

## The role of school literacy environment in strengthening students' religious competencies

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### KEYWORDS

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Reading Corner;  
Islamic Literacy.

### ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe the form and characteristics of the school literacy environment at Madrasatul Quran Al Mutawassithoh (MQW) Jajar Islamic Center Sambu, analyze its implementation in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning, and identify factors that support and hinder the use of the literacy environment in strengthening students' religious competence. Religious competence is interpreted comprehensively as encompassing religious knowledge, religious attitudes, and students' daily worship practices. This research employs a qualitative approach, incorporating a field study. The research subjects were 7th- to 9th-grade students, while informants included the madrasah principal, literacy mentor teachers, reading corner managers, and students actively involved in literacy activities. Data collection techniques included in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation, with data validation through triangulation of techniques and sources. Data analysis was conducted through open, axial, and selective coding, as well as analytical and reflective triangulation. The results indicate that the literacy environment at MQW is built as an ecosystem integrated with Islamic boarding school traditions, through reading corner facilities, a book study program, and the habit of reading the Quran and Islamic literature. This environment supports the development of religious character and an understanding of Islamic values in students. Supporting factors include teacher involvement, a diversity of reading materials, and madrasah policies; while barriers include limited time, low reading interest, and inadequate facilities. This research emphasizes the importance of integrating literacy into Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning to strengthen students' holistic religious competence.

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## Introduction

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) plays a strategic role in shaping students with Islamic character, noble morals, and profound spiritual awareness. The learning process emphasizes not only cognitive aspects but also the appreciation and application of Islamic teachings in daily life (Fatoni & Subando, 2024; Jasmansyah et al., 2025). At the madrasah level, PAI serves as an important medium for instilling Islamic values. However, learning is still dominated by lecture-based methods, resulting in students being passive and underutilizing independent learning resources, including available literacy facilities. While technological developments and openness to information have provided significant opportunities for students to access Islamic

literature extensively, this potential has not been optimally utilized to support reflective and contextual PAI learning (Hafizah & Januardi, 2025; Mundofi, 2025). The school literacy environment—which includes libraries, literacy programs, and a reading culture—can be a strategic instrument in strengthening students' religious competence, especially when integrated with the curriculum and learning process. Several previous studies have explored the role of literacy in education. However, studies specifically exploring the relationship between the madrasah literacy environment and strengthening students' religious competence are still limited, especially in the context of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) such as Madrasatul Qur'an Al Mutawassithoh (MQW) Jajar Islamic Center Sambi. Therefore, this study offers novelty by examining in depth the form and characteristics of the school literacy environment at MQW, its implementation in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning, as well as supporting and inhibiting factors. It is hoped that it can provide conceptual and practical contributions to the development of a religious literacy-based Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning model that aligns with the demands of the Independent Curriculum.

## 1. School Literacy Environment

A school literacy environment is the overall atmosphere, facilities, and programs designed to encourage reading interest, text comprehension skills, and positive literacy habits among the school community (Ali et al., 2024; Irmayanti & Mustiningsih, 2025). In this sense, a literacy environment is not limited to the availability of books or reading media, but also encompasses an academic atmosphere that motivates students to access and utilize various information sources independently. According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (2021), an effective literacy environment must be integrated with the learning process so that it becomes part of the school culture, not just an additional program (Liansari et al., 2021; Marmoah & Jenny Indrastoeti Siti Poerwanti, 2022).

Structurally, the school literacy environment can be divided into physical and non-physical components. Physical components include libraries, reading corners, digital media, information boards, and other facilities that facilitate access to information. Non-physical components include school policies, the role of teachers, the support of the principal, parental involvement, and literacy activities such as group reading, book reviews, and writing competitions. Research by Jerebine et al., (2024) confirms that these physical and non-physical components must complement each other to create a sustainable literacy ecosystem.

The importance of a school literacy environment cannot be separated from its role as a catalyst for improving the quality of learning. When students are accustomed to interacting with a variety of relevant reading sources, they will be more critical, creative, and adaptive to developments in science. A literacy environment also serves as a platform for character development, because through appropriate reading, students can internalize positive values, including religious ones. Thus, a school literacy environment serves as a crucial foundation in supporting the achievement of educational goals, particularly in madrasas (Islamic schools), which integrate general knowledge and religious knowledge.

## 2. Student Religious Competence

Students' religious competence encompasses the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to comprehensively understand and practice religious teachings (Acquah, 2024; Cashwell & Young, 2014). Within the framework of Islamic Religious Education, this competence encompasses mastery of faith (aqidah), worship (sharia), and morals. The goal is to develop students with strong faith, a proper understanding of religious guidance, and the ability to behave by Islamic values. Izzah (2025) emphasized that religious competence is not merely

academic achievement, but also a lifelong skill that will guide students in facing the challenges of the times.

The knowledge dimension of religious competence encompasses the ability to understand the Quran, Hadith, Islamic history, and Sharia law. The attitude dimension encompasses the appreciation of Islamic values such as honesty, trustworthiness, and patience. Meanwhile, the skills dimension encompasses the ability to properly perform worship, preach, and contribute positively to society. These three dimensions are complementary, so strengthening one must be balanced with strengthening the others (Poveda, 2017).

The development of religious competence is inseparable from the learning environment, whether at school, at home, or in the community. Madrasahs, as educational institutions that integrate religious and general knowledge, play a strategic role in developing this competence. However, its success is greatly influenced by the learning methods used, the available learning resources, and the support of a literacy environment that allows students to expand their Islamic insights independently and deeply.

### 3. The Relationship Between the School Literacy Environment and Religious Competence

Religious literacy is the ability to read, understand, interpret, and apply religious teachings in everyday life (Marcus, 2018; Unstad & Fjørtoft, 2021). A school literacy environment that facilitates access to Islamic reading materials, such as tafsir (commemorative texts), hadith (hadith), Islamic history books, and religious articles, can broaden students' knowledge and strengthen their understanding of Islamic teachings. Thus, literacy is not merely a language skill, but also a means of internalizing religious values.

The influence of the literacy environment on religious competence occurs through students' interactions with texts and the discussions that follow. For example, an Islamic-themed reading corner program can provide a forum for students to read exemplary stories of the Prophet Muhammad and then discuss them in groups. This activity not only enhances understanding but also fosters critical thinking about contemporary religious issues, while simultaneously developing a more mature Islamic character.

Research by Sapitri & Maryati, (2022) shows that integrating a religion-based literacy program into Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning can improve students' comprehension of religious texts by up to 30%. This demonstrates that a well-managed literacy environment has significant potential to strengthen religious competence. Therefore, efforts to optimize school literacy, particularly in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), can be an effective strategy for developing students who are knowledgeable, faithful, and have noble character.

## Method

This study used a qualitative approach with the aim of deeply exploring the role of the school literacy environment in strengthening students' religious competencies. This approach was chosen because it enables it to uncover the meanings, processes, and dynamics that occur naturally in madrasahs, without manipulating variables or relying on numerical data. The researcher served as the primary instrument in data collection through direct interactions with informants, thus enabling rich and descriptive narratives about students' experiences accessing religious literacy, participating in Islamic literacy programs, and internalizing religious values.

The study was conducted at Madrasatul Quran Al Mutawassithoh (MQW) Jajar Islamic Center Sambu during the 2025–2026 academic year. This location was chosen because it has diverse Islamic literacy facilities, such as a religious library, a Quran reading corner, and an

active religious literacy program. The research subjects were students in grades 7–9, while informants included the madrasah principal, literacy teachers, librarians, and students selected purposively based on their active participation and achievements in religious studies.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and documentation (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Interviews were conducted to obtain firsthand insights and experiences from informants, while participant observation allowed researchers to observe students' interactions with literacy facilities in their daily activities. Documentation, such as photos of activities, literacy curricula, and student work, was used to strengthen the findings from the interviews and observations.

Data validity was maintained through triangulation of techniques and sources, member checking, and audit trails to ensure the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings (Ahmed, 2024; Carcary, 2009). Researchers also provided detailed contextual descriptions to ensure the research results had a high level of transferability. All processes were systematically recorded so they could be traced and re-examined by others.

Data analysis was conducted in stages through open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to identify themes, identify relationships between categories, and develop a central narrative. Analytical triangulation was used to compare findings across data sources, while analytical memos helped researchers record reflections, ideas, and critical questions throughout the analysis process. This approach ensured that the research results were not only descriptive but also had high interpretive power.

## Result

In order to obtain a comprehensive picture of the format, facilities, and literacy activities at Madrasatul Qur'an Al Mutawassithoh (MQW) Jajar Islamic Center Sambu, researchers conducted a series of in-depth interviews with relevant parties. The results of these interviews are presented to provide a contextual understanding of how the literacy environment at MQW is built, managed, and integrated into the Islamic boarding school education system. The data obtained include a description of the meaning of the literacy environment according to the madrasah's perspective, the available literacy facilities, and the variety of literacy activities carried out routinely. This presentation is expected to provide a comprehensive picture of literacy practices at MQW as a basis for further analysis in this study.

Table 1. Summary of Interview Results

No	Question Indicator	Interview Results	Informant	Keywords
1	The meaning of literacy in MQW	Literacy is not only interpreted as the ability to read and write, but also as the habit of reading the Qur'an, yellow books, and Islamic works as a means of internalizing Islamic values and forming the character of students.	I1, I2	Islamic literacy, habituation
2	Literacy facilities and resources	MQW provides reading corners in dormitories, madrasa corridors, and classrooms, containing mushafs, tafsirs, basic fiqh books, and popular Islamic books that are appropriate to the students' level of understanding.	I1, I3	Reading corner, classic books, Islamic books

No	Question Indicator	Interview Results	Informant	Keywords
3	Teacher mentoring strategies	Teachers play an active role in assisting students through a regular reading schedule, selecting reading materials according to their abilities, and guiding discussions of Islamic books and stories to foster an interest in reading.	I2	Teacher assistance, reading selection
4	Literacy program objectives	The literacy program aims to build understanding and love for knowledge, make reading an act of worship, and integrate literacy activities with religious learning.	I1	Understanding, love of knowledge, integration
5	Strategies to grow interest in reading	MQW implements literacy challenges such as the best story or selected wisdom, book reading competitions, storytelling, and presentations of Islamic figures to encourage student enthusiasm.	I1, I2	Challenges, literacy competitions, motivation
6	Supporting factors	A strong Islamic boarding school culture, the involvement of teachers with religious and Arabic language competencies, and appreciation for students' written work are important factors that strengthen literacy.	I1, I2	Islamic boarding school culture, teacher competence, appreciation
7	Reading material barriers	The limited reading materials that suit the students' ability level, especially in the early grades, means they need books with simpler language and intensive support.	I2, I3	Limited reading, difficult language
8	Reading time barriers	The density of students' daily activities (tahfidz, diniyah, extracurricular activities, worship) makes time for independent reading limited, thus requiring a time management strategy.	I2	Limited time, busy activities

Interview results indicate that literacy at Madrasatul Quran Al Mutawassithoh (MQW) is interpreted more broadly than just the technical skills of reading and writing. Literacy is understood as the habit of reading the Quran, Islamic texts, and Islamic works, which serve to internalize Islamic values while shaping the character of students. Thus, literacy is not merely academic, but also spiritual and cultural.

In terms of facilities, MQW provides reading corners located in dormitories, madrasah hallways, and classrooms. These reading corners are equipped with Quranic manuscripts, tafsir (commentaries), basic fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) books, and popular Islamic books tailored to the students' level of understanding. The availability of these facilities demonstrates that literacy is positioned as an integral part of the students' daily lives, not simply an additional activity.

The role of teachers in fostering literacy is prominent. Teachers not only assign reading assignments but also actively guide students through regular reading schedules, selecting reading materials appropriate to their abilities, and discussing Islamic books and stories. This strategy makes reading activities more focused and helps students understand the reading material in depth. This aligns with the goals of the literacy program, which aims to build

understanding, foster a love of knowledge, and make reading an integral part of religious worship integrated with Islamic religious studies.

Furthermore, MQW develops specific strategies to foster reading interest through various challenges and competitions. Programs such as "Best Story of the Week," book reading competitions, storytelling, and presentations on Islamic figures encourage students' enthusiasm for reading while also improving their communication skills. Thus, literacy not only trains comprehension but also students' communication skills.

Factors supporting literacy success at MQW include a strong Islamic boarding school culture, the involvement of teachers competent in religion and Arabic, and the appreciation of students' written work. These conditions create a conducive literacy ecosystem, where students are motivated to read and produce reflective work based on the reading they examine.

However, interviews also revealed obstacles. The limited availability of reading materials suited to the students' abilities, especially in the early grades, necessitates reading materials in simpler language. Another obstacle is the students' busy daily activities, ranging from memorizing the Quran (tahfidz), religious studies, extracurricular activities, and congregational worship, which limit time for independent reading. Therefore, time management strategies and the provision of more beginner-friendly reading materials are needed to optimize the use of environmental literacy at MQW.

## Discussion

The research results show that the meaning of literacy at MQW has unique characteristics compared to the general understanding of literacy. While in basic educational institutions, literacy is often defined as reading, writing, and arithmetic skills, at MQW, literacy has developed into a tradition rooted in Islamic boarding school culture. Literacy is understood as the habit of reading the Quran, classical texts, and Islamic works to build religious values and shape the character of students (Amin, 2022; Jamil, 2024; Sofa, 2022). This understanding aligns with studies of religious literacy, which emphasize the integration of reading skills with spiritual strengthening.

In terms of facilities, the presence of reading corners scattered throughout various spaces demonstrates MQW's efforts to make literacy part of the students' daily lives. The provision of basic and popular Islamic books also demonstrates an adaptation to students' reading abilities (Irawan, 2023; Saber et al., 2022). This supports the theory of functional literacy, which emphasizes the importance of providing relevant facilities so that reading activities are not merely symbolic but truly beneficial.

The very active role of teachers in assisting students emphasizes that literacy depends not only on facilities but also on ongoing support. Strategies implemented, such as guided reading and book discussions, demonstrate the application of the scaffolding principle in learning (Narbayevna, 2025). With teacher guidance, students can read religious texts that are actually quite difficult and gradually improve their understanding.

Other strategies, such as literacy challenges and competitions, demonstrate that MQW strives to foster both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in students. These efforts support the view that literacy needs to be developed with a creative approach to make it an enjoyable activity (Chiu et al., 2024; Marleni et al., 2024). Through competitions, students read not only for academic purposes but also for achievement and expression of ideas.

Supporting factors, such as the pesantren culture, teacher competence, and appreciation for students' written work, strengthen the literacy ecosystem. A collective culture that values knowledge makes it easier for students to adopt reading as a routine (Islamic et al., 2024; Munif, 2025). This aligns with the theory of literacy ecology, which emphasizes the influence of the social and cultural environment on the development of literacy behavior.

On the other hand, obstacles such as limited reading materials and busy daily activities present challenges that need to be overcome. Students' need for reading materials in simpler

language demonstrates the need to develop adaptive teaching materials (Islamic et al., 2024; Munif, 2025). Meanwhile, limited reading time indicates the importance of activity management to ensure literacy is not sidelined by other agendas. If these two obstacles can be managed well, then strengthening literacy in MQW will be more optimal.

## Conclusion

This research confirms that the literacy environment at Madrasatul Quran Al Mutawassithoh (MQW) is built as an ecosystem integrated with Islamic boarding school traditions. Its form and characteristics are evident through the provision of reading corners, book study programs, and the habituation of reading the Quran and Islamic literature, which foster religious character and deepen students' understanding of Islamic values. The implementation of literacy in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning not only supports knowledge acquisition but also strengthens students' religious attitudes and daily worship practices, thus developing holistic religious competencies.

The main supporting factors for the sustainability of literacy include the involvement of teachers as facilitators, the availability of diverse reading materials, and madrasah policies that consistently encourage literacy activities. However, implementation still faces obstacles such as limited student time, low reading interest among some students, and inadequate facilities. Therefore, strategies to strengthen facilities, program innovation, and more effective time management are needed so that literacy can continue to be integrated into PAI learning and further contribute to the development of students' comprehensive religious competencies.

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