

Determinants of Learning Motivation Barriers in Islamic Religious Education: A Qualitative Analysis in a Pesantren-Based Junior High School

Azimatun Nikmah,^{1*} Dwi Indah Sulistyani,² Nabila Wasilatul Mukarromah,³ Yulia Citra Ayunda Destri Yanti,⁴ Muhammad Anshori⁵

^{*}azimatunnikmah19@gmail.com

^{1,2,3,4,5} Universitas Islam KH. Achmad Muzakki Syah Jember, Indonesia

Abstract

This study aims to examine the barriers and determinants of students' learning motivation in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) within a pesantren-based junior high school context. It specifically investigates how pedagogical practices, teacher competencies, students' physical readiness, and institutional environments interact to influence students' engagement and participation in PAI learning. This research employed a qualitative case study design conducted at SMP Islam Nurul Ulum. Data were collected through classroom observations, in-depth semi-structured interviews with teachers and students, and document analysis. Data analysis followed an interactive qualitative model consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Triangulation of sources and techniques, prolonged engagement, and member checking were applied to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. The results indicate that students' learning motivation remains suboptimal, as reflected in low classroom participation, passive behavior, limited discussion involvement, and feelings of boredom and fatigue. The study identifies interconnected internal and external barriers. Internal factors include students' physical and psychological exhaustion due to intensive pesantren routines, which reduce concentration and readiness to learn. External factors include lecture-dominated and teacher-centered instruction, limited implementation of innovative models such as Problem Based Learning, insufficient teacher digital literacy, and inadequate learning facilities, particularly technology-based media. These barriers operate simultaneously and systematically weaken students' intrinsic motivation. This study provides a contextual and ecological perspective by situating learning motivation within the unique ecosystem of a pesantren-based school, an area rarely explored in existing motivation research. It conceptualizes motivation not merely as an individual attribute but as a systemic outcome shaped by pedagogical, environmental, and institutional conditions. The findings contribute theoretically by integrating contemporary motivation theories with Islamic boarding school education and practically by offering evidence-based recommendations for curriculum contextualization, participatory teaching strategies, teacher professional development, and institutional policy improvement to enhance student engagement in PAI learning.

Keywords: learning motivation; Islamic Religious Education; pesantren-based school; qualitative case study; pedagogical barriers; student engagement.

Introduction

Learning motivation is consistently recognized as one of the most decisive predictors of students' academic engagement, persistence, and achievement. Students with strong motivation tend to demonstrate higher participation, deeper cognitive processing, and better learning outcomes compared to those who experience motivational barriers. In educational psychology, motivation determines not only whether students learn, but also how meaningfully they engage with learning tasks (Schunk et al., 2014). Learning environments that support autonomy, competence, and social relatedness are proven to enhance intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Consequently, teachers are required to function not merely as knowledge transmitters but also as facilitators, motivators, and designers of interactive and student-centered learning experiences.

From the perspective of Islamic educational philosophy, education is not limited to intellectual development but also emphasizes moral and spiritual formation. Al-Ghazali emphasized that good habits, character building, and value internalization are central to educational success. This perspective aligns with the goals of Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam or PAI), which aims to cultivate not only cognitive understanding but also religious awareness, ethical behavior, and meaningful life practices. Therefore, motivation becomes a crucial foundation for successful PAI learning because students who are intrinsically motivated are more likely to internalize and practice Islamic values in their daily lives (Marfu'ah, 2025).

However, empirical realities often show a discrepancy between these ideals and classroom practices. Observations in many schools indicate that PAI learning is still dominated by lecture-based instruction, memorization, and teacher-centered approaches. Such practices limit students' active participation, critical reflection, and experiential learning opportunities. As a result, PAI is frequently perceived as a formal and normative subject rather than as a meaningful guide for life (Effendi, 2002). Monotonous methods, limited learning media, and minimal instructional variation further contribute to boredom and disengagement, which ultimately weaken students' learning motivation (Rubiana, 2020).

These challenges become more complex in pesantren-based schools. The pesantren environment theoretically provides strong advantages for character education through religious habituation, discipline, and communal learning culture. Nevertheless, the integration of formal schooling with intensive boarding activities may also generate unintended consequences. Dense daily schedules, physical fatigue, and limited rest can reduce students' readiness and concentration during formal lessons. Research in motivational theory shows that exhaustion and excessive demands negatively affect students' expectancy, task value, and engagement (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020). Thus, the pesantren context may function as an ambivalent environment that

simultaneously supports moral development while potentially inhibiting academic motivation when not managed pedagogically.

Institutional and managerial aspects also play an important role. Studies on pesantren and madrasah management highlight that teacher competence, leadership quality, and organizational culture strongly influence learning effectiveness. Teacher development, professional commitment, and motivational climate determine whether instructional innovation can occur in classrooms. Weak professional support systems may lead to stagnant pedagogical practices that fail to respond to students' needs. Conversely, adaptive leadership and continuous teacher development encourage more contextual, engaging, and meaningful learning processes. Empirical evidence from pesantren-based institutions shows that strengthening teacher competence, instructional leadership, and religious culture contributes positively to educational quality and student engagement (Fauzi, 2022; Fauzi, 2023).

Although numerous studies have examined learning motivation and PAI instruction, most are conducted in general schools and focus on improvement strategies rather than systematically analyzing inhibiting factors. Research specifically investigating motivational barriers within pesantren-based formal schools remains limited. This gap is significant because pesantren-based institutions possess unique characteristics, including the integration of religious traditions, boarding routines, and formal curricula. These distinctive features require contextual and qualitative exploration rather than general assumptions derived from conventional schooling models.

Based on these theoretical and empirical considerations, an in-depth investigation is needed to understand how pedagogical practices, psychological conditions, and pesantren environments interact to inhibit students' learning motivation in PAI classrooms. Therefore, this study aims to explore and analyze the factors that hinder students' motivation to learn Islamic Religious Education at a pesantren-based junior high school. By employing a qualitative case study approach, this research seeks to provide contextual explanations and evidence-based recommendations for developing more engaging, meaningful, and sustainable PAI learning practices.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive case study design to explore in depth the factors inhibiting students' learning motivation in Islamic Religious Education within a pesantren-based junior high school context. A qualitative design was selected because the phenomenon under investigation involves complex pedagogical, psychological, and environmental interactions that cannot be adequately explained through numerical measurement alone. Qualitative inquiry enables researchers to understand participants' experiences, perceptions, and meanings in natural settings, allowing rich and contextual interpretations of social realities. In line

with this perspective, qualitative research is conducted under natural conditions where the researcher serves as the key instrument, and data are collected through triangulation of multiple techniques such as observation, interviews, and documentation (Sugiyono, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research was conducted at SMP Islam Favorit Nurul Ulum, a pesantren-based junior high school characterized by the integration of formal education and intensive boarding school activities. This setting was purposively selected because it represents a unique educational environment where religious habituation, structured routines, and formal classroom instruction coexist, potentially influencing students' learning motivation. A case study strategy was considered appropriate since it allows intensive and holistic examination of a bounded system within its real-life context and provides contextualized understanding rather than statistical generalization (Yin, 2018). By focusing on one institutional case, the study aimed to generate deep insights into the dynamics of motivational barriers as they occur naturally in everyday educational practices.

Participants were determined using purposive sampling to ensure that the selected informants possessed direct knowledge and relevant experiences related to the PAI learning process. The participants consisted of a PAI teacher and several students representing different levels of engagement and academic performance. These participants were considered information-rich sources capable of providing comprehensive explanations regarding instructional strategies, classroom experiences, and perceived obstacles to learning motivation. The inclusion of both teacher and student perspectives enabled the study to capture multiple viewpoints and to construct a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

Data were collected through methodological triangulation involving classroom observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation analysis. Observations were conducted directly in the classroom to examine teaching methods, teacher-student interactions, students' participation, classroom atmosphere, and the use of learning media. These observations were carried out repeatedly to identify consistent behavioral patterns rather than incidental events, and detailed field notes were recorded systematically. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teacher and selected students to explore their perceptions of learning practices, motivational challenges, fatigue related to pesantren routines, and institutional support. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility for probing deeper responses while maintaining alignment with the research objectives. All interviews were audio recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. Documentation data were also gathered from lesson plans, school schedules, photographs of learning activities, and institutional records, which served to complement and corroborate findings obtained from observations and interviews. The integration of these multiple data sources strengthened the credibility and robustness of the study (Patton, 2015).

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing conducted simultaneously and iteratively. During data condensation, raw data from interviews, observations, and documents were coded and organized into meaningful categories. Initial open coding was applied to identify emerging themes, followed by categorization and thematic interpretation to reveal relationships among factors influencing learning motivation. The data were then displayed in matrices and narrative summaries to facilitate systematic comparison and interpretation. Finally, conclusions were drawn and continuously verified through cross-checking across different sources and repeated review of the data to ensure consistency and validity (Miles et al., 2014).

To ensure trustworthiness, several strategies were implemented throughout the research process. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement in the field, triangulation of techniques and data sources, and member checking, in which participants reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of interview transcripts and interpretations. Dependability was maintained through detailed documentation of procedures to create an audit trail, while confirmability was supported through reflexive notes to minimize researcher bias. Transferability was addressed by providing thick descriptions of the research context so that readers may determine the applicability of the findings to similar educational settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ethical considerations were also strictly observed, including obtaining informed consent from participants, ensuring confidentiality, and using pseudonyms to protect identities. Through these systematic procedures, the qualitative case study design was expected to produce credible, contextual, and in-depth explanations of the factors inhibiting students' learning motivation in Islamic Religious Education within a pesantren-based school environment.

Results and Discussion

Pedagogical Barriers: Teacher-Centered Instruction and Limited Student Engagement

Classroom observations conducted during Islamic Religious Education (PAI) lessons at SMP Islam Nurul Ulum consistently revealed low levels of behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement among students. Most learning sessions were dominated by one-way instruction in which the teacher explained the material verbally while students listened and took notes. Opportunities for dialogue, questioning, collaborative discussion, or problem-solving activities were minimal. Students rarely initiated interaction, and only a small number responded when prompted. The overall classroom atmosphere tended to be monotonous and passive.

Several observable indicators reflected weakened learning motivation. Some students appeared sleepy, rested their heads on the desk, yawned frequently, or became easily distracted. Others engaged in side conversations

unrelated to the lesson. Although students were physically present, many were not cognitively or emotionally involved in the learning process. This pattern suggests that the instructional environment failed to stimulate curiosity, attention, and active participation, which are essential elements of motivated learning.

Students' perceptions confirmed these observational findings. One student, Vela Nurcahyaningtyas, expressed dissatisfaction with the monotonous learning format:

"Kalau menurut saya pelajaran agama ini bisa dibuat lebih menarik agar saya dan teman-teman tidak merasa bosan dan mengantuk."

In a follow-up interview, she further stated:

"Coba saja pelajaran pakai diadakan atau dijelaskan menggunakan video atau diskusi kelompok biasanya temen-temen lebih semangat. Tapi di pelajaran PAI disini jarang seperti itu."

These statements indicate that students do not reject PAI as a subject; instead, they expect more interactive, varied, and visually engaging instruction. Their responses highlight a mismatch between students' learning preferences and the pedagogical approach currently implemented.

From a theoretical standpoint, this situation can be explained through Self-Determination Theory. According to Ryan and Deci (2000), intrinsic motivation emerges when learners experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Lecture-based instruction restricts autonomy by limiting student choice, reduces competence by minimizing active practice, and weakens relatedness by limiting collaboration. Consequently, students' intrinsic motivation declines. Schunk et al. (2014) similarly emphasize that meaningful engagement requires active participation rather than passive reception. Therefore, the dominance of teacher-centered pedagogy becomes a primary barrier to learning motivation.

Teacher Competency Barriers: Limited Innovation and Digital Literacy

Another important finding concerns limitations related to teacher competency, particularly in the integration of innovative and technology-based strategies. Observations showed that learning activities rarely involved multimedia, digital tools, or interactive methods. Lessons relied almost exclusively on oral explanation and textbooks, which reduced variation and stimulation.

The teacher acknowledged these constraints during the interview:

"Usia saya memang beda jauh sama teman teman guru lainnya, ini bias jadi kendala saya pribadi, di mana saya belum mengerti banyak tentang penggunaan media digital."

This statement reflects a gap in digital literacy and pedagogical innovation. While teaching experience is valuable, the inability to adapt to

contemporary learning technologies may hinder instructional effectiveness. Modern students are accustomed to multimedia environments, and traditional approaches may no longer meet their expectations or learning styles.

Research supports this interpretation. Reeve (2012) argues that engaging learning environments require interactive and technology-supported instruction to foster student involvement. Furthermore, studies in pesantren-based institutions demonstrate that strengthening teachers' competence, commitment, and motivation positively affects instructional quality and student engagement (Fauzi, 2022). Thus, limited teacher adaptability constitutes a significant external barrier to students' learning motivation.

Internal Barriers: Physical Fatigue and Psychological Readiness of Santri

In addition to pedagogical issues, internal student conditions were identified as substantial barriers. Most students live in the pesantren and follow intensive daily routines that include religious worship, diniyah classes, and evening activities that often extend late into the night. As a result, many students come to school physically tired and mentally unprepared for formal learning.

Classroom observations showed several students struggling to stay awake, lacking concentration, and displaying reduced responsiveness. This condition was clearly articulated by Muhammad Zaki:

“Jujur saja kalau pelajaran PAI rasanya capek dan ngantuk, karena malamnya kegiatan pondok disini padat bahkan sampai larut. Jadi ketika kami di kelas kurang fokus.”

This testimony indicates that learning motivation is strongly influenced by physiological readiness. Even when students value religious education, fatigue reduces their capacity to engage actively. Expectancy-Value Theory explains that exhaustion lowers students' expectations of success and decreases the perceived value of learning tasks, which ultimately diminishes effort and persistence (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020).

These findings confirm that the pesantren environment has an ambivalent character. On one hand, it promotes discipline and religious character formation; on the other hand, excessive schedules may unintentionally reduce academic readiness. Therefore, motivational problems cannot be understood solely as instructional issues but must also consider students' physical well-being.

Structural Barriers: Limited Facilities and Learning Media

Document analysis revealed further constraints related to infrastructure. The school possesses only one projector, and its use is prioritized for general subjects. Consequently, PAI classes rarely utilize audiovisual or multimedia tools. The teacher explained:

“Selama ini pembelajaran PAI masih banyak menggunakan metode ceramah. Saya menyadari bahwa metode ini kurang menarik, tetapi

keterbatasan media yang hanya memiliki satu proyektor menjadi kendala untuk menerapkan metode yang lebih variatif.”

Limited facilities restrict teachers’ ability to diversify instruction and create engaging learning environments. According to Mayer (2014), multimedia learning enhances attention, comprehension, and retention through the integration of visual and auditory channels. Without such support, lessons rely solely on verbal delivery, which may reduce student interest. Thus, infrastructural limitations directly contribute to weakened motivation.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that barriers to learning motivation are multidimensional and interconnected. Teacher-centered pedagogy reduces engagement, limited teacher innovation restricts instructional variety, student fatigue lowers readiness, and inadequate facilities constrain creativity. These factors interact systematically rather than independently, creating a cycle of disengagement.

Importantly, the problem does not lie primarily in students’ character or willingness to learn. Instead, it emerges from systemic pedagogical and institutional conditions. Therefore, improvement efforts must be holistic. Curriculum design should become more contextual and experiential, connecting religious concepts with students’ daily pesantren life. Instructional strategies should emphasize participatory models such as Problem Based Learning, collaborative discussions, and project-based tasks. Teacher professional development in digital literacy is essential, and school management should balance pesantren schedules with adequate rest time. Structural support through improved facilities is equally necessary.

Only through integrated reform at pedagogical, psychological, and institutional levels can pesantren-based schools foster meaningful and sustainable learning motivation in Islamic Religious Education.

Positioning learning motivation within the distinctive ecosystem of a pesantren-based junior high school provides an important new perspective in the study of Islamic Religious Education. Existing research on learning motivation in PAI has largely concentrated on instructional techniques or student achievement within conventional school settings, with limited attention to how boarding school culture, religious routines, and institutional structures collectively influence students’ motivational dynamics. By employing a qualitative case study design grounded in classroom observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, this research captures the lived experiences of students and teachers and explains motivation as a contextual and systemic phenomenon rather than merely an individual psychological trait. This integrative lens highlights that motivational barriers emerge from the interaction between pedagogical practices, teacher competencies, students’ physical fatigue, and infrastructural constraints within the pesantren environment, thereby offering a more holistic and ecologically grounded understanding that has rarely been addressed in previous studies.

Beyond its contextual novelty, the study contributes both theoretically and practically to the development of Islamic education research. Theoretically, it bridges contemporary motivational frameworks, particularly Self-Determination Theory and Expectancy-Value Theory, with the sociocultural realities of pesantren-based schooling, enriching the discourse on motivation in faith-based educational contexts. Practically, the findings generate evidence-based implications for curriculum contextualization, participatory and student-centered instructional strategies, continuous teacher professional development, and institutional policy adjustments that balance religious activities with academic readiness. These contributions provide actionable guidance for educators, school leaders, and policymakers seeking to strengthen student engagement and learning quality in Islamic boarding schools. Accordingly, this research not only addresses an empirical gap in the literature but also serves as a strategic reference for designing more motivating and meaningful PAI learning environments.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that students' learning motivation in Islamic Religious Education at SMP Islam Nurul Ulum has not yet reached an optimal level. This condition is reflected in students' low classroom engagement, limited participation in discussions, and a general tendency to display boredom, passivity, and lack of enthusiasm during the learning process. Although students attend classes regularly, their involvement remains largely superficial, characterized more by physical presence than by active cognitive and emotional engagement. Such patterns suggest that the current learning environment has not sufficiently stimulated students' intrinsic interest or encouraged meaningful participation in PAI learning activities.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that barriers to learning motivation are multidimensional, arising from both internal and external factors that interact systematically. Internally, students' physical and psychological fatigue caused by intensive pesantren routines reduces concentration, readiness, and persistence in learning. Externally, conventional and lecture-dominated instructional practices, the limited implementation of innovative models such as Problem Based Learning, constraints in teacher adaptability and digital literacy, and inadequate learning facilities collectively hinder the creation of engaging and stimulating learning experiences. These interconnected barriers indicate that low motivation is not merely an individual student issue but a systemic outcome of pedagogical and institutional conditions. Therefore, improving students' motivation in Islamic Religious Education requires comprehensive efforts that integrate instructional innovation, teacher professional development, balanced scheduling of pesantren activities, and strengthened infrastructural support to foster more meaningful, active, and sustainable learning environments.

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