Proceedings of International Conference on Islamic Education (ICIED)
Building an Inclusive and Sustainable Educational System
Volume 11, 2026 (p-ISSN 2477-3638 / e-ISSN 2613-9804)

How is School Inclusiveness Measured? A Systematic Review of Frameworks, Dimensions, and Indicators

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Abstract
Measuring school inclusiveness has become a central concern in global and national education policy, yet the field remains fragmented across many frameworks and instruments that rarely share a common conceptual language. This article reports a systematic literature review (SLR) guided by the PRISMA 2020 protocol on the frameworks, dimensions, and indicators used to assess inclusiveness at the school level. Following a reproducible search of academic sources and grey literature (55 records identified), duplicate removal, and eligibility screening, 20 studies were retained for narrative synthesis. The review shows that most instruments converge on the tripartite logic of the Index for Inclusion—inclusive cultures, policies, and practices—while extending it with leadership, teacher competence, accessibility, student participation and well-being, and family–community collaboration. Indicators cluster into structural, process, relational, and outcome types, and a quality appraisal of the 20 included studies shows that psychometric maturity varies considerably, from near-universal reporting of explicit construct definitions to comparatively rare measurement-invariance and test–retest evidence. Building on this synthesis, the review proposes an integrated conceptual framework linking these dimensions to student participation and well-being as a proximal outcome, and it identifies specific implications for madrasah and pesantren settings, where Islamic normative constructs such as human dignity (*karamah insaniyyah*), justice (*'adl*), and compassion (*rahmah*) offer an underused basis for operationalising the inclusive-culture dimension.

Keywords:
inclusive education; school inclusiveness; index for inclusion; measurement indicators; systematic review; Islamic education

A. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education occupies a prominent place in global and national education agendas. Sustainable Development Goal 4 explicitly calls for inclusive, equitable, and quality education that offers lifelong learning opportunities for all learners, regardless of ability, gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic background. In the school context, however, the operational question of how inclusiveness is actually measured has received far less systematic attention than the normative question of why it matters.

Inclusion in schools is now understood to extend well beyond the physical placement of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. It encompasses school culture, governance and policy, pedagogical practice, physical and digital accessibility, student participation and well-being, teacher capacity, and collaboration with families and communities (Ainscow, 2005; Florian, 2014). This multidimensionality makes inclusiveness difficult to measure, since a school may score well on administrative-access indicators while scoring poorly on culture or participation indicators, and vice versa.

Over the past two decades a substantial number of frameworks and instruments have been developed to translate this abstract, multidimensional construct into measurable indicators. The most influential of these, the Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2011), organises whole-school self-review around three dimensions—creating inclusive cultures, producing inclusive policies, and evolving inclusive practices—and has since been quantitatively validated and adapted across national contexts, including for parents, secondary students, and teachers (Fernández-Archilla et al., 2020a, 2020b). Alongside it, a growing family of related tools has emerged, addressing teacher attitudes and self-efficacy (Forlin et al., 2011; Sharma et al., 2012), school leadership for inclusion (López-López et al., 2021; Zúñiga et al., 2025), students' perception of inclusion climate (Schwab et al., 2018), family support for inclusion (Sánchez-Pujalte et al., 2020), and system-level indicator frameworks proposed by international organisations such as the OECD (Mezzanotte & Calvel, 2023). In Indonesia, similar efforts have begun to adapt these frameworks to national policy and higher-education contexts (Iswari et al., 2023), in line with the continuously updated national regulatory framework for inclusive education (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia, 2023). In parallel, a distinct qualitative literature documents inclusive practice in Islamic educational institutions—madrasah and pesantren—largely in the normative vocabulary of Islamic educational values rather than the secular measurement tradition reviewed above (Rofiah et al., 2025).

Despite this proliferation, the literature lacks a systematic synthesis of which frameworks exist, which dimensions and indicators they share or diverge on, and how methodologically robust they are. Existing reviews in this area tend to examine a single instrument family in isolation—for example, only the Index for Inclusion, or only teacher-attitude scales—rather than mapping the field as a whole across stakeholder groups and measurement traditions, and rarely appraise psychometric quality using an explicit, reported checklist. This review addresses that gap by combining a PRISMA 2020-guided search with a COSMIN-informed quality appraisal, and by explicitly distinguishing three constructs that are frequently conflated in this literature: the conceptual dimension being measured, the type of indicator used to operationalise it, and the psychometric evidence supporting the resulting instrument. It further extends the scope of prior reviews by considering what these mainstream, predominantly secular frameworks imply for Islamic educational institutions, whose inclusive practice is documented mainly through qualitative case studies rather than validated measurement tools (Rofiah et al., 2025). Accordingly, this review asks: (1) what frameworks and instruments have been developed or applied to measure inclusiveness at the school level; (2) what dimensions and sub-dimensions of

inclusiveness do these frameworks share or diverge on; (3) what types of indicators are used to operationalise these dimensions, and how do they relate to one another conceptually; (4) what is the reported methodological and psychometric quality of the identified instruments; and (5) what implications do these dimensions and indicators carry for measuring inclusiveness in madrasah and pesantren settings?

B. METHODS

This study used a systematic literature review (SLR) design guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 statement (Page et al., 2021), which specifies a transparent and replicable procedure for identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion of studies. Because the review synthesises frameworks and instruments narratively rather than pooling effect sizes, it is reported as a PRISMA-guided review with narrative synthesis rather than a meta-analysis.

Studies were eligible if they (a) proposed, validated, or empirically applied a framework, index, or instrument intended to measure inclusiveness, inclusive culture, or inclusive practice at the school or classroom level; (b) reported at least one explicit dimension or indicator set; (c) were published in a peer-reviewed journal, book, or recognised institutional report; and (d) were published in English, Spanish, Portuguese, or Indonesian between 2005 and 2025. Studies addressing inclusion solely at the national-system level without school-level indicators, focused on populations outside the K–12 school range, or lacking a described methodology (e.g., opinion pieces), were excluded.

Search Strategy and Sources

Searches were conducted on 12 September 2026 through publicly accessible academic sources—Google Scholar-indexed literature, ERIC, and institutional or publisher repositories (OECD, MDPI, PLOS, PMC)—supplemented by manual searching of the reference lists of key sources and grey-literature searches on the websites of UNESCO and the OECD. Because subscription databases such as Scopus and Web of Science were not accessible for this review, the search relied on openly indexed sources; this is a methodological limitation that may reduce the completeness and international coverage of the review, and researchers with institutional access are encouraged to replicate and extend the search in those databases. Table 1 reports the exact search strings used, grouped by stage, together with the approximate number of records each returned.

Table 1. Search Sources, Strings, and Dates

Stage / Focus	Search String	Date Searched	Records
General framework/indicator search	instruments frameworks measuring school inclusiveness systematic review indicators	12 Sep 2026	9
Index for Inclusion validation	"Index for Inclusion" Booth Ainscow dimensions culture policy practice validation study	12 Sep 2026	9
Parent questionnaire validation	"Validation of the Index for Inclusion Questionnaire for Parents of Non-University Education Students" authors journal	12 Sep 2026	5
Secondary-student questionnaire validation	"Validation of the Index for Inclusion Questionnaire for Compulsory Secondary Education Students" Sustainability 2020 authors Trigueros	12 Sep 2026	5

System-level indicator framework	OECD working paper "Indicators of inclusion in education: A framework for analysis" author 2023	12 Sep 2026	6
Recent instrument development (2023–2024)	inclusive school index instrument validation 2023 2024 journal indicators dimensions	12 Sep 2026	7
Leadership instrument	"Leadership for Educational Inclusion: Design and Validation of a Measurement Instrument" Education Sciences 2025 authors	12 Sep 2026	3
Psychometric quality appraisal precedent	"Evaluating the psychometric quality of school connectedness measures: A systematic review" authors journal citation	12 Sep 2026	2
Islamic education / madrasah context	inclusive education Islamic perspective madrasah journal article disability	12 Sep 2026	9

Note. Records column shows the approximate number of distinct results reviewed from that query before deduplication; overlapping results across queries were merged in the deduplication step reported in Table 3.

Study Selection, Data Extraction, and Reasons for Exclusion

Titles and abstracts were screened against the eligibility criteria, followed by full-text assessment of records passing the first screen. For each included study, authorship, context, framework name, dimensions, indicator types, respondents, and reported validity/reliability evidence were extracted into a standardised matrix. Table 2 reports the specific reasons for exclusion at each stage, addressing the transparency requirement that a purely numerical PRISMA flow cannot satisfy on its own.

Table 2. Reasons for Exclusion at Screening and Full-Text Stages

Stage	Reason for Exclusion	n
Screening (title/abstract)	Non-peer-reviewed or promotional web page (e.g., slide presentation, organisational homepage)	2
	Duplicate or citation-listing page without original content	1
	Distinct construct not specific to school inclusiveness (e.g., general school-health assessment, generic parental-involvement measures)	2
	Wrong population/level (institutional indicator above school level)	1
Full-text	Published outside the 2005–2025 review window	1
	Overlapping construct coverage already represented by an included instrument in the same population	1
	Focus on vocational/post-secondary population outside the K–12 school scope	1
	Focus on a collaborative process rather than a measurement instrument or indicator framework	1

Quality Appraisal

Because included studies ranged from instrument-validation papers to conceptual or policy frameworks, quality was appraised using a hybrid checklist. Empirical instrument-validation studies (16 of the 20 included studies) were appraised against six criteria adapted from the COSMIN taxonomy of measurement properties (Hodges et al., 2018): (1) explicit definition of the construct/dimension

being measured, (2) stakeholder involvement in item generation, (3) reported content-validity evidence, (4) internal-consistency reliability, (5) factor structure (exploratory or confirmatory factor analysis), and (6) measurement invariance across respondent groups or contexts; test–retest reliability was also recorded where reported. Conceptual and policy-level frameworks (4 of the 20 included studies—Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Mezzanotte & Calvel, 2023; UNESCO, 2020; and the Indonesian ministerial regulation) were instead appraised on construct clarity, stakeholder involvement, and contextual applicability, since formal psychometric criteria do not apply to non-instrument sources. Two of the authors' assessments were reconciled by discussion where initial ratings diverged. Table 4 (Results and Discussion) reports the summary counts.

Table 3. PRISMA Flow of Study Identification and Selection

PRISMA Stage	Records (n)
Records identified through web-based academic search (Google Scholar-indexed literature, ERIC, publisher/repository sites)	55
Duplicate records removed	25
Records after duplicates removed	30
Records screened (title/abstract)	30
Records excluded at screening (see Table 2 for reasons)	6
Full-text articles assessed for eligibility	24
Full-text articles excluded (see Table 2 for reasons)	4
Studies included in the narrative synthesis	20

Note. Counts reflect the web-based academic search actually conducted for this review and are not derived from a full Scopus/Web of Science export (see Search Strategy and Sources).

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Quality Appraisal Results

Table 4 summarises how many of the 20 included studies met each quality-appraisal criterion described in the Method section.

Table 4. Quality-Appraisal Criteria and Summary Results Across the 20 Included Studies

Criterion	Studies Meeting Criterion (n/20)	%
Explicit construct/dimension definition	20	100%
Stakeholder involvement in item generation	14	70%
Reported content-validity evidence	13	65%
Internal-consistency reliability (α/ω)	12	60%
Factor structure (EFA/CFA)	9	45%
Cross-context/cross-cultural adaptation evidence	6	30%
Measurement invariance across groups	3	15%
Test–retest reliability	2	10%

Note. The four conceptual/policy-level sources were rated only on construct clarity, stakeholder involvement, and contextual applicability, consistent with the appraisal procedure described in the Method section; they are counted as not meeting the remaining empirical criteria.

These results indicate a clear gradient: nearly all included studies define their construct explicitly and involve stakeholders in some form, but rigorous construct-validity evidence—factor analysis, measurement invariance, and test–retest reliability—is reported far less consistently, echoing the broader pattern identified for school-based measures by Hodges et al. (2018).

Overview of Frameworks Identified

The review identified several recurring families of frameworks and instruments used to measure school inclusiveness. The Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2011) and its national, quantitatively validated adaptations for parents, secondary students, and school communities (Carvalho et al., 2022; Fernández-Archilla et al., 2020a, 2020b) remain the dominant reference point, organised around inclusive cultures, policies, and practices. A second family consists of attitude- and efficacy-based instruments, such as the Sentiments, Attitudes and Concerns about Inclusive Education (SACIE) scale (Forlin et al., 2011) and teacher-efficacy scales for inclusive practice (Sharma et al., 2012), which measure staff readiness rather than whole-school inclusiveness directly. A third family addresses school leadership for inclusion (López-López et al., 2021; Zúñiga et al., 2025) and family perceptions of school support (Sánchez-Pujalte et al., 2020). A fourth family consists of system-level indicator frameworks proposed by international bodies, which apply an input–process–outcome logic to national or system-level monitoring with school-level indicators nested within it (Mezzanotte & Calvel, 2023). Finally, locally developed, multidimensional assessment tools—such as instruments for evaluating inclusive education implementation in Indonesian universities (Iswari et al., 2023)—are typically produced through expert-validated, needs-based research and development.

Across these families, the Index for Inclusion functions as the dominant conceptual anchor: even instruments that expand well beyond its original three dimensions generally retain "culture," "policy," and "practice" as an organising backbone, then add further dimensions to capture aspects the original Index treats only implicitly, such as leadership, accessibility, and family–community collaboration.

Common Dimensions of School Inclusiveness

Synthesising the dimension sets reported across the reviewed frameworks yields seven recurrent dimensions, summarised in Table 5.

Table 5. Recurrent Dimensions of School Inclusiveness Across Reviewed Frameworks

Dimension	Representative Focus
Inclusive culture	Shared values, sense of safety, acceptance, respect for diversity (Florian, 2014; Booth & Ainscow, 2011)
Inclusive policy and governance	Admission policies, child-protection and anti-bullying procedures, equity-based decision-making
Inclusive learning practice	Differentiated instruction, adaptive assessment, responsive pedagogy (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011)
Teacher competence and support	Training participation, collaboration, self-efficacy for inclusive practice (Sharma et al., 2012)
School leadership for	Principals' inclusive vision, resource management, network-

inclusion	building (Zúñiga et al., 2025)
Student participation and well-being	Engagement, peer relationships, sense of belonging, perceived inclusion climate (Schwab et al., 2018)
Family and community collaboration	Parental involvement and perceived school support (Sánchez-Pujalte et al., 2020)

Source: synthesised by the authors from the reviewed literature.

Conceptual Synthesis: An Integrated Framework

The seven dimensions in Table 5 do not function as a flat checklist; the included studies suggest they relate to one another in a broadly nested structure. Figure 1 proposes how they interrelate, building on the Index for Inclusion's original culture–policy–practice logic.

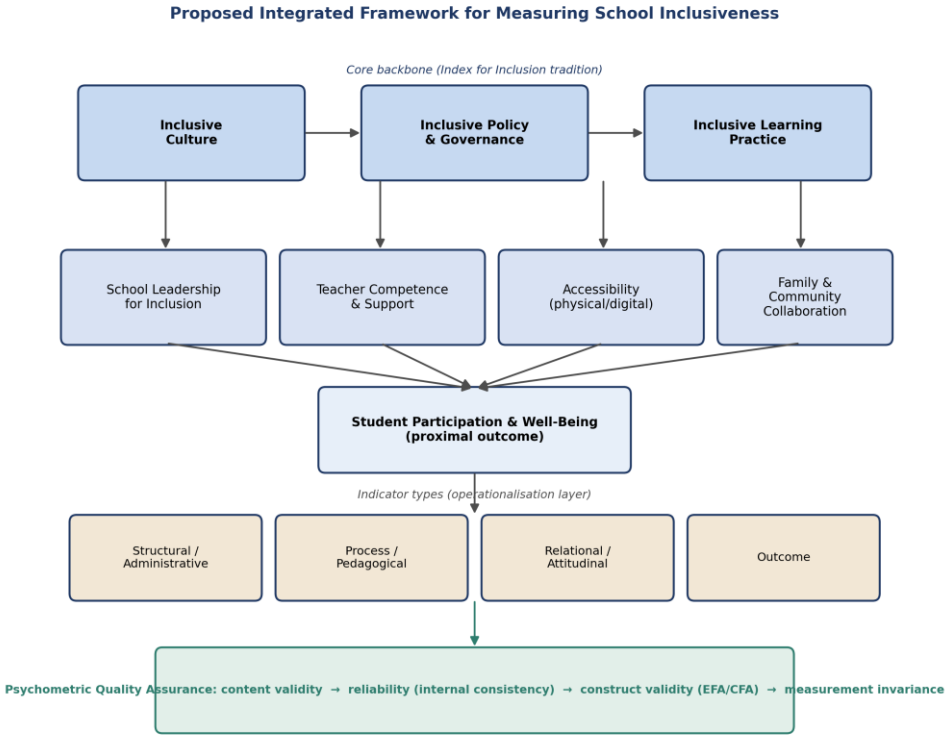


Figure 1. Proposed Integrated Framework for Measuring School Inclusiveness

Consistent with the Index for Inclusion's original logic, inclusive culture is treated as the normative foundation from which inclusive policy is authorised and resourced, which in turn enables inclusive learning practice. Leadership, teacher competence, accessibility, and family–community collaboration operate as enabling conditions that translate this culture–policy–practice backbone into daily experience, converging on student participation and well-being as the proximal outcome that most instruments ultimately try to capture. Each dimension is then operationalised through one or more indicator types, whose credibility depends on the psychometric quality-assurance sequence identified in Table 4. This nested structure helps explain why comparing raw "inclusiveness scores" across instruments is difficult: two schools may receive different scores not because their students experience different levels of inclusion, but because one instrument privileges structural indicators (e.g., accessible infrastructure) while another privileges relational indicators (e.g., peer attitudes) of a dimension that, in this framework, sits at the same conceptual level.

Distinguishing Dimension, Indicator Type, and Psychometric Evidence

Because these three constructs are frequently conflated in the reviewed literature, Table 6 defines each explicitly, since the reviewers of this manuscript rightly noted that dimension, indicator, and validation evidence describe different things and should not be presented as interchangeable.

Table 6. Distinguishing Dimension, Indicator Type, and Psychometric Evidence

Construct	Definition	Example
Dimension	A conceptual domain of school inclusiveness identified through the literature synthesis (Table 5)	Inclusive culture; school leadership for inclusion
Indicator type	The operational form used to measure a dimension: structural/administrative, process/pedagogical, relational/attitudinal, or outcome	Presence of a written anti-bullying policy (structural) measuring the policy dimension
Psychometric evidence	Empirical support for the quality of an instrument's items: content validity, reliability, factor structure, invariance	Confirmatory factor analysis reported for the LEI-Q leadership scale (Zúñiga et al., 2025)

Types of Indicators

Indicators used to operationalise these dimensions can be grouped into four broad types: (1) structural/administrative indicators, such as the presence of a written inclusion policy or the availability of accessible infrastructure; (2) process/pedagogical indicators, such as the frequency of differentiated instruction or teacher participation in inclusion-related training; (3) relational/attitudinal indicators, such as staff, student, and parent attitudes toward inclusion or perceived school climate (Forlin et al., 2011; Schwab et al., 2018); and (4) outcome indicators, such as attendance, retention, and self-reported sense of belonging. Most instruments combine several indicator types within a single dimension, but few frameworks explicitly distinguish indicator type by design, which complicates cross-instrument comparison.

Methodological and Psychometric Quality

The appraisal reported in Table 4 shows considerable variation. The original Index for Inclusion was developed through extensive stakeholder consultation but was, for many years, used mainly in qualitative self-review contexts; more recent studies have retrofitted quantitative validation onto its questionnaires, reporting confirmatory factor analysis and measurement invariance across respondent groups (Fernández-Archilla et al., 2020a, 2020b). Attitude- and efficacy-based instruments generally report stronger classical psychometric evidence—internal consistency and factor structure—but narrower construct coverage (Forlin et al., 2011; Sharma et al., 2012). Leadership- and family-focused instruments increasingly report robust confirmatory factor analyses with good fit indices (López-López et al., 2021; Zúñiga et al., 2025), reflecting a maturing methodological standard. System-level frameworks proposed by international organisations are the least amenable to conventional psychometric appraisal, since they function as monitoring frameworks rather than measurement scales, but they contribute conceptual clarity on how school-level data can feed into system-level indicators (Mezzanotte & Calvel, 2023).

These findings answer the objectives outlined in the Introduction: the field has converged on a recognisable set of core dimensions anchored in the Index for Inclusion, yet indicator design and psychometric rigour remain uneven, most notably for measurement invariance and test–retest reliability (Table 4). This is broadly

consistent with earlier observations that internationally developed tools require contextualisation before they can be meaningfully applied outside their country of origin (Azorín et al., 2019); it also extends that observation by showing that the same trade-off between conceptual comprehensiveness and psychometric maturity recurs across leadership, family, and student-focused instruments alike, not only in culture–policy–practice self-review tools. A further pattern concerns context sensitivity: most instruments reviewed originate in European or Latin American settings, while adaptations to Southeast Asian contexts, including Indonesia, remain comparatively scarce despite active national policy development in this area (Iswari et al., 2023; Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia, 2023).

Implications for Islamic Education and Madrasah Contexts

The dimensions identified above also carry specific implications for Islamic educational institutions such as madrasah and pesantren, which operate a dual curriculum combining religious and general education (Rofiah et al., 2025). Qualitative studies in this setting consistently frame inclusive practice through Islamic normative vocabulary rather than the secular language of most instruments reviewed here: adaptive support for students with disabilities is commonly described as an expression of justice (*'adl*), compassion (*rahmah*), and human dignity (*karamah insaniyyah*), rather than purely as a matter of administrative compliance. In Indonesia, this normative framing is now reinforced by regulation: alongside the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology's accommodation regulation for general schools (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia, 2023), a parallel accommodation mandate extends to madrasah, religious higher-education institutions, and pesantren (Rofiah et al., 2025).

This suggests that the "inclusive culture" dimension in Table 5 is not absent in Islamic educational institutions but is typically expressed through religious rather than secular constructs, which the quantitative instruments reviewed here—developed predominantly in European and Latin American, largely secular contexts—do not capture. None of the 20 included studies operationalised inclusive culture using explicitly religious indicators, despite the emerging qualitative literature on pesantren and madrasah inclusion. A contextually adapted index for Islamic educational institutions would therefore need, at minimum, to (a) retain the culture–policy–practice backbone identified in this review; (b) operationalise the culture dimension partly through Islamically grounded indicators (e.g., staff and student endorsement of *karamah insaniyyah* and *rahmah* as grounds for accommodating diverse learners); and (c) subject such indicators to the same psychometric validation summarised in Table 4, rather than relying solely on the qualitative case-study evidence that currently dominates this sub-literature (Rofiah et al., 2025).

D. CONCLUSION

This systematic review shows that measuring school inclusiveness requires moving beyond the question of whether a school enrols diverse learners to the question of whether its culture, policies, practices, leadership, relationships, and partnerships genuinely support them. Across the 20 studies synthesised, the field has converged on a recognisable set of dimensions—anchored in the Index for Inclusion's culture–policy–practice framework and extended by leadership, student participation and well-being, and family–community collaboration—while indicators and psychometric rigour remain uneven, particularly for measurement invariance and test–retest reliability. The integrated framework proposed in Figure 1, together with the explicit distinction between dimension, indicator type, and psychometric evidence in Table 6, offers researchers and policymakers a conceptual map for selecting,

adapting, or building measurement tools rather than adding another isolated instrument.

Three practical implications follow. First, schools and school networks seeking to self-assess inclusiveness should adopt or adapt an Index-for-Inclusion-based instrument extended with explicit leadership, accessibility, and family–community dimensions, rather than relying on narrower attitude- or efficacy-only scales. Second, instrument developers should design indicator sets that deliberately balance structural, process, relational, and outcome indicators within each dimension, and should report content-validity, internal-consistency, and, where feasible, confirmatory factor-analytic evidence before an instrument is used for accountability purposes. Third, for madrasah, pesantren, and other Islamic educational institutions, future instrument development should operationalise the inclusive-culture dimension through Islamically grounded indicators—drawing on constructs such as *karamah insaniyyah*, *'adl*, and *rahmah*—and subject these indicators to the same psychometric validation expected of secular instruments, rather than treating religious framing and empirical rigour as separate tracks. Future research should also prioritise replication of this search in subscription databases such as Scopus and Web of Science to verify and extend the corpus identified here.

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