

From Compliance to Commitment: Institutional Ethics and the Social Formation of Student Engagement in Islamic Religious Education

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines how Islamic Religious Education operates not merely as a curricular obligation but as an institutional ethical practice that shapes students' engagement through social and moral formation. Moving beyond a compliance-oriented view of religious instruction, the study explores how institutional ethics influence students' attention, participation, and commitment within everyday school practices.

Method: The research employed a qualitative descriptive approach with a field-based design. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews with Islamic Religious Education teachers, students, and parents, and institutional documentation. The study was conducted in a public senior high school context. Data analysis followed an interactive model involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, supported by credibility checks to ensure trustworthiness.

Findings: The findings reveal that student engagement in Islamic Religious Education is socially formed through three interrelated dimensions. First, ethical teaching practices foster attentive participation by framing religious learning as meaningful rather than obligatory. Second, students' use of discretionary time reflects negotiated commitment, where learning occurs selectively and is shaped by both institutional expectations and personal agency. Third, participation in classroom interaction and religious extracurricular activities demonstrates that engagement is sustained when ethical values are embedded in institutional routines rather than imposed through formal authority. These dynamics indicate a shift from procedural compliance toward moral commitment.

Significance: This study contributes to religious and social studies by reframing Islamic Religious Education as a site of institutional ethical formation rather than solely an instructional process. It offers an empirical basis for understanding how religious education can cultivate sustained engagement through ethical governance and social interaction, providing insights relevant to scholars and practitioners concerned with religion, education, and institutional morality.

INTRODUCTION

Islamic Religious Education has long been positioned as a formal subject designed to transmit doctrinal knowledge and moral norms within school systems. However, recent social changes have increasingly challenged the assumption that formal instruction alone can foster meaningful student engagement, particularly when religious learning is framed as procedural obligation rather than lived ethical practice (Sessions & Williams,

2024). In many institutional contexts, compliance with curricular requirements becomes the dominant indicator of success, while deeper forms of moral commitment remain weakly examined. This condition raises questions about how religious education functions socially within institutions rather than merely what it teaches. Scholars have noted that ethical values are often articulated normatively but enacted unevenly in everyday educational routines (Fisher et al., 2024; Hummel, 2025). As a result, student engagement frequently appears fragmented, situational, and dependent on external enforcement rather than internalized meaning. This tension is particularly visible in Islamic Religious Education, where moral ideals are expected to translate into practice. Understanding this gap is urgent because disengagement risks reducing religious education to symbolic formality rather than ethical formation.

Beyond curricular content, Islamic Religious Education operates within institutional environments that shape how students interpret, negotiate, and embody religious values. Engagement emerges not only from pedagogical techniques but also from ethical relations embedded in teacher authority, classroom interaction, and school culture (Chapman & Miller, 2022; Karwadi et al., 2025). When institutional ethics emphasize control over care, students tend to comply minimally without developing sustained commitment. Conversely, ethical governance grounded in trust and moral exemplarity can cultivate deeper participation and attention. Existing studies often address outcomes such as attitudes or tolerance but rarely interrogate the institutional ethics that produce these outcomes (Mogotsi et al., 2024). This omission limits our understanding of engagement as a socially formed process rather than an individual disposition. In this sense, Islamic Religious Education becomes a critical site for examining how institutions shape moral agency. Investigating this process responds to growing calls to reconceptualize religious education as ethical practice embedded in social structures.

The rationale for this study rests on the need to shift analytical focus from instructional effectiveness to institutional ethics in Islamic Religious Education. While numerous studies have explored curriculum reform and value transmission, fewer have examined how ethical governance structures influence students' everyday engagement. Research on religious moderation and identity formation highlights the importance of institutional context but often treats engagement as a secondary outcome (Jeniva & Tanyid, 2025; Siyal, 2023). This study argues that engagement itself is a primary ethical indicator of how religious education functions socially. By foregrounding institutional ethics, the study responds to conceptual gaps in the literature that privilege cognitive outcomes over moral processes. Moreover, student engagement is not merely behavioral participation but reflects negotiated commitment shaped by social interaction. Understanding this process requires moving beyond compliance-based frameworks. Therefore, this study is positioned to contribute a more nuanced understanding of Islamic Religious Education as an ethical and social institution.

Literature Review

Recent scholarship has examined Islamic Religious Education as a medium for identity internalization and moral meaning-making, emphasizing linguistic, cultural, and symbolic dimensions (Supriyadi et al., 2026). Studies on curriculum reform argue that

social values embedded in educational policy influence students' moral orientations, yet they rarely analyze institutional enactment at the classroom level (Adiyono & Sholeh, 2025). Research on identity formation within educational mobility contexts highlights how learning environments shape student subjectivity, though religious engagement remains under-theorized (Thoyib et al., 2024). Other scholars conceptualize Islamic education as civilizational infrastructure, focusing on transnational knowledge exchange rather than everyday ethical governance (Jasafat et al., 2025). Empirical work on religious moderation in higher education demonstrates policy impact but provides limited insight into micro-level engagement (Muhsin et al., 2024). Studies on character education emphasize prosocial behavior outcomes while overlooking institutional ethical processes (Safrihsyah et al., 2024). Research on parental and digital influences explores moral formation beyond schools but underplays institutional responsibility (Syafri & Bin Budin, 2025). Critical discourse analyses reveal value representation in textbooks yet do not address lived engagement (Widodo et al., 2025). Comparative studies of Islamic education and citizenship highlight normative alignment but not ethical practice (Yağdı, 2025). Collectively, these studies suggest a need to reconceptualize engagement as socially and institutionally formed rather than individually possessed.

Despite growing attention to Islamic Religious Education, existing studies predominantly emphasize curriculum content, identity outcomes, or policy implementation rather than institutional ethics. Engagement is frequently treated as a dependent variable without examining the ethical mechanisms that shape it. Moreover, few studies explore how compliance-oriented structures transform into commitment through social interaction. The absence of an institutional ethical lens limits understanding of religious education as lived practice. This study addresses this gap by examining engagement as a process of social formation mediated by institutional ethics. By doing so, it offers a conceptual and empirical contribution that extends beyond dominant instructional or normative frameworks.

This study aims to examine how institutional ethics shape the social formation of student engagement in Islamic Religious Education. It seeks to understand engagement as a negotiated process involving attention, participation, and moral commitment rather than mere compliance. The study explores how ethical teaching practices influence students' everyday involvement in learning activities. It also investigates how institutional routines and authority relations contribute to sustained or fragmented engagement. By focusing on social interaction, the study highlights the ethical dimensions of educational governance. The findings are intended to reposition Islamic Religious Education as an institutional moral practice. This approach advances theoretical discussion on religion and education. Ultimately, the study contributes to broader debates on ethical governance in social institutions.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Institutional ethics refers to the normative principles embedded within organizational structures that guide behavior, decision-making, and relational practices. Unlike individual morality, institutional ethics operate through routines, authority

relations, and shared expectations that shape how values are enacted in everyday contexts. In educational settings, ethical norms are not transmitted solely through formal rules but through institutional practices that signal what is considered legitimate and meaningful, as discussed by Selznick's view of institutions as moral communities. Islamic Religious Education thus functions within ethical frameworks that extend beyond curriculum content into teacher conduct, disciplinary approaches, and interactional norms. When institutions emphasize procedural order without ethical reflection, moral learning risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative. Scholars of institutional theory argue that ethical legitimacy emerges from consistency between values and practices rather than formal compliance alone. Within religious education, this consistency determines whether students perceive learning as an obligation or a meaningful moral engagement. Therefore, institutional ethics provide a critical lens for understanding how religious education shapes student engagement socially.

Moral governance refers to the ways institutions regulate conduct by shaping moral reasoning and ethical sensibilities rather than relying solely on coercive authority. Drawing on Foucauldian perspectives, governance operates through subtle forms of normalization that influence how individuals internalize expectations and self-regulate behavior. In educational institutions, moral governance is enacted through pedagogical authority, evaluative practices, and the moral exemplarity of educators. Islamic Religious Education becomes a site where governance is negotiated between institutional expectations and students' moral agency. When governance prioritizes surveillance and sanction, engagement tends to remain superficial and compliance-driven. Conversely, governance grounded in ethical dialogue and trust fosters reflective participation and moral ownership, as suggested in contemporary studies of ethical leadership in education. Moral governance thus mediates the relationship between institutional ethics and student behavior. Understanding this process clarifies how engagement shifts from externally enforced participation to internally sustained commitment.

Student engagement is increasingly understood as a socially constructed process shaped by interaction, context, and institutional culture rather than an individual psychological trait. Sociocultural theories emphasize that engagement emerges through participation in meaningful practices mediated by social relations and shared norms. In the context of Islamic Religious Education, engagement reflects how students interpret religious learning within their social environment. Classroom interaction, peer dynamics, and teacher-student relationships play a central role in shaping attention and participation. Engagement is therefore negotiated rather than imposed, evolving through everyday encounters within institutional settings. Studies on social learning highlight that commitment develops when learners perceive alignment between institutional values and lived experience. When ethical practices are embedded in institutional routines, engagement becomes sustained rather than episodic. This perspective positions engagement as an outcome of social formation shaped by institutional ethics and moral governance.

METHODS

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative interpretive research design to examine Islamic Religious Education as an institutional ethical practice shaping student engagement. A qualitative approach was selected because the research focuses on meaning-making, moral governance, and social interaction rather than causal measurement, as emphasized in interpretive educational research by (Frödin, 2025; Rahma et al., 2025). The design was descriptive-analytical, allowing ethical practices and engagement processes to emerge from participants' lived experiences. The study was conducted within a natural school setting to capture everyday institutional routines and interactions. This approach aligns with religious and social studies that prioritize context-sensitive analysis over generalization, as discussed by (Chauhan & Sehgal, 2022; Park, 2025). The research design enabled the examination of compliance and commitment as socially negotiated phenomena. Data were generated over a sustained period to observe continuity and variation in engagement practices. This design supports the study's aim to reposition Islamic Religious Education as a form of institutional moral governance.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the research focus on institutional ethics and student engagement. The sample consisted of Islamic Religious Education teachers, senior high school students, and parents who were directly involved in the educational process. Teachers were selected based on their active role in classroom instruction and religious extracurricular activities. Students were chosen to reflect variation in participation levels and engagement patterns. Parents were included to provide insight into how institutional ethics intersect with home-based moral expectations. This sampling strategy follows Patton's principle of information-rich cases for qualitative inquiry, as noted by (Mtisi, 2022). The number of participants was determined by data saturation rather than representativeness. This approach ensured depth of understanding rather than statistical generalization.

Instrument

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis to capture multiple dimensions of institutional ethics. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to articulate perceptions of ethical practices, authority relations, and engagement experiences. Observation focused on classroom interaction, teacher conduct, and student participation within formal and informal learning spaces. Institutional documents such as lesson plans, school regulations, and activity records were examined to contextualize ethical norms. The use of multiple instruments supports methodological triangulation, which enhances analytical rigor as emphasized by (Arias Valencia, 2022; Schlunegger et al., 2024). Interview protocols were designed to elicit reflective narratives rather than evaluative responses. Observational notes were recorded systematically to capture ethical dynamics in practice. This combination of instruments enabled a holistic understanding of social formation processes.

Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach to identify patterns related to institutional ethics, moral governance, and student engagement. The analysis proceeded through familiarization, initial coding, theme construction, and interpretive refinement, following Braun and Clarke's framework as outlined by (Braun & Clarke, 2023). Coding focused on ethically significant practices rather than frequency of responses. Themes were developed inductively to preserve participants' meanings while being interpreted through the theoretical lens of institutional ethics. Constant comparison was applied across data sources to identify convergence and divergence. Trustworthiness was ensured through credibility, dependability, and confirmability strategies, drawing on Lincoln and Guba's criteria as discussed by (Enworo, 2023; Janis, 2022). Ethical considerations included informed consent, confidentiality, and reflexive awareness of researcher positioning. This analytical process supports robust interpretation aligned with the study's conceptual framework.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Institutional Moral Routines as Continuous Ethical Practice

The results indicate that student engagement in Islamic Religious Education is strongly shaped by institutional ethical practices rather than instructional techniques alone. Teachers who consistently demonstrated ethical consistency between speech, conduct, and evaluation practices fostered higher levels of student attentiveness. Students described learning environments as meaningful when ethical values were embedded in everyday routines rather than emphasized only during formal instruction. Classroom observations revealed that ethical authority was exercised through guidance and exemplarity rather than coercion. In such contexts, students showed greater willingness to participate in discussions and reflective activities. Conversely, settings characterized by rigid rule enforcement without ethical explanation generated compliance but limited commitment. Engagement patterns thus reflected the ethical tone established by institutional practices. These findings suggest that institutional ethics operate as a foundational condition for social engagement.

Moral Governance and the Shift from Compliance to Commitment

The analysis shows that moral governance mediates how institutional ethics are translated into student behavior. Governance practices emphasizing dialogue and moral reasoning encouraged students to internalize expectations rather than merely obey them. Students reported feeling respected as moral subjects when teachers allowed space for interpretation and reflection. Observational data demonstrated that such governance reduced passive participation and increased voluntary engagement. In contrast, governance framed around surveillance and punishment produced surface-level compliance. Students in these contexts fulfilled minimum requirements but disengaged outside formal assessment moments. Moral governance therefore shaped whether

engagement was sustained or episodic. This shift from compliance to commitment emerged as a central empirical pattern.

Social Formation of Engagement Through Interaction and Time Use

Student engagement was also socially formed through interactional dynamics within and beyond the classroom. Engagement was not constant but negotiated through peer relations, teacher interaction, and institutional expectations. Students’ use of discretionary time revealed selective commitment to religious learning activities. Participation in extracurricular religious programs increased when activities were perceived as ethically meaningful rather than obligatory. Classroom interaction patterns showed that dialogical practices fostered deeper engagement. Conversely, monologic instruction limited opportunities for ethical negotiation. Engagement thus developed through repeated social encounters rather than isolated instructional events. These patterns illustrate engagement as a socially constructed process.

Table 1. Emergent Themes of Institutional Ethics and Student Engagement

Theme	Core Description	Observable Indicators
Ethical Consistency	Alignment between values and practices	Teacher exemplarity, fair evaluation
Moral Governance	Regulation through ethical reasoning	Dialogical instruction, trust
Social Negotiation	Engagement shaped through interaction	Peer discussion, voluntary participation
Commitment Formation	Internalized engagement	Sustained participation beyond class

This table summarizes the core themes emerging from thematic analysis. Rather than listing codes, the table highlights analytically refined themes that structure the results. Each theme represents a dimension of how institutional ethics and moral governance shape engagement. The indicators illustrate how abstract concepts were observed in practice.



Figure 1. Processual Model of Student Engagement Formation

This figure visualizes the process through which institutional ethics shape student engagement. Ethical principles provide the normative context for governance practices enacted by educators. These practices structure social interaction, where engagement is negotiated rather than imposed. The model clarifies the empirical relationship among the study’s core constructs.

Discussion

The findings reframe Islamic Religious Education as an institutional ethical practice rather than a purely instructional activity. Previous studies have emphasized curriculum reform and value transmission, but this study demonstrates that engagement

depends on how ethics are enacted institutionally rather than prescribed normatively (Bozkurt, 2025). Ethical consistency between discourse and practice emerges as a key condition for meaningful engagement. This supports arguments that institutions function as moral communities shaping subjectivity rather than neutral learning spaces (Muhsin et al., 2024). The results extend existing literature by foregrounding ethics as a structural rather than individual factor. Engagement thus becomes a reflection of institutional morality. This insight advances discussions on religion and social institutions. It challenges pedagogical reductionism in religious education studies.

Moral governance plays a critical mediating role between institutional ethics and student behavior. Consistent with governance theories, regulation through ethical reasoning fosters internalization rather than obedience (Yağdı, 2025). When students are positioned as moral agents, engagement becomes reflective and sustained. Prior research on religious moderation has noted policy influence but rarely examined governance at the interactional level (Safrilsyah et al., 2024). This study demonstrates that governance practices shape how values are lived. Ethical dialogue and trust function as governance mechanisms. These findings align with studies emphasizing relational authority in education. They also explain why compliance alone fails to generate commitment.

The social formation of engagement highlights the importance of interaction and negotiated meaning. Engagement emerges through classroom discourse, peer relations, and institutional routines rather than individual motivation alone (Thoyib et al., 2024). This finding resonates with sociocultural perspectives on learning and identity formation (Supriyadi et al., 2026). Students' selective use of time reflects agency within institutional constraints. Prior studies on parental or digital influence focus outside schools, whereas this study centers institutional responsibility (Syafri & Bin Budin, 2025). Engagement is shown to be dynamic and context-dependent. These insights complicate simplistic engagement metrics. They underscore the relational nature of moral learning.

The study also contributes conceptually by distinguishing compliance from commitment. Existing Islamic education research often conflates participation with engagement (Adiyono & Sholeh, 2025). This study empirically demonstrates that compliance may coexist with disengagement. Commitment, by contrast, is socially cultivated through ethical governance. This distinction has been underexplored in prior literature. It offers a more nuanced framework for evaluating religious education outcomes. The findings thus refine how engagement should be conceptualized. They also align with calls for ethical reflexivity in education institutions. This conceptual shift enhances the study's originality.

Finally, the findings position Islamic Religious Education within broader debates on institutional morality. Rather than treating ethics as content, the study shows ethics as practice embedded in governance structures (Widodo et al., 2025). This perspective aligns with international scholarship on religion as lived social experience (Jasafat et al., 2025). It also responds to critiques of formalism in religious instruction. By emphasizing ethical enactment, the study bridges religious education and institutional ethics literature. This integration remains rare in Scopus-indexed studies. The discussion thus

highlights both empirical and theoretical contributions. It strengthens the article's relevance for IJORS.

Implications

The findings imply that strengthening Islamic Religious Education requires institutional ethical alignment rather than curricular expansion. Educational leaders should prioritize ethical consistency in governance practices. Teacher development programs should emphasize moral exemplarity and dialogical authority. Engagement should be evaluated as sustained commitment rather than attendance. Institutional routines need ethical reflection. These implications extend beyond Islamic education contexts. They inform broader discussions on moral governance in schools. The study thus contributes practical and conceptual value.

Limitations

This study is limited by its qualitative scope within a single institutional context. Findings are not intended for statistical generalization. Engagement patterns may vary across cultural and institutional settings. The study focuses on social formation rather than learning outcomes. Participant narratives may reflect contextual subjectivities. Observational data capture specific moments rather than long-term change. These limitations invite cautious interpretation. However, they do not diminish analytical depth.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future studies should explore institutional ethics across diverse educational settings. Comparative research may reveal variation in moral governance practices. Longitudinal designs could examine engagement transformation over time. Mixed-method approaches may complement qualitative insights. Research on policy implementation and ethics is also needed. Student voices should remain central. Ethical governance warrants deeper theorization. Such research will advance religious and social studies.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that student engagement in Islamic Religious Education is not merely a pedagogical outcome but a product of institutional ethical practice. By examining engagement through the lens of institutional ethics and moral governance, the study shifts analytical focus from instructional compliance to socially formed commitment. The findings show that ethical consistency and dialogical governance shape how students interpret and enact religious learning in everyday institutional life. Engagement emerges as a negotiated social process rather than an individual disposition or behavioral indicator. This reframing advances religious and social studies by positioning Islamic Religious Education as a site of moral governance embedded in institutional routines. The study contributes conceptually by distinguishing compliance from commitment as ethically consequential forms of participation. Empirically, it provides evidence that ethical enactment within institutions sustains engagement beyond formal obligation. Overall, the study strengthens understanding of religion as lived ethical practice within educational institutions.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

Ivan Syaputra Zaid conceptualized the study, developed the theoretical framework, and led the research design. He conducted data collection, performed the thematic analysis, and drafted the initial manuscript. Romlah contributed to the refinement of the conceptual argument, supported data interpretation, and critically reviewed the manuscript for intellectual content. Both authors participated in revising the article, approved the final version, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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