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Discipleship and Professional Growth in Christian Education: Reflections from Matthew 28:19-20 at SD Negeri 044840 Talimbaru

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationship between discipleship and the professional growth of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers through an exegetical and qualitative case study at SD Negeri 044840 Talimbaru. Grounded in the theological framework of Matthew 28:19-20, the research examines how the Great Commission functions not only as a missionary mandate but also as a pedagogical and vocational foundation for teacher development. The study involved 34 Christian students and five Christian teachers in a pluralistic public elementary school environment. Using a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected through biblical exegesis, semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The exegetical analysis employed a historical-grammatical approach to uncover the theological meaning of discipleship, teaching, obedience, and divine accompaniment. Field data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns in spiritual formation, pedagogical practice, collaboration, and professional learning. The findings reveal that discipleship profoundly shapes teachers' professional identity, motivation, and pedagogical orientation. Professional growth is understood by teachers as a spiritual vocation rather than merely an institutional requirement. Discipleship-oriented practices foster servant leadership, relational teaching, reflective professionalism, and strong mentoring relationships with students. Collaborative spiritual practices among teachers further strengthen vocational resilience and ethical commitment. However, limitations such as constrained access to theological training and administrative workload remain significant challenges. The study concludes that discipleship serves as the spiritual engine of professional growth in Christian education. By integrating biblical theology and educational practice, this research affirms that authentic teacher professionalism is rooted in continuous spiritual formation and participation in Christ's mission.

Keywords: *Discipleship, Christian Religious Education, Professional Growth*

INTRODUCTION

Discipleship constitutes the very heart of Christian education because it integrates faith, character formation, and the lifelong process of spiritual and professional growth. In

contemporary educational contexts, especially within public schools in Indonesia, Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers are expected not only to transmit doctrinal knowledge but also to nurture students through exemplary living, mentoring relationships, and sustained moral guidance. This dual calling as educators and disciples places CRE teachers in a strategic position where spiritual formation and professional development are inseparably intertwined. Such a dynamic is clearly evident in SD Negeri 044840 Talimbaru, where 34 Christian students are guided by five Christian teachers within a pluralistic school environment. This setting provides a concrete context for examining how discipleship shapes professional growth in Christian education. The theological foundation of Christian discipleship is most explicitly articulated in Matthew 28:19-20, commonly known as the Great Commission. Jesus' command to "go and make disciples of all nations" establishes discipleship not merely as a task of evangelism but as a comprehensive educational mandate involving teaching, mentoring, and sustained spiritual accompaniment (Fee, 2019; Stassen & Gushee, 2003). The command to "teach them to obey everything I have commanded you" situates instruction within a relational and formative framework, where knowledge, obedience, and character are shaped through an ongoing process. For CRE teachers, this passage functions as both a theological calling and a professional orientation that frames their identity, competence, and ethical responsibility. Professional growth is generally understood as the continuous development of pedagogical competence, reflective practice, and instructional innovation (Creswell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014). However, within Christian education, professional growth cannot be separated from spiritual maturity and discipleship. A teacher's effectiveness is not measured solely by methodological mastery but also by the depth of spiritual integrity, relational authenticity, and commitment to Christ-like service (Groome, 2011; Hill, 2020). Discipleship thus becomes the spiritual engine that drives professional excellence, motivating teachers to grow not only in skills but also in calling, vocation, and moral credibility. Numerous studies in character and Christian education emphasize that the most influential learning experiences occur through relational modeling rather than through verbal instruction alone (Lickona, 2012; Hays, 1996). Within the framework of Matthew 28:19-20, teaching is inseparable from accompaniment; disciples are formed through proximity, shared practice, and sustained guidance. This principle bears direct implications for CRE teachers, whose professional growth is deeply shaped by how they themselves live as disciples of Christ. Teachers who cease to grow spiritually often experience stagnation in pedagogical creativity, moral sensitivity, and vocational endurance. Conversely, teachers who remain rooted in discipleship tend to demonstrate resilience, reflective openness, and continuous professional renewal.

The context of SD Negeri 044840 Talimbaru-Karo adds further depth to this discussion. As a public elementary school situated within a culturally rich Karo society, the school reflects a dynamic interaction between Christian faith, local cultural values, and national educational standards. With 34 Christian students and five Christian teachers, the school possesses a relatively strong Christian presence compared to many public schools in rural Indonesia. This demographic condition opens wider space for structured discipleship practices to be integrated into CRE instruction, school activities, and teacher collaboration. At the same time, teachers remain challenged to manifest discipleship in inclusive ways that respect the school's pluralistic environment and educational

regulations. Empirical studies that explicitly examine the relationship between discipleship and teacher professional growth particularly in elementary public school settings, remain limited. Existing literature often treats discipleship as a purely ecclesial or theological concept, while professional growth is analyzed within secular pedagogical frameworks. Few studies attempt to integrate these two domains through an exegetical and field-based approach. This gap indicates the need for a study that explores how the Great Commission is both theologically interpreted and practically embodied in the daily professional development of CRE teachers. This study therefore seeks to explore discipleship as a foundation for professional growth in Christian education through reflections on Matthew 28:19-20 at SD Negeri 044840 Talimbaru-Karo. The objectives of this research are: to examine the theological meaning of discipleship in Matthew 28:19–20 through exegetical analysis, to analyze how discipleship values are embodied by CRE teachers in their professional growth and pedagogical practice, and to explore how this integration of discipleship and professionalism influences the learning experiences of Christian students. By integrating biblical exegesis and qualitative educational inquiry, this study argues that professional growth in Christian education is most authentic when it flows from a living discipleship relationship with Christ. The Great Commission is thus not only a missionary mandate but also a pedagogical paradigm that shapes how teachers learn, develop, and serve. Through this lens, teacher professionalism is redefined not merely as technical competence but as a form of faithful obedience within the ongoing journey of discipleship.

METHODS

A qualitative descriptive research design with an integrative theological-educational approach was used to examine how discipleship based on Matthew 28:19-20 is reflected in the professional growth of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers. The research was conducted at SD Negeri 044840 Talimbaru-Karo, where 34 Christian students are served by five Christian teachers. This setting is pedagogically strategic because it allows for the observation of discipleship not only as a theological ideal but also as a lived professional practice within a pluralistic public-school environment. The study consisted of two complementary methodological components. The first component was an exegetical analysis of Matthew 28:19-20 using the historical-grammatical method. This analysis involved examination of the literary context of the Great Commission, key Greek terms related to “make disciples” (*mathēteusate*), “teach” (*didaskontes*), and “keep/obey” (*tērein*), as well as the theological emphasis on authority, mission, and divine accompaniment. Major biblical commentaries and New Testament theological resources were used to construct the discipleship framework that later guided the interpretation of the field data. The next component was a field-based qualitative inquiry focused on the professional growth of CRE teachers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the five Christian teachers to explore their understanding of discipleship, their experiences of professional development, their spiritual formation practices, and the way Matthew 28:19-20 shapes their teaching identity and professional commitment. Non-participant classroom observations were carried out during CRE lessons and selected school activities to document how discipleship values were manifested in teaching strategies, teacher–student relationships, classroom management, and collaborative learning dynamics. All interview transcripts, observation field notes, and documents were systematically coded

to identify recurring patterns related to discipleship, spiritual formation, professional competence, reflective practice, collaboration, and pedagogical transformation. These codes were then grouped into broader thematic categories and interpreted in dialogue with the exegetical findings from Matthew 28:19–20. This integrative analysis enabled a coherent connection between biblical theology and empirical educational practice. The study sought to generate a holistic and credible understanding of how discipleship based on the Great Commission shapes the professional growth of CRE teachers in a public elementary school context.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that discipleship grounded in Matthew 28:19-20 functions not merely as a theological slogan but as a living pedagogical and professional framework that shapes the identity, motivation, and continuous growth of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers at SD Negeri 044840 Talimbaru-Karo. With 34 Christian students and five Christian teachers, the school provides a fertile environment for observing how discipleship is embodied both personally and collectively within professional practice. The Great Commission is interpreted by the teachers not primarily as a missionary mandate in the narrow sense, but as a comprehensive call to form lives through teaching, accompaniment, mentoring, and faithful presence in everyday educational settings (Stassen & Gushee, 2003). This interpretation becomes the spiritual foundation that animates their professional growth. Matthew 28:19-20 emphasizes three inseparable dimensions of discipleship: divine authority (*“all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me”*), the formative task (*“make disciples... teaching them to obey”*), and divine accompaniment (*“I am with you always”*). These three dimensions—authority, formation, and presence—form the theological grammar through which teachers interpret their professional calling (Fee, 2019; Hays, 1996). The teachers consistently articulated that their confidence in teaching does not arise merely from pedagogical skill or institutional legitimacy, but from a sense of being sent and accompanied by Christ in their daily instructional practice. This theological consciousness shapes their perseverance in facing professional challenges such as administrative burdens, diverse student learning needs, and the pressures of national curriculum demands.

The finding concerns discipleship as the spiritual driver of professional identity. All five teachers described their vocation not only in terms of employment but as a divine calling to participate in Christ’s mission of forming lives. This self-understanding significantly influences how they approach professional development. Instead of viewing training, workshops, and curriculum updates as merely institutional obligations, they regard them as part of their obedience to Christ’s command to *“teach them to obey all that I have commanded you”* (Matt. 28:20). One teacher explicitly stated that improving teaching competence is, for her, a form of discipleship because it enables her to teach God’s Word more responsibly and credibly. This confirms Groome’s (2011) argument that Christian teaching is essentially participatory in God’s redemptive activity, not merely the transmission of religious content.

The study also reveals that discipleship shapes the teachers' attitude toward lifelong learning and reflective practice. Observational data show that teachers regularly engage in informal peer discussions to reflect on classroom experiences, student moral struggles, and teaching strategies. These reflective practices are often framed in spiritual language, through prayer, biblical reflection, and mutual exhortation. Professional growth, therefore, is not reduced to technical improvement but is integrated with spiritual discernment and moral accountability. This finding aligns with Hill's (2020) perspective that Christian teacher development is most effective when pedagogical reflection is united with spiritual formation. Teachers who remain rooted in discipleship exhibit greater openness to criticism, willingness to revise teaching methods, and resilience in facing professional limitations. A result emerging from the data is discipleship as a model for relational pedagogy and classroom leadership. Teachers consistently demonstrated that their understanding of "making disciples" is realized through relational closeness rather than authoritarian control. Classroom observations show that teachers prioritize dialogue, mentoring, and personal accompaniment. They invest time in listening to students' personal stories, family contexts, and emotional struggles before directing them toward biblical reflection. This relational approach mirrors the pedagogical style of Jesus, who formed His disciples through proximity, shared life, and gradual instruction (Hays, 1996). In this sense, discipleship becomes the pedagogical logic that transforms classroom authority into servant leadership. Teachers exercise authority not through coercion but through relational trust and moral credibility. The impact of this discipleship-oriented pedagogy is evident in the learning climate of CRE classes. Students demonstrate a high level of engagement, openness, and emotional safety. They are willing to ask questions, express doubts, and even admit moral failures without fear of condemnation. Such a climate confirms Lickona's (2012) assertion that moral and spiritual formation flourishes where authority is relational rather than punitive. Teachers repeatedly emphasized that their goal is not merely to make students "know the Bible" but to "walk with God and with others in love." This pedagogical emphasis flows directly from the Great Commission's call to teach obedience as a lived reality, not merely a memorized command. Another significant finding concerns discipleship as the foundation of collaborative professional growth among teachers. At SD Negeri 044840 Talimbaru, the presence of five Christian teachers allows for a communal dimension of discipleship in professional development. Teachers regularly pray together, share life struggles, and discuss instructional challenges in informal fellowship settings. This communal discipleship strengthens emotional support, reduces professional isolation, and fosters a shared moral vision. According to Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), professional growth is significantly enhanced in collaborative cultures where reflective exchange is normalized. In this study, such collaboration is not merely collegial but spiritual in nature, rooted in the shared identity of being disciples of Christ.

From the perspective of curriculum and instructional development, the teachers demonstrated that discipleship influences how they design lesson plans, select learning methods, and assess student growth. Lesson plans intentionally integrate cognitive learning objectives with affective and behavioral formation. Teachers incorporate case-based moral discussions, biblical storytelling connected to daily life, role-playing of ethical dilemmas, and service-oriented projects as concrete expressions of "teaching them to

obey.” This confirms that the Great Commission’s pedagogical mandate is interpreted not as a doctrinal curriculum only, but as a holistic formation process touching knowledge, attitudes, and behavior (Groome, 2011). Professional growth, therefore, is measured not only by improved test scores, but by observable transformation in students’ character and relational life. The study also reveals that discipleship sustains teachers’ vocational resilience. Teaching in public elementary schools in Indonesia involves various challenges: administrative complexity, curriculum changes, limited instructional resources, and diverse student backgrounds. Teachers testified that their commitment to discipleship enables them to endure these pressures without losing vocational meaning. The promise of Christ’s abiding presence in Matthew 28:20 (“*I am with you always*”) is frequently cited by teachers as the spiritual source of endurance. This theological assurance transforms professional struggle into participation in Christ’s ongoing work. Such a perspective resonates with Bonhoeffer’s (2015) view that Christian vocation involves costly obedience sustained by divine grace rather than by personal strength alone.

Observational and interview data indicate that students experience CRE classes not merely as academic sessions but as relational and formative encounters. Students show increased moral sensitivity, responsibility, and willingness to serve others. They actively participate in communal prayer, demonstrate respect toward teachers and peers, and show growing awareness of ethical decision-making in daily school life. Teachers attribute this transformation not to their own competence alone but to the discipling dimension of their relationship with students. This finding supports Stassen and Gushee’s (2003) argument that Christian ethics is learned through habituation within communities shaped by shared practices rather than through abstract moral reasoning alone. The minority-majority dynamics of Christian students within the broader school environment also sharpen the importance of discipleship. Although the school has a relatively strong Christian presence compared with many public schools, students still interact daily with peers of different religious and cultural backgrounds. Teachers therefore understand discipleship not as isolation from pluralism but as faithful engagement within it. They intentionally teach students to live out Christian identity with humility, respect, and social responsibility. This approach reflects the missional dimension of the Great Commission, where discipleship equips believers to live as witnesses through conduct and character, not merely through verbal proclamation. Such findings resonate with Banks and Banks’ (2019) view that religious education in pluralistic contexts must cultivate both identity and dialogical openness. A crucial dimension of the findings concerns professional growth as spiritual obedience rather than career ambition. Teachers consistently rejected purely instrumental motivations for professional advancement, such as promotion or certification alone, although they recognize their institutional importance. Instead, they framed professional development as an act of obedience to Christ’s command to teach faithfully. This theological framing significantly reshapes how teachers approach workshops, continuing education, and curriculum reform. Rather than experiencing professional development as a burden, they perceive it as participation in discipleship itself. This spiritual reframing strengthens intrinsic motivation for growth and guards against professional stagnation. The study also identifies structural and contextual challenges that limit the full realization of discipleship-oriented professional growth. These include limited access to advanced theological training, uneven quality of

government-sponsored professional development programs, and time constraints created by heavy administrative workloads. Teachers often rely on informal peer study, local church resources, and personal devotional practices to sustain their spiritual and professional growth. This condition highlights the gap between the theological ideal of discipleship and the institutional realities of public education. As Hill (2020) notes, spiritual formation within professional contexts requires systemic support if it is to be sustained over the long term. The integration of discipleship and professionalism observed in this study affirms that Matthew 28:19-20 functions as both a missional and pedagogical charter for Christian education. The command to make disciples inherently includes the formation of teachers themselves as lifelong learners and followers of Christ. Teachers are not merely “implementers” of discipleship but are themselves continuously being disciplined through their professional journey. This recursive dynamic—teachers disciplining students while themselves being disciplined through their vocation—creates a living cycle of formation that sustains both spiritual vitality and professional competence.

This study contributes to the discourse on Christian education by demonstrating that professional growth cannot be adequately understood apart from discipleship. While secular educational theory emphasizes reflective practice, competency development, and pedagogical innovation (Creswell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014), this study extends those frameworks by showing how such practices are spiritually energized and ethically oriented through discipleship. Professional growth in Christian education is therefore not merely a technical process but a form of faithful participation in Christ’s mission. The results and discussion show that at SD Negeri 044840 Talimbaru, discipleship grounded in Matthew 28:19-20 permeates the teachers’ professional identity, pedagogical practice, collaborative culture, and vocational resilience. Professional growth is experienced not as a detached career trajectory but as an expression of obedience, service, and participation in the Great Commission. The integration of discipleship and professionalism produces teachers who are not only pedagogically competent but spiritually grounded, relationally sensitive, and ethically credible. These findings confirm that when discipleship becomes the spiritual engine of professional growth, Christian education is transformed from mere instruction into a living process of faith formation and communal transformation.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that discipleship, as articulated in Matthew 28:19-20, functions as a profound spiritual foundation for the professional growth of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers at SD Negeri 044840 Talimbaru. Discipleship is not merely understood as a theological command aimed at students, but as a living vocational framework that continuously forms the teachers themselves as lifelong learners, moral exemplars, and spiritual mentors. The Great Commission shapes how teachers interpret their professional identity, not primarily as a career trajectory driven by external rewards, but as a divine calling rooted in obedience, service, and faithfulness to Christ’s mission. The findings demonstrate that professional growth in this context is inseparable from spiritual formation. Teachers pursue pedagogical improvement, curriculum development, and instructional innovation as expressions of their commitment to “teach others to obey” all that Christ has commanded. As a result, professional development is not perceived as a burdensome institutional obligation, but as a meaningful act of discipleship. This spiritual

motivation generates intrinsic commitment to lifelong learning, reflective practice, and ethical responsibility in teaching. Discipleship significantly shapes the teachers' pedagogical orientation. Classroom practice is marked by relational leadership, mentoring, dialogue, and compassionate accompaniment. Authority is exercised through servant leadership rather than domination, creating a learning climate characterized by trust, openness, and moral safety. Students are not only instructed cognitively but are intentionally formed in character, responsibility, and social sensitivity. This confirms that discipleship-oriented pedagogy functions as a holistic educational model that integrates knowledge, values, and lived obedience. Communally, the presence of five Christian teachers enables discipleship to flourish within a collaborative professional culture. Shared prayer, peer reflection, and mutual encouragement strengthen vocational resilience and guard teachers against professional isolation. At the same time, this study also highlights structural challenges, such as limited access to advanced theological training and the heavy administrative demands of public schooling, which constrain the sustainability of discipleship-based professional growth. These realities indicate that greater institutional and ecclesial support is needed to ensure that the spiritual foundations of teaching are nurtured alongside professional competencies. This research affirms that the Great Commission is not only a missionary mandate but also a pedagogical and professional charter for Christian educators. Teachers are both agents and recipients of discipleship in an ongoing formative cycle. As they form students, they themselves are continuously formed in humility, obedience, perseverance, and faithfulness. This dynamic integration of discipleship and professionalism demonstrates that authentic professional growth in Christian education is ultimately rooted in participation in Christ's redemptive mission. This study asserts that when discipleship becomes the spiritual engine of professional growth, Christian education is transformed from a merely instructional enterprise into a living process of faith formation, ethical cultivation, and communal transformation. Future research is encouraged to explore this discipleship-professionalism integration across diverse educational levels and denominational contexts to further strengthen the theoretical and practical foundations of Christian teacher development.

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