

Teachers' Strategies in Establishing Positive Relationships to Enhance Students' Learning Motivation

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Abstract: Learning motivation in Islamic Religious Education is not only influenced by instructional models but also by the quality of teacher–student relationships. However, existing studies in madrasah contexts tend to emphasize quantitative measurement of motivation rather than examining the relational processes underlying its formation. This study aims to analyze teachers' efforts in building positive relationships and their implications for students' learning motivation at MTs Negeri 1 Tanjung Jabung Timur. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed, with data collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The data were analyzed thematically using an interactive model of data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing. The findings indicate that positive relationships are developed through empathetic attitudes, two-way communication, personal approaches, constructive responses to mistakes, and motivational reinforcement. These practices are strengthened by the madrasah ecosystem, including the 5S culture, collective prayer, and leadership support. The study demonstrates that learning motivation functions as a relational construct shaped by supportive pedagogical interactions that fulfill students' need for relatedness, resulting in psychological comfort, increased self-confidence, active engagement, and learning persistence. The novelty of this research lies in proposing a relational model of learning motivation that integrates pedagogical practices and institutional culture within the framework of Self-Determination Theory. It concludes that teachers' relational competence plays a strategic role in fostering intrinsic motivation in madrasah education.

Keywords: pedagogical relationship; learning motivation; psychological comfort; student engagement; islamic education.

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Introduction

Education is not only oriented towards cognitive achievement, but also towards character building and strengthening the motivation to learn among students. In the context of national education, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) has a strategic role in shaping the religious attitudes, morals, and integrity of students as mandated in Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System. (Republik Indonesia, 2003). However, the effectiveness of learning is largely determined by the dynamics of interaction between teachers and students in the classroom, where positive relationships form the foundation for meaningful learning experiences. (Hidayah, Akhiruyanto, Yudhistira, & Virama, 2025; Wang, 2024). Positive teacher-student relationships have been shown to be an important factor in increasing student engagement and motivation to learn. (Martinez dan Wighting, 2023). From the perspective of Self-Determination Theory, Ryan dan Deci (2020) emphasizes that fulfilling the need for relatedness is an absolute prerequisite for the growth of intrinsic motivation. When this need is met through supportive and warm communication, a psychologically safe learning environment is created, giving students the courage to express their opinions and actively participate. The relevance of this theory is reinforced by recent empirical

findings. Zhang dan Hu (2025) serta Longakit et al. (2025) shows that the perception of teacher support has a positive and significant relationship with students' intrinsic motivation and academic engagement. These findings are even more relevant in the context of PAI learning, which requires the internalization of values and character building through meaningful pedagogical interactions.

Although various studies have confirmed the importance of interpersonal relationships in learning, in practice, teachers' efforts to build supportive and sustainable relationships have not been fully optimized. Some teachers still focus more on delivering material and achieving curriculum targets, so that empathetic communication, appreciation of student opinions, and emotional support have not been adequately integrated (Amerstorfer und Münster-kistner, 2021). This condition has the potential to hinder the development of students' intrinsic motivation, which in turn can lead to a decline in academic achievement, increased boredom, and weakened student engagement in both academic and non-academic activities at the madrasah (Diseth, Kathrine, Mathisen, & Samdal, 2020).

Based on initial observations at MTs Negeri 1 Tanjung Jabung Timur, there are indications that student motivation is not yet optimal. This can be seen from the students' passive attitudes, lack of enthusiasm, and minimal participation in learning activities, as well as their low level of perseverance in completing tasks, which is characterized by a habit of procrastination. In addition, initial observations show that pedagogical interactions in the classroom tend to be one-way. Teachers are more dominant in delivering material, while opportunities for students to express their opinions, convey learning difficulties, or obtain emotional feedback are still limited. As a result, the emotional bond that should be the basis of intrinsic motivation is not well established. This condition has implications for a less conducive classroom atmosphere and has an impact on decreasing student interest and motivation to learn. Therefore, the key problem that emerges from this situation is how teachers build positive pedagogical relationships with students and how these relationships contribute to strengthening students' learning motivation in Islamic Religious Education within the madrasah context.

The literature on learning motivation in the context of Islamic education shows a tendency toward quantitative approaches that focus on testing the relationship between variables or psychometric instruments. Studies by Fadli et al. (2023) focused more on the validity of motivation measurement instruments, while other studies highlight the effectiveness of certain learning models, such as the application of the Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC) model, which has been proven to increase motivation in learning Islamic Religious Education (Sewang dan Aswad, 2023). However, these studies generally focus on measurement results or model effectiveness, and therefore do not reveal much about the pedagogical processes that underlie the formation of student motivation. On the other hand, qualitative studies by Maulidin et al. (2025) began to highlight teachers' strategies in building positive relationships through personal communication, emotional approaches, and understanding student characteristics, which resulted in increased engagement and learning achievement. However, such studies are still limited and have not specifically examined the dynamics of teacher-student relationships in Islamic Religious Education in madrasahs, particularly those focusing on the process of forming contextual learning motivation.

This study contributes to the literature by offering a new perspective that conceptualizes learning motivation as a relational construct formed through continuous pedagogical interactions between teachers and students in Islamic Religious Education. While previous studies have predominantly focused on measuring motivation levels or evaluating the effectiveness of specific instructional models, limited attention has been given to the relational processes through which motivation is cultivated in the madrasah context.

Based on this review, there is a clear research gap, namely the absence of an in-depth study revealing how teachers strive to build positive relationships with students, the obstacles they face, and the strategies they use to overcome these obstacles in the context of Islamic Religious Education, and

how these relationships contribute to increasing student motivation to learn. Therefore, this study focuses on analyzing teachers' efforts, obstacles, and solutions in building positive relationships to increase student motivation in Islamic Religious Education learning, so that it is expected to contribute conceptually and practically to the development of interpersonal relationship-based pedagogical strategies in madrasahs.

This study offers a new perspective by positioning learning motivation as a relational construct that emerges through pedagogical interactions between teachers and students in Islamic Religious Education. Unlike previous studies that primarily focused on measuring motivation or evaluating the effectiveness of instructional models, this research highlights the relational dynamics of teacher–student interactions as the core process underlying the development of motivation in the madrasah context. Through a qualitative approach, this study provides both conceptual and practical contributions by explaining how teachers build positive relationships with students, the challenges they encounter, and the adaptive strategies they employ to address these challenges. In doing so, the study offers a deeper understanding of pedagogical relationship practices that contribute to strengthening students' learning motivation within the madrasah environment.

Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach with descriptive methods to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of teachers' efforts to build positive relationships in order to increase student motivation to learn (Doyle et al., 2019). This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to interpret the meaning, process, and dynamics of interactions that occur naturally in the school environment (Ghamrawi et al., 2025). The data produced is descriptive in nature, consisting of words, expressions, and descriptions of factual situations obtained from the field, rather than statistical figures (Alem, 2020).

The research was conducted at MTs Negeri 1 Tanjung Jabung Timur from November to December 2025. The location was chosen deliberately, considering that the madrasah has a context relevant to the focus of the research, especially in the practice of teacher-student relations. The research subjects were determined using the purposive sampling technique, which consisted of the head of the madrasah as the key informant, 1 Islamic Education teacher as the main informant, and 7 students as the supporting informant. The selection of informants is based on their direct involvement in the learning process and educational interaction in the madrasah environment (Sumarsono, Imron, Wiyono, & Arifin, 2025).

The data sources in this study include human and non-human sources. Primary data were obtained through observation and in-depth interviews focusing on the interactions between teachers and students and the strategies used in building positive relationships (Mahfud & Riniati, 2023). Secondary data was obtained through documentation, such as madrasah profiles, organizational structures, teacher and student data, and other documents relevant to the study (Widdah, 2022).

Data collection was conducted through triangulation techniques that integrated observation, in-depth interviews, and systematic documentation (Natow, 2019; Nikmah, 2023). Observations were conducted using passive participatory methods, whereby researchers observed learning dynamics and social interactions in classrooms and madrasah environments. Observations focused on student behavior, teacher-student communication patterns, classroom atmosphere, and the approaches used by teachers to build positive relationships. Observation data were recorded in field notes and observation sheets.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, primary informants, and supporting informants to explore the experiences, perceptions, strategies, obstacles, and solutions used by teachers in building positive relationships with students (Hagenauer, Muehlbacher, & Ivanova, 2023). In addition, documentation techniques were used to collect supporting data in the

form of school archives, learning tools, photos of activities, and relevant administrative documents to reinforce the findings of observations and interviews (Hidayatul, Dafik, Tirta, Wangguway, & Suni, 2020; Mayasari, Arifudin, Herawati, Rosanti, & Prayogi, 2024).

Data analysis was conducted interactively following the Miles and Huberman model, which consists of three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Khusnul et al., 2025). During the reduction stage, researchers select and focus on data relevant to the research focus. The reduced data is then presented in the form of descriptive narratives to facilitate the tracing of patterns of findings, before conclusions are drawn gradually and continuously.

The validity of the data in this study was maintained through source and technique triangulation, extended field participation, and member checks with informants (Santos et al., 2020). These steps are taken to ensure the credibility, consistency, and accuracy of the interpretation of data obtained during the research process (Marlina, Purwaningsih, Siagian, Hakim, & Maryati, 2025).

Result and Discussion

Based on the results of interviews, observations, and documentation, teachers build positive relationships through several consistent and systematic relational strategies. Teachers not only act as conveyors of material, but also as mentors, facilitators, and motivators. Concrete practices found include two-way communication, a friendly attitude, positive reinforcement, empathy for students' conditions, and a personal approach outside of formal learning.

The results of the observation show that teachers begin the lesson with a greeting and a prayer together, establish warm communication at the beginning of the lesson (apperception), and conduct a reflection at the end of the learning activity. Informal interactions, such as greeting students outside the classroom and giving personal attention, also strengthen emotional closeness. The following is a summary of the findings on the teacher-student relationship aspect:

Table 1. Teacher Pedagogical Relationship Practices

Theme	Sub-theme	Indicator	Data Source	Quote/Finding	Interpretation
Pedagogical Relationship Practices	Friendly & empathetic attitude	Teachers are friendly and caring	Student interviews	Teachers are kind, friendly, and caring	The affective dimension serves as the foundation of interpersonal relationships
	Two-way communication	Discussion and Q&A	Teacher interviews	Communication is conducted two-way through discussion and Q&A	Relationships are dialogical, not one-way
	Personal approach	Knowing student characters	Teacher interviews	Knowing student characters and creating a comfortable atmosphere	Character-based pedagogical adaptation
	Response to mistakes	Constructive reprimands & guidance	Teacher interviews	Reprimanding kindly and providing additional guidance	Corrective practices without damaging the relationship
	Motivational reinforcement	Giving praise & advice	Student interviews	Teachers provide motivation and praise	Positive reinforcement increases self-confidence

Based on the results of thematic analysis, teachers' pedagogical practices in building positive relationships with students consist of five main sub-themes, namely friendly and empathetic attitudes, two-way communication, personal approaches, responses to mistakes, and motivational reinforcement. These five sub-themes show that teacher-student relationships are built through a combination of affective and communicative dimensions that occur consistently in the learning process.

In terms of friendly and empathetic attitudes, students stated that teachers were “kind, friendly, and caring.” This finding shows that the affective dimension is the foundation of interpersonal relationships in the classroom. Teachers' friendly attitudes and caring nature create a more open atmosphere that supports positive interactions. In a pedagogical context, this attitude serves as a prerequisite for building trust between teachers and students.

The sub-theme of two-way communication shows that learning interactions are not one-sided. Teachers said that communication is carried out through discussions and question and answer sessions. This pattern shows that pedagogical relationships are dialogical, where students are given space to actively participate in the learning process. This kind of interaction allows for a more balanced exchange of ideas between teachers and students.

In terms of a personal approach, teachers mention the importance of getting to know students' characters and creating a comfortable learning atmosphere. This indicates the existence of character-based pedagogical adaptation, where learning strategies are tailored to students' needs and backgrounds. This approach shows that relationships are not built uniformly, but take individual differences into account.

Responding to mistakes is also an important part of pedagogical relationships. Teachers reprimand students appropriately and provide additional guidance when mistakes occur. This corrective practice is carried out without damaging interpersonal relationships, so that the coaching function continues without causing emotional tension. Thus, academic correction remains within the framework of a supportive relationship.

In addition, motivational reinforcement through praise and advice is a strategy that strengthens students' self-confidence. Students revealed that teachers provide motivation and praise, which contributes to increased self-confidence in learning. This positive reinforcement shows that pedagogical relationships are not only communicative but also play a role in building psychological conditions that support learning engagement.

Overall, the five sub-themes illustrate that the practice of teacher pedagogical relationships is structured and multidimensional. Relationships are not only formed through formal interactions in the classroom, but also through attitudes, approaches, and responsive strategies that pay attention to students' emotional and academic needs. These findings confirm that the quality of teacher-student relationships is the result of conscious and continuous pedagogical practices.

Table 2. Supporting Madrasah Ecosystem

Theme	Sub-theme	Indicator	Data Source	Quote/Finding	Interpretation
Institutional Ecosystem	5S Culture	<i>Smile, Greeting, Courteousness, Politeness, Manners</i>	Principal interview	The Madrasah implements the 5S culture	Institutional values strengthen social relationships
	Religious practices	Group prayer	Observation	Teachers begin the lesson with greetings and prayer	A spiritual atmosphere creates emotional closeness
	Leadership support	Principal's commitment	Teacher interviews	Support from the School Principal	Relationships are not individualistic, but systemic

The analysis shows that positive relationships between teachers and students are not only built at the classroom interaction level, but are also strengthened by the institutional ecosystem of the madrasah. The implementation of the 5S culture (smile, greet, say hello, be polite, be courteous) promoted by the principal has become a normative value that shapes a warm and mutually respectful social climate. This culture serves as an institutional framework that supports the quality of social relations in the madrasah environment.

In addition, religious practices such as the habit of praying together before learning creates a spiritual atmosphere that supports emotional closeness between teachers and students. The support of madrasah leaders is also an important factor, as the principal's commitment shows that strengthening teacher-student relationships is not just an individual initiative, but part of the system and organizational culture. Thus, pedagogical relationships develop in a conducive and integrated structural context.

Table 3. Implications for Learning Motivation

Theme	Sub-theme	Indicator	Data Source	Quote/Finding	Interpretation
Motivation as a Relational Construction	Psychological comfort	Not afraid to ask questions	Student interview	Not afraid to ask questions because of feeling comfortable	Fulfillment of the need for relatedness
	Self-confidence	Increased student confidence	Teacher interview	Positive relationships make students more confident	Teacher support increases self-efficacy
	Active involvement	Enthusiasm & active participation	Observation	Students appear active and enthusiastic	Relationships trigger engagement
	Learning persistence	Increased diligence	Student interview	More diligent in studying due to good relationships	Intrinsic motivation increases

Thematic analysis shows that student learning motivation is formed as a relational construct influenced by the quality of the teacher-student relationship. Psychological comfort is the main indicator, marked by the students' courage to ask questions without fear because they feel accepted and appreciated. This condition indicates that the need for relatedness is fulfilled, which contributes to the growth of internal motivation.

Positive relationships also have an impact on increasing students' self-confidence, as expressed by teachers that relational closeness makes students more confident in their abilities. Learning observations show active involvement and enthusiasm among students, which indicates an increase in engagement. In addition, students admit to studying more diligently when they have a good relationship with their teachers. Overall, these findings confirm that the quality of pedagogical relationships has a direct implication on the increase in students' intrinsic motivation and perseverance in learning.

Research findings show that building positive relationships between teachers and students is not without obstacles. Student character variations are a major challenge, as expressed by principals and teachers who say that differences in student backgrounds, temperaments, and abilities require different approaches. This confirms that pedagogical relationships cannot be built using a uniform approach, but rather require differentiated strategies. In addition, external factors such as a lack of parental attention also affect student motivation to learn. Limited learning time is also a structural obstacle that limits the intensity of interpersonal interaction in the classroom.

To overcome these obstacles, teachers implement solution-based strategies through individual communication with students. This strategy allows teachers to understand the specific needs and psychological conditions of each student in greater depth. On the other hand, collaboration with

parents is carried out to strengthen external support for the learning process. Thus, relational obstacles are not seen as permanent barriers, but as dynamics that can be managed through adaptive and collaborative strategies.

Table 4. Obstacles and Adaptive Strategies

Theme	Sub-theme	Indicator	Data Source	Quote/Finding	Interpretation
Relational Obstacles	Character variation	Diverse student characters	Principal & teacher interviews	Character differences pose a challenge	Relationships require a differentiated approach
	External factors	Lack of parental attention	Teacher interviews	Lack of parental involvement/attention	Family factors significantly influence motivation
	Time constraints	Limited instructional time	Principal interview	Limited time availability	Interaction has not reached its maximum potential
Solutive Strategies	Personal approach	Individual communication	Teacher interviews	Personalized approach	Adaptive relational strategy
	Parental collaboration	Communication with parents	Teacher interviews	Ongoing communication with parents	Strengthening external support systems



Figure 1. Relational Model of Learning Motivation

The findings of this study can be formulated in the form of a relational model, in which the madrasah ecosystem functions as a structural context that supports the development of teachers' pedagogical relationship practices. These relationships then fulfill students' need for relatedness and lead to the formation of intrinsic motivation and increased learning engagement.

Discussion

This study confirms that a positive relationship between teachers and students is a systematic pedagogical practice, not merely an informal social interaction. This relationship is built through two-way communication, empathy, positive reinforcement, and madrasah cultural support. Learning motivation arises as a consequence of supportive interpersonal interactions, so that the teacher-student relationship serves as a psychopedagogical foundation in the learning process. These findings are in line with the Self-Determination Theory developed by Ryan dan Deci (2020), which emphasizes the importance of fulfilling the need for relatedness in fostering intrinsic motivation. When students feel

valued and have an emotional connection with their teachers, they show increased confidence, comfort, and active participation.

The results of this study are also consistent with findings Košir dan Jugović (2025) which states that the quality of teacher-student relationships contributes to academic engagement, and is supported by John Hattie's meta-analysis, which shows that positive relationships have a significant influence on learning outcomes. In the context of madrasahs, the 5S culture and character building reinforce the creation of psychological safety, as stated by Hotimah et al. (2024), so that students are more confident in participating.

Barriers such as differences in student character and time constraints show that pedagogical relationships are adaptive and contextual. Personalized approaches and communication with parents demonstrate that relational competence is an integral part of teacher professionalism. Thus, the quality of teacher-student relationships is a strategic element in increasing learning motivation, especially in the context of madrasah education.

This study not only confirms the importance of positive relationships between teachers and students in increasing learning motivation but also offers a conceptual perspective by positioning motivation as a *relational construct* that is formed through continuous pedagogical interactions in the madrasah ecosystem. Based on Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory, this study expands the meaning of the dimension of relatedness by showing that connectedness is not only interpersonal but also reinforced by institutional culture, such as the implementation of 5S, the habit of praying together, and the support of madrasah leadership.

The originality of this study lies in the formulation of a relational model of learning motivation that integrates pedagogical practices, institutional culture, and the fulfillment of psychological needs in the context of Islamic Religious Education in madrasahs. This study shifts the focus from learning strategies alone to the relational competence of teachers as a strategic element of educator professionalism. Thus, this study contributes theoretically to enriching the application of Self-Determination Theory in Islamic education and, practically, emphasizes the importance of strengthening relational competence as the foundation for improving the quality of learning.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that students' learning motivation in Islamic Religious Education is fundamentally shaped by the quality of teacher-student relationships. Rather than functioning merely as a supporting social factor, the relationship operates as a pedagogical mechanism through which intrinsic motivation is cultivated. Dialogic communication, empathetic attitudes, constructive responses to mistakes, and personalized attention create psychological safety that encourages students' confidence, engagement, and persistence in learning.

A key contribution of this study lies in reframing learning motivation as a relational construct that emerges from continuous pedagogical interaction rather than solely from individual psychological factors. In the madrasah context, this relational process is further strengthened by institutional culture such as the 5S culture, collective prayer practices, and leadership support which collectively create a socio-pedagogical ecosystem that sustains students' sense of relatedness. This finding extends the application of Self-Determination Theory by demonstrating that the relatedness dimension in Islamic education is not only interpersonal but also institutionally embedded.

The study therefore highlights teachers' relational competence as a strategic dimension of professional practice that directly contributes to the development of students' intrinsic motivation. Despite contextual challenges including diverse student characteristics, limited instructional time, and varying levels of parental support, adaptive relational strategies and collaborative communication with parents enable teachers to sustain motivational engagement.

Nevertheless, the findings are limited by the single-site qualitative design and the relatively small number of informants, which restricts broader generalization. Future research is recommended to involve multiple educational contexts, employ mixed or quantitative approaches, and further examine relational pedagogical dynamics across different subjects and educational levels. Such studies would help deepen the empirical understanding of how relational competence can systematically enhance learning motivation in Islamic educational settings.

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