standards can be transformed into competencies that resonate locally.

Practically, this study suggests the following: Curriculum integration should involve a joint planning team that maps international content with local values. PjBL strategies should explicitly target cognitive and ethical objectives. Dormitory routines should be formalized as character laboratories. Evaluation systems should incorporate both academic and behavioral evidence, reviewed at multiple levels.

Limitations and Future Research

While these findings provide valuable insights, a limitation of this study lies in its focus on a single location. Future research should include multi-site comparative studies or longitudinal designs to identify which integration elements (planning, project design, or dormitory routines) contribute most significantly to sustainable character formation.

Overall, this study demonstrates that the integration of the Cambridge Curriculum at Mu'allimin is not simply the adoption of global content, but rather a contextual transformation that strengthens academic performance and moral identity.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research results above, it can be concluded that the integration of the Cambridge Curriculum at Madrasah Mu'allimin Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta was effectively realized through a three-phase process: 1) planning, 2) implementation, and 3) evaluation, which aligned international academic standards with Islamic values and Indonesian culture. The planning phase ensured strategic alignment of the institutional vision, curriculum mapping, and teacher readiness; the implementation phase created a holistic ecosystem through intracurricular learning, project-based co-curricular activities, and a faith-based dormitory program; while the evaluation phase implemented multi-level, evidence-based monitoring that linked academic achievement to measurable growth in character, discipline, and social responsibility. Compared with international practices in Singapore, China, the United

States, and Finland, Mu'allimin demonstrates a unique model in which global competencies are successfully contextualized within a moral and cultural framework, demonstrating that curriculum adaptation is most effective when the structural and cultural dimensions are simultaneously integrated.

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