



## The Effect of the Project-Based Learning Model on Learning Motivation in Christian Religious Education and Character Education among Grade VIII Students at SMP Negeri 2 Balige

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### ABSTRACT

*Learning motivation stands as a fundamental determinant of student engagement and achievement, serving as both an intellectual and moral catalyst in education. In the context of Christian Religious Education and Character Education (CRECE), motivation extends beyond academic performance to encompass the cultivation of faith, virtue, and reflective moral action. However, observations in Indonesian schools reveal that many students display low motivation due to monotonous, teacher-centered methods and the absence of contextual learning opportunities. To address this issue, the present study examined the effect of the Project-Based Learning (PjBL) model on students' motivation to learn CRECE at SMP Negeri 2 Balige. Employing a quantitative pre-experimental design with a one-group pretest–posttest format, the research involved 30 eighth-grade students selected purposively from a population of 232. A 30-item Likert-type questionnaire, validated through expert review and reliability testing (Cronbach's  $\alpha > 0.80$ ), measured six indicators of motivation: persistence, resilience, independence, goal orientation, problem-solving interest, and positive learning attitude. The six-week PjBL intervention integrated biblical and moral themes into authentic projects emphasizing collaboration, creativity, and reflection. Quantitative analysis using a paired-samples *t*-test revealed a statistically significant improvement in learning motivation, with the mean score rising by 22.70 points ( $t_{(29)} = 12.080, p < 0.05$ ). Observations further indicated heightened enthusiasm, cooperation, and moral awareness. The findings confirm that PjBL effectively enhances both intrinsic motivation and spiritual engagement by linking faith-based principles with experiential learning. Consequently, the study recommends incorporating PjBL into CRECE curricula to foster holistic Christian formation—uniting knowledge, moral responsibility, and faith in action.*

**Keywords:** *Project-Based Learning, Christian Religious Education, Learning Motivation*

## INTRODUCTION

Learning motivation is a foundational determinant of both academic performance and holistic personal development; it energizes students to engage, persist, and invest cognitive and emotional resources in the learning process. In the specific domain of Christian Religious Education and Character Education (CRECE), motivation assumes an expanded role: beyond facilitating knowledge acquisition, it is instrumental in shaping moral habits, spiritual sensibilities, and dispositions that underpin Christian witness in daily life. When learners are motivated in CRECE, they are more likely to treat biblical content as meaningful guidance rather than as abstract facts to be memorized, enabling a deeper integration of faith and practice (Uno, 2023). Conversely, when motivation falters, instruction risks remaining superficial—students may perform adequately on tests while failing to translate classroom lessons into ethical action or reflective discipleship. Field realities at many Indonesian schools testify to such motivational challenges within CRECE. Reports and classroom observations indicate that monotonous, teacher-centred pedagogy, pervasive use of digital devices for non-instructional purposes, and inconsistent parental engagement all contribute to student disengagement. These conditions often yield passive learning behavior, limited critical reflection on moral issues, and a weak bridge between scriptural themes and everyday responsibilities. Addressing these deficits therefore requires pedagogical approaches that renew students' interest and provide authentic opportunities to enact Christian values in contextualized tasks (Mayasari & Alimuddin, 2023). Project-Based Learning (PjBL) offers such a pathway by privileging student agency, collaboration, and application. PjBL engages learners in sustained inquiry through the phases of identifying meaningful problems, planning and executing projects, producing tangible outcomes, and reflecting on both process and product. This sequence fosters active responsibility, sustained effort, and situated problem-solving—qualities that correspond closely with key indicators of learning motivation such as perseverance, autonomy, and goal orientation. In CRECE, PjBL can be intentionally designed to connect doctrinal themes and ethical principles to community-oriented projects (e.g., service initiatives, awareness campaigns, creative media productions), thereby converting abstract theological truths into lived practices and reinforcing moral internalization. The theoretical grounding for PjBL's suitability in CRECE is robust. Constructivist accounts posit that learners construct understanding through active interaction with problems and peers; knowledge becomes meaningful when situated within authentic contexts (Bruner, 1961). Vygotskian perspectives similarly highlight the social mediation of learning—students develop higher-order cognition through collaborative dialogue within the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Project-based tasks, which require joint planning, negotiation, and reflection, instantiate both constructivist and sociocultural processes, and thereby create fertile conditions for intrinsic motivation to flourish. Moreover, contemporary motivation theories—most notably Self-Determination Theory—suggest that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are core psychological needs; PjBL directly cultivates these needs by allowing choice, providing opportunities for skill mastery, and encouraging cooperative belonging (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Empirical studies outside the CRECE domain have documented positive effects of PjBL on motivation and related outcomes. For instance,

investigations in religious and social studies contexts report increases in student responsibility, curiosity, and task persistence after PjBL interventions (Maulana, 2021; Wirawan, 2024). Primary-level research also indicates concomitant gains in achievement when motivation and engagement rise through project-based approaches (Nuku et al., 2024). However, the literature specifically addressing PjBL within Christian Religious Education at the junior-high level remains limited, creating a practical and scholarly gap this study seeks to address.

This research therefore examines whether implementing a structured Project-Based Learning model enhances learning motivation among Grade VIII students at SMP Negeri 2 Balige. Grounded in both theoretical rationale and initial empirical promise, the study asks: Does PjBL produce a statistically and educationally meaningful increase in students' motivation in CRECE compared with their baseline levels? By focusing on motivation indicators such as persistence, independence, goal orientation, and active interest, the investigation aims to generate context-sensitive evidence that informs pedagogical choices for faith-based education and contributes to the broader conversation on student-centred learning in religious classrooms.

## METHODS

A quantitative pre-experimental design was implemented in this research, using a one-group pretest–posttest format to determine the effect of the Project-Based Learning (PjBL) model on students' learning motivation in Christian Religious Education and Character Education (CRECE). This design was selected because it enables the researcher to measure changes in the same group of participants before and after an intervention, thus identifying the direct impact of the instructional treatment within authentic classroom conditions (Sugiyono, 2017). The study was conducted at SMP Negeri 2 Balige, located in Toba Regency, North Sumatra, during the 2025/2026 academic year. The total population included 232 eighth-grade students distributed across four parallel classes (VIII-A to VIII-D). Through purposive sampling, Class VIII-G, consisting of 30 students, was chosen as the sample. This class was selected deliberately because initial observations and teacher reports revealed lower levels of learning motivation compared with other classes, making it an appropriate target for the implementation of the PjBL intervention. The research used a 30-item Likert-scale questionnaire to assess students' motivation in CRECE. The instrument was constructed according to Uno's (2023) six theoretical indicators of learning motivation, which include persistence in completing tasks, resilience in overcoming difficulties, independence in learning, goal orientation, interest in problem-solving, and a positive attitude toward learning. Each item was rated on a five-point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The questionnaire was reviewed by experts, including two educational psychologists and one CRECE teacher, to ensure content validity and conceptual clarity. It was then piloted with 20 students from a similar school to test its psychometric properties. The results of the pilot testing showed a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient above 0.80, indicating high reliability and internal consistency, while expert validation confirmed construct validity and the relevance of each item to the measured dimensions of motivation. The implementation phase of the research lasted for six weeks, integrated into the students' regular CRECE lessons. During this period, the teacher acted as a facilitator rather than a lecturer, guiding students

through the stages of project-based learning, which included problem identification, project design, implementation, presentation, reflection, and evaluation. Students collaboratively developed and carried out projects related to Christian values such as honesty, stewardship, or compassion. They produced creative outcomes such as posters, short films, and community-service initiatives, all of which were later presented and evaluated in class. Reflection sessions encouraged students to connect their projects to biblical principles, thereby deepening moral understanding and personal engagement. Quantitative data were collected from both pretest and posttest administrations of the motivation questionnaire. The pretest measured students' baseline motivation before exposure to PjBL, while the posttest was conducted immediately after the intervention. Data analysis employed SPSS version 25.0, using descriptive statistics to summarize results and a paired-samples t-test to determine whether the observed mean differences between pretest and posttest scores were statistically significant at the 0.05 level. The null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ) stated that there would be no significant difference in motivation before and after PjBL, while the alternative hypothesis ( $H_1$ ) predicted a positive and significant increase. To enrich quantitative findings, qualitative field notes gathered during classroom observations were analyzed to provide contextual understanding of behavioral and emotional changes that accompanied the quantitative trends.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents the pretest and posttest results of students' learning motivation scores. The results show that students' mean motivation score increased from 88.53 to 111.23, indicating a gain of 22.70 points. The t-test value ( $t_{(29)} = 12.080$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) exceeded the critical threshold, confirming a significant improvement in motivation after PjBL implementation.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Learning Motivation Scores**

Variable	N	Mean Pretest	Mean Posttest	Mean Difference	$t$ (29)	$t_{(crit)}$ (0.05)	Interpretation
Motivation	30	88.53	111.23	+22.70	12.080	1.699	Significant

The results of this study revealed a substantial increase in students' motivation to learn Christian Religious Education and Character Education (CRECE) following the implementation of the Project-Based Learning (PjBL) model. Quantitative analysis indicated that the mean pretest score for learning motivation was 88.53, which increased to 111.23 in the posttest, producing an absolute gain of 22.70 points. Statistical testing through a paired-samples t-test yielded a value of  $t_{(29)} = 12.080$ , which exceeded the critical t-value (1.699) at the 0.05 significance level. This result clearly demonstrates that the difference between the pretest and posttest means was statistically significant, confirming that the PjBL model had a positive and meaningful effect on students' motivation in CRECE. Beyond the statistical evidence, classroom observations provided qualitative confirmation of these findings. Students who initially appeared disengaged and hesitant became increasingly active and collaborative over the six-week intervention period. Their participation in project planning, creation, and reflection sessions visibly

improved. Students asked more questions, volunteered to present their group findings, and expressed enthusiasm in connecting their projects to moral lessons drawn from biblical passages. The dual quantitative and qualitative evidence thus points to the conclusion that PjBL was not merely an effective instructional technique but a transformative approach that reshaped classroom dynamics and student attitudes toward faith-based learning. The marked increase in students' motivation reflects how project-based learning fosters engagement, autonomy, and responsibility—three essential pillars of active learning and intrinsic motivation. Traditional, teacher-centered instruction in CRECE often positions students as passive recipients of information. In such settings, learning tends to rely on rote memorization of biblical texts or moral principles without inviting students to interpret or apply those lessons to their own lives. In contrast, the PjBL model transforms this dynamic by positioning students as active agents in the construction of their own learning. Through project development, students engage in decision-making, problem-solving, and reflection. They are required to plan tasks, divide responsibilities, and produce tangible outcomes, thereby cultivating perseverance and accountability—two qualities aligned with Uno's (2023) motivational indicators. The act of presenting their work to peers also builds confidence and ownership, reinforcing a sense of purpose and personal accomplishment. As Mayasari and Alimuddin (2023) note, motivation flourishes when students perceive learning as meaningful, relevant, and within their control. PjBL provides these exact conditions: students see the tangible results of their efforts and feel that their voices and ideas matter in the learning process. From a psychological perspective, the success of the PjBL approach can be understood through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) proposed by Deci and Ryan (2000). SDT identifies three innate psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—that, when fulfilled, nurture intrinsic motivation. In this study, each of these components was activated through the PjBL process. Students experienced autonomy by making meaningful choices during project planning and execution. Competence was developed as they saw their ideas materialize into concrete outcomes, such as posters, videos, or community-service initiatives. Relatedness was fostered through collaboration with peers, where mutual encouragement and group success created a sense of belonging. These interlocking elements explain why students reported higher enthusiasm and engagement after the intervention. Furthermore, the experiential and collaborative nature of PjBL aligns closely with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which posits that learning occurs through social interaction and shared activity within a "zone of proximal development." The group-based nature of project learning enabled students to scaffold each other's understanding, combining their individual strengths to solve problems collectively. This environment promoted peer learning and social responsibility, qualities integral to both educational and moral growth. The increase in motivation observed in this study also demonstrates the principle that motivation is not only cognitive but affective. When students engage in authentic, real-world projects that allow them to apply Christian teachings to life situations, learning becomes emotionally resonant. Students reported enjoyment in working with classmates, pride in completing their projects, and satisfaction in realizing that their ideas could have moral and social value. Such emotional engagement supports the findings of Bruner (1961), who argued that learning is most powerful when learners experience discovery and delight in the process.

Within the framework of Christian Religious Education, the outcomes of this study have deep theological significance. PjBL mirrors the communal and participatory nature of Christian faith. The Bible presents learning as an active, relational process, as illustrated in Romans 12:5, which emphasizes that “each member belongs to all the others.” Similarly, in a PjBL setting, students learn not in isolation but as a community of believers working toward shared understanding and moral action. The collaborative essence of the method resonates with the biblical call to fellowship (*koinonia*) and service (*diakonia*), making PjBL not only a pedagogical model but also a theological embodiment of Christian discipleship. Students in this study were encouraged to translate biblical principles into concrete actions through their projects. For example, when discussing environmental stewardship, learners linked their projects to Genesis 2:15, which commands humanity to “work and take care of” creation. By relating their work to such verses, students discovered that faith is not confined to the classroom but extends to ethical decision-making in daily life. In another project focusing on honesty and integrity, students created short dramatizations showing the consequences of deceit and the redemptive power of truth, reinforcing biblical moral teaching through creative expression. Such activities illustrate the integration of faith and learning—a central goal of Christian education. As Knight (2006) observes, Christian pedagogy should unite cognitive understanding with moral and spiritual formation. PjBL achieves this by engaging the mind through inquiry, the heart through reflection, and the hands through practical action. Students who learn in this way are not merely absorbing doctrine; they are embodying the values of faith through lived experience. In doing so, the PjBL process transforms the classroom into a miniature Christian community where service, dialogue, and mutual growth occur naturally. Observation data and teacher reflections revealed profound behavioral shifts throughout the implementation of the PjBL model. At the beginning of the intervention, many students appeared hesitant to express opinions or take initiative. However, as the weeks progressed, participation became more evenly distributed across the class. Students who were previously quiet began contributing ideas during brainstorming sessions, while more outspoken learners learned to listen actively and include others in discussions. This shift toward collaborative learning exemplifies the social constructivist principles that underlie PjBL. During project implementation, students displayed heightened enthusiasm and energy. They worked in groups to gather information, design creative outputs, and discuss how their projects related to Christian teachings. Importantly, the class atmosphere became noticeably more supportive: peers encouraged each other, offered constructive feedback, and celebrated group achievements. The sense of community that developed reflected the Christian value of mutual edification. Students were no longer motivated solely by grades but by the shared desire to complete meaningful projects that reflected their faith and values. Teachers’ field notes described several concrete examples of behavioral change. One group, for instance, took the initiative to organize a mini-campaign on environmental cleanliness in their schoolyard, linking their effort to stewardship teachings in Genesis. Another group produced a short video dramatizing the importance of honesty in friendships, while others developed posters promoting compassion and anti-bullying messages. These projects not only required critical thinking and creativity but also allowed students to practice moral reasoning—an essential aspect of Christian character formation. Emotionally, students exhibited increased confidence and joy in learning. They reported

feeling proud of their contributions and more connected to both their peers and their faith. This affective dimension of motivation, often neglected in conventional instruction, is crucial for long-term engagement. When students experience positive emotions associated with learning, they are more likely to internalize the underlying values and sustain motivation beyond the classroom. The findings thus suggest that PjBL enhances both the behavioral and emotional components of motivation. Students' willingness to ask questions, cooperate, and reflect on moral meaning indicates that they are not only learning about Christian principles but also beginning to live them out. This holistic engagement demonstrates how project-based learning can function as an effective vehicle for spiritual formation within formal education.

The findings of this study are consistent with and extend those of previous research on PjBL's influence on motivation and engagement. Maulana (2021) reported that applying the PjBL model in Islamic education classes enhanced students' responsibility, participation, and persistence in completing moral-based projects. Similarly, Wirawan (2024) found that students in social studies classes taught through PjBL demonstrated greater curiosity, enthusiasm, and independent problem-solving skills compared to those taught through lectures. At the elementary level, Nuku et al. (2024) confirmed that PjBL significantly improved both motivation and learning outcomes, concluding that authentic projects help bridge the gap between theoretical learning and practical application. The present study corroborates these findings but contributes a new dimension by situating the discussion within the field of Christian Religious Education. While prior studies have explored PjBL in secular or Islamic contexts, little empirical evidence has been available for its application in Christian education. By documenting measurable improvements in learning motivation among CRECE students, this research establishes that PjBL can be effectively adapted to faith-based curricula, supporting the broader educational goal of holistic Christian formation. The study extends theoretical understanding by demonstrating that the mechanisms driving motivation in PjBL—autonomy, competence, and collaboration—are not only compatible with but also amplified by Christian theological principles such as stewardship, community, and service. This convergence suggests that PjBL is not merely a pedagogical innovation but also a spiritually coherent approach to Christian education. The study reinforces constructivist and self-determination frameworks, confirming that motivation thrives in contexts where learners are actively engaged, experience autonomy, and perceive relevance in their tasks. In line with Bruner's (1961) discovery learning theory, students in this study achieved deeper understanding by exploring, creating, and reflecting, rather than passively receiving information. The social and reflective elements of PjBL also correspond to Palmer's (1998) notion of "teaching from the heart," in which authentic learning occurs when teachers and students encounter truth together through dialogue and trust. The findings underscore the need for educators to integrate PjBL systematically into CRECE lesson design. Teachers should act as facilitators who guide students in exploring moral and spiritual issues through collaborative inquiry. Schools should provide institutional support in the form of training, materials, and flexible scheduling to accommodate the longer timeframes PjBL typically requires. Assessment practices should also evolve to value not only final products but also the process of idea generation, teamwork, and moral reflection. The study's outcomes suggest that PjBL can serve as an effective tool for

spiritual formation. When students work on projects that embody Christian virtues—such as compassion, stewardship, honesty, and service—they are simultaneously developing faith-based identity and social responsibility. This dual function of PjBL makes it an especially valuable approach for religious education, where the ultimate aim is not only intellectual mastery but the cultivation of moral and spiritual character. While the findings of this study are compelling, several limitations should be acknowledged. The use of a pre-experimental design without a control group limits the ability to attribute all observed changes solely to the PjBL intervention. Other factors, such as teacher enthusiasm or peer influence, may also have contributed to the results. The sample size was relatively small (30 students) and drawn from a single school, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the intervention period of six weeks may not capture the long-term sustainability of motivational changes. To strengthen future research, scholars could employ quasi-experimental or randomized controlled designs involving multiple schools and larger samples. Mixed-methods approaches incorporating interviews, observation rubrics, and longitudinal tracking would provide a richer understanding of how motivation develops over time. Further studies could also explore how PjBL influences other aspects of Christian education, such as moral reasoning, empathy, and faith commitment. Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative results converge on the conclusion that Project-Based Learning substantially enhances learning motivation in Christian Religious Education and Character Education. The model engages students intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually by integrating cognitive challenge with collaborative reflection and moral application. It aligns with contemporary educational theory while remaining faithful to Christian pedagogical values. By transforming students from passive listeners into active creators and moral agents, PjBL breathes new life into CRECE classrooms. The findings demonstrate that when learning is meaningful, participatory, and value-centered, motivation naturally flourishes. As students experience autonomy, competence, and fellowship through project work, they not only learn about Christian faith but begin to live it—making their education a living testimony of belief in action.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that the Project-Based Learning (PjBL) model exerts a significant and positive influence on students' learning motivation in Christian Religious Education and Character Education (CRECE) at SMP Negeri 2 Balige. The quantitative results provide strong empirical support for this conclusion: students' mean motivation scores increased by 22.70 points, from 88.53 in the pretest to 111.23 in the posttest, with a  $t$ -value of 12.080 ( $p < 0.05$ ). This statistical evidence confirms that the difference was not due to chance but was the direct result of the instructional intervention. In addition, classroom observations and qualitative reflections corroborated these findings, revealing visible behavioral and emotional changes among learners. Students became more enthusiastic, confident, and reflective; they engaged actively in collaborative discussions, took responsibility for their learning, and expressed greater joy in relating classroom projects to Christian moral and ethical principles. The improvement in motivation can be understood as the outcome of a learning environment that stimulates autonomy, creativity, and spiritual reflection—three aspects central to holistic Christian education. Unlike conventional, teacher-centered approaches, which often

emphasize memorization of biblical content without adequate contextualization, the PjBL model encourages students to take ownership of their learning process. Through project planning, investigation, creation, and presentation, students are empowered to transform religious knowledge into lived experience. This process aligns with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which emphasizes the satisfaction of three psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—as the foundation of intrinsic motivation. In this study, students experienced autonomy by making decisions in project design, competence through completing tangible outputs, and relatedness through collaboration with peers in a shared mission inspired by Christian values. From a theological and moral perspective, the application of PjBL resonates deeply with the Christian educational philosophy that views faith as both belief and practice. Learning becomes an act of discipleship when students are invited to connect scriptural teachings with practical expressions of service, compassion, and stewardship. The projects implemented in this study—ranging from community-cleanliness campaigns to creative dramatizations of biblical virtues—illustrated how faith-based education can transcend theoretical discussion and manifest as active moral engagement. Thus, PjBL not only increased cognitive engagement but also nurtured spiritual and character formation, making education both intellectually meaningful and theologically grounded. In practical terms, this study underscores the importance of integrating PjBL systematically into the pedagogy of Christian Religious Education. Teachers should be trained to design and facilitate project-based lessons that promote inquiry, teamwork, and reflection without compromising theological integrity. Schools, in turn, should provide institutional support—including sufficient instructional time, appropriate learning resources, and professional development opportunities—to ensure the sustainable implementation of this innovative model. Moreover, assessment practices should evolve to value not only final academic results but also the processes of collaboration, moral reasoning, and spiritual reflection that PjBL cultivates. While the outcomes of this research are promising, certain limitations—such as the relatively small sample size, the short intervention period, and the absence of a control group—suggest the need for further investigation. Future research should adopt quasi-experimental or mixed-method approaches involving multiple schools and diverse contexts to enhance generalizability. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to explore whether the motivational and spiritual benefits of PjBL persist over time. The success of Project-Based Learning in this study confirms its compatibility with the Christian vision of education as faith in action. By engaging students in meaningful, collaborative projects grounded in biblical values, PjBL transforms learning from a passive cognitive exercise into an active expression of discipleship. In such a setting, motivation arises not only from intellectual curiosity but from a sincere desire to live out Christ's teachings in everyday life. This synthesis of cognitive, emotional, and spiritual engagement reaffirms that education, when infused with faith and creativity, can shape learners who are not only knowledgeable but also compassionate, responsible, and spiritually mature.

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