

Transforming Classroom Relationships through Matthew 10:16: A Christian Pedagogical Perspective from SMP Negeri 1 Silima Pungga Pungga

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how Matthew 10:16 “be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” serves as a transformative relational framework within Christian Religious Education, focusing on the context of SMP Negeri 1 Silima Pungga Pungga in Dairi, which includes 540 Christian students and three Christian teachers. Using a qualitative design grounded in a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) and supported by light semi-structured interviews, the research investigates how biblical relational wisdom can shape healthier, more constructive teacher-student interactions. Exegetical analysis of Matthew 10:16 provides the theological foundation, revealing that “phronimoi” (wisdom) entails discernment, strategic awareness, and the ability to respond prudently to challenges, while “akeraioi” (innocence) reflects purity of intention, gentleness, and moral integrity. Findings from the SLR show strong scholarly consensus that relational wisdom significantly influences classroom climate, conflict resolution, and student engagement. Integrating these insights with interview data reveals that Christian teachers who embody both discernment and innocence are better equipped to manage classroom diversity, emotional tensions, and behavioral disruptions. Students reported feeling more supported, respected, and spiritually guided when teachers demonstrated patience, fairness, and genuine care. The study also highlights that relational wisdom enhances teacher resilience, enabling educators to navigate pressure, maintain emotional stability, and reflect Christlike character in their decision-making. The research concludes that Matthew 10:16 provides a timeless pedagogical paradigm for transforming classroom relationships. By integrating wisdom and innocence into daily teaching practice, Christian educators can foster learning environments marked by trust, respect, and spiritual growth, thereby strengthening the holistic formation of students and advancing the mission of Christian education.

Keywords: Pedagogical, Christian Religious Education, Classroom Relationships

INTRODUCTION

The cultivation of healthy classroom relationships has emerged as a central concern in contemporary educational discourse, especially within diverse and rapidly changing

learning environments. In Indonesia, where public schools increasingly reflect a complex interaction of cultural plurality, digital influence, and shifting social norms, teachers face the urgent task of shaping relational wisdom among students. Relational wisdom refers to the capacity to interact with others through discernment, empathy, integrity, and moral clarity, enabling individuals to navigate interpersonal complexities with both compassion and prudence (Goleman, 2013). Within Christian Religious Education (CRE), this task becomes even more crucial because relational formation is grounded not only in pedagogical approaches but also in biblical theology and spiritual formation. Christian students are called to embody Christ-like relational attitudes such as humility, peace, honesty, and moral courage. One of the biblical passages that directly addresses relational competence is Matthew 10:16, where Jesus says, “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep among wolves; therefore be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” The verse combines two complementary virtues: *phronimos* (prudence, strategic wisdom) and *akeraioi* (purity, sincerity, moral innocence). Exegetically, the verse emphasizes that Christian disciples must cultivate balanced relational dispositions, wisdom without manipulation, innocence without naivety. Scholars note that “serpent-like wisdom” entails discernment, awareness of human motives, and strategic decision-making, while “dove-like innocence” represents moral integrity, gentleness, and blameless conduct (France, 2007; Keener, 2014). This balanced relational disposition serves as a theological foundation for Christian pedagogy, shaping how teachers guide students to navigate interpersonal challenges in school. The context of SMP Negeri 1 Silima Pungga Pungga, located in Dairi Regency, presents a unique educational setting for exploring this biblical principle. With 540 Christian students and only three Christian teachers, including one CRE teacher, the relational formation of students relies heavily on the modeling, instruction, and presence of these teachers. Christian teachers in such a context carry triple responsibilities: academic, moral, and spiritual. They serve not only as instructors of theological content but also as relational mentors who shape students’ character through daily interactions. Studies on Christian education in Indonesia have consistently shown that teacher modeling, especially relational modeling, has a stronger impact on student behavior formation than cognitive instruction alone (Simanjuntak, 2020; Napitupulu, 2022). Therefore, integrating Matthew 10:16 into classroom practice can provide a transformative framework for developing relational wisdom among students.

Adolescents in Indonesian public schools often face relational pressures including competition, bullying, social media conflicts, peer influence, and identity struggles. These challenges require not only disciplinary interventions but also character formation rooted in relational discernment and integrity. Many researchers emphasize that students today need guidance to differentiate between assertiveness and aggression, honesty and harshness, prudence and fear, innocence and naivety (Wentzel, 2019). Matthew 10:16 offers an integrated relational ethic, one that trains students to respond wisely to challenges while maintaining purity of heart and integrity of behavior. Within this pedagogical landscape, Christian teachers at SMP Negeri 1 Silima Pungga Pungga can use Matthew 10:16 as a theological-pedagogical lens for shaping classroom relationships. By embodying both *serpent-wisdom* and *dove-innocence*, teachers demonstrate relational strategies that are firm yet compassionate, discerning yet ethical, and courageous yet gentle. This study, therefore, seeks to examine how biblical relational wisdom can

transform classroom relationships and enhance Christian pedagogical practices within a public school context. Through exegetical analysis, literature synthesis, and contextual reflection, this research argues that relational wisdom grounded in Matthew 10:16 provides an essential foundation for fostering respect, empathy, conflict resolution, and constructive interpersonal engagement among students.

METHODS

The choice of SLR as the primary method was based on its capacity to synthesize conceptual, biblical-theological, and educational insights relevant to Christian pedagogy, particularly those intersecting with relational wisdom, as framed by Jesus' instruction in Matthew 10:16. The SLR method followed the guidelines proposed by Snyder (2019) for transparent, replicable, and conceptually rigorous literature integration. It aimed to identify how contemporary scholarship interprets biblical relational ethics, classroom relationship dynamics, pedagogical transformation, and Christian education frameworks. The central review question guiding the SLR was: How do biblical principles of relational wisdom, particularly those derived from Matthew 10:16 ("wise as serpents and innocent as doves"), inform the development of transformative classroom relationships in Christian educational settings? Search strings included combinations of "Christian pedagogy," "relational wisdom," "biblical classroom ethics," "Matthew 10:16," "Christian teacher-student relationships," "faith-integrated teaching," and "character-centered pedagogy." Databases consulted and criteria limited sources to peer-reviewed articles, books, and dissertations published within the last ten years, except for classical theological works used for exegesis. Exclusion criteria eliminated sources unrelated to Christian education or relational ethics, and those lacking methodological clarity. A total of 147 sources were initially identified; after title and abstract screening, 68 sources remained. Full-text screening eventually narrowed the final dataset to 42 high-quality sources, which became the basis for the thematic synthesis. Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic approach guided the synthesis, allowing emergent themes related to relational wisdom, pedagogical transformation, teacher moral agency, and the biblical formation of learning communities. To complement the literature findings and ground the study in local context, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with three Christian teachers (including one Christian Religious Education teacher) and nine Christian students drawn proportionally from different grade levels. The interviews aimed not to generate generalizable empirical patterns but to provide contextual insights into how Matthew 10:16 is understood and practiced in real classroom interactions. Interview questions explored teacher strategies for managing conflicts, building trust, integrating biblical values, and maintaining balance between assertiveness ("serpents") and gentleness ("doves"). Student interviews explored perceptions of teacher relational style, emotional safety, fairness, and spiritual influence. Interviews were conducted in a confidential setting within the school compound, lasting 20–25 minutes each. Themes emerging from interviews were compared with the SLR themes using methodological triangulation (Flick, 2018) to ensure interpretive robustness and contextual alignment. Particular attention was given to convergences between theory and practice, and divergences that highlighted contextual or cultural nuances in the Dairi region. The study also incorporated exegetical analysis of Matthew 10:16 using historical-critical and lexical methods. Primary Greek sources (Nestle-Aland 28) and leading commentaries were consulted to clarify semantic

nuances of *phronimoi* (“wise, prudent”) and *akeraioi* (“pure, harmless”), ensuring that the pedagogical application remained faithful to the text’s original intent while appropriately adapted for educational purposes. Ethical procedures followed Creswell & Creswell’s (2018) qualitative research ethics: consent, anonymity, voluntary participation, and safeguarding student perspectives. Combining SLR, light interview data, and exegetical interpretation created an integrative methodology suitable for constructing a Christian pedagogical model that transforms classroom relationships through biblical relational wisdom.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study, derived from a systematic literature review, exegetical analysis of Matthew 10:16, and supplementary interviews with teachers and students at SMP Negeri 1 Silima Pungga Pungga, reveal a multifaceted and deeply theological understanding of relational wisdom within the Christian pedagogical context and demonstrate that the integration of biblical principles significantly shapes the dynamics of classroom relationships, moral atmosphere, and educational outcomes. The synthesis consistently shows that Jesus’ instruction, “Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves,” provides a comprehensive relational framework that balances prudence, discernment, emotional intelligence, and moral integrity, qualities urgently needed in contemporary educational contexts characterized by behavioral diversity, socio-emotional challenges, and shifting cultural values. The results indicate that teachers who internalize *phronesis* (biblical wisdom) operate in classrooms with heightened situational awareness, increased capacity for conflict navigation, and greater ability to foster a climate of respect, safety, and trust. Literature across Christian education scholarship affirms that relationally wise teachers embody virtues such as empathy, patience, firmness, and spiritual sensitivity, allowing them to negotiate complex student behaviors without compromising their moral character, a finding strongly aligned with the second interpretive key of Matthew 10:16—the symbolism of the dove, representing moral purity and ethical consistency. The exegetical component reinforces that Jesus’ instruction emerges from a missional context in which His disciples were sent into challenging environments, implying that Christian educators likewise operate within relational terrains requiring both perceptiveness and innocence. This theological grounding enriches the findings from the school context, where teachers reported that daily interactions with 540 Christian students across diverse backgrounds demand constant balancing between authority and gentleness, decisiveness and compassion, correction and pastoral care. The interview data highlight that students perceive relational wisdom in teachers not merely through classroom management strategies but through observable attitudes of fairness, calmness, clarity of communication, and the ability to de-escalate emotional tensions without intimidation or favoritism.

Results from the school context show that the Christian teachers at SMP Negeri 1 Silima Pungga Pungga interpret Matthew 10:16 as a guiding ethic for relational decision-making, especially in moments of disciplinary intervention. One teacher explained that being “wise like serpents” means anticipating student behaviors, discerning underlying emotional issues, and responding in ways that prevent escalation, a finding that coheres

with educational psychology research identifying teacher mindfulness and anticipatory guidance as predictors of classroom harmony. At the same time, maintaining “innocence like doves,” according to the teachers, involves protecting one’s speech, tone, and intentions so that correction is delivered lovingly rather than harshly, a finding supported by Christian pedagogical literature emphasizing that moral purity and relational gentleness strengthen student openness and reduce defiance. The interviews also reveal that students respond more positively to teachers who embody this biblical balance, describing them as “wise but not scary,” “firm but caring,” and “protective, not punitive.” This relational response aligns with SLR findings indicating that classrooms governed by relational wisdom tend to foster intrinsic motivation, improved student engagement, and increased openness toward moral and spiritual formation. The theme of relational safety emerged strongly in both literature and field data. Students consistently reported feeling safer and more respected in classrooms where teachers demonstrate patience, calmness, and moral consistency, reinforcing theories of socio-emotional learning which argue that emotional safety is foundational for academic performance and character growth. Christian educators particularly emphasize that relational safety is grounded not solely in psychological competence but in the teacher’s spiritual orientation toward compassion, mercy, and the imitation of Christ, principles that mirror the dove-like innocence of Matthew 10:16. Another central theme emerging from the data is relational discernment, illuminated by the serpent metaphor. Teachers described numerous situations where discernment prevented misunderstandings, unnecessary conflict, or misplaced punishment. For example, one teacher noted that students who appear rebellious are often masking insecurity or anxiety, and responding harshly would only amplify the problem. This insight is consistent with Christian counseling literature underscoring discernment as an essential pastoral skill for educators functioning within faith-based moral frameworks. The SLR further shows that discernment enables teachers to recognize spiritual and emotional dynamics that influence behavior, facilitating interventions that are restorative rather than punitive. In the context of SMP Negeri 1 Silima Pungga Pungga, relational discernment was also visible in teachers’ efforts to adapt communication strategies based on the needs of individual students, an approach that reflects the inclusive and context-sensitive pedagogy found in Christian educational research.

The findings also emphasize the relevance of biblical relational ethics for shaping classroom communities. The theological reading of Matthew 10:16 clarifies that Jesus calls His followers to navigate social hostility and interpersonal complexity without losing their moral identity, a principle that translates directly into educational practice where teachers often confront peer conflicts, bullying, learning apathy, and emotional instability. Literature indicates that Christian teachers who consistently apply biblical relational ethics cultivate classrooms where students practice respect, forgiveness, cooperation, and humility, relational virtues drawn directly from Christ’s teachings. During interviews, teachers reported intentionally modeling such virtues, believing that students learn relational integrity not only through instruction but through imitation, echoing *imitatio Christi* as a pedagogical norm. Students confirmed this perception by stating that they feel encouraged to treat peers better when their teachers demonstrate patience or calm responses to difficult situations. A further significant result is the emergence of transformative relational leadership among Christian teachers. The SLR

illuminates that teachers who embody the dual wisdom of serpent and dove often act as spiritual-leadership figures in their classrooms, influencing students' moral behavior and social interactions beyond academic instruction. The teachers interviewed acknowledged this leadership role, recognizing that students observe their emotional reactions, ethical choices, and conflict management strategies daily. Christian pedagogy literature argues that such modeling has long-term formative effects, shaping students' relational habits and ethical judgements. At SMP Negeri 1 Silima Pungga Pungga, this was reflected in teachers' deliberate commitment to relational transparency, consistency, and compassion, qualities students cited as reasons for trusting or respecting them.

Matthew 10:16 provides a pedagogical paradigm for navigating the complexities of 21st-century classrooms. The SLR highlights global trends in student behavior, digital distraction, emotional volatility, diverse learning needs, and socio-cultural fragmentation, that demand a pedagogy grounded not merely in instructional knowledge but in relational wisdom and ethical resilience. The serpent-dove paradigm equips Christian teachers to respond constructively to these challenges. For example, prudence enables them to create proactive behavioral structures, anticipate classroom disruptions, and implement restorative discipline strategies. Innocence guides them to preserve compassion, avoid retaliatory emotions, and model Christlike relational integrity. These complementary relational qualities produce learning environments where students experience both structure and grace, boundaries and acceptance. The data suggest that integrating Matthew 10:16 into pedagogical practice supports holistic character formation. Christian educational literature emphasizes that relational spaces are primary contexts where virtues such as patience, self-control, kindness, and forgiveness are cultivated. Teachers at the school described several instances where biblical relational wisdom enabled them to transform momentary conflicts into teachable moments, helping students reflect on empathy, responsibility, and respect. Students also reported feeling spiritually strengthened by teachers who handled conflicts calmly, prayed for them, or reminded them of biblical values when they struggled emotionally, an approach consistent with integrative faith-learning models. Another insight from the findings concerns teacher resilience, which forms part of the article's conceptual focus. The SLR indicates that relational wisdom is not merely outward-facing but also inward-strengthening, enabling teachers to maintain emotional stability amidst stress, criticism, and student misbehavior. The serpent-like wisdom helps teachers set healthy relational boundaries, while dove-like innocence protects their hearts from bitterness or burnout. Interviews confirmed that teachers relied on prayer, biblical reflection, and collegial fellowship to sustain emotional resilience, especially given the large number of students they serve. Teachers expressed that Matthew 10:16 reminded them to stay spiritually grounded, protecting them from reacting impulsively and helping them regain composure during difficult days. The combined results assert that Matthew 10:16 functions not as a metaphor for survival but as a comprehensive blueprint for transformative Christian relational pedagogy, applicable in diverse educational settings including SMP Negeri 1 Silima Pungga Pungga. The verse provides a theological grammar for relational excellence, equipping teachers to be discerning without being manipulative, gentle without being naïve, firm without being harsh, and influential without being authoritarian. This balanced relational posture shapes classrooms into communities of trust, respect, spiritual growth, and moral clarity.

Through the integration of SLR findings, exegetical insights, and contextual interview data, the study demonstrates that the biblical principle of being “wise as serpents and innocent as doves” has profound relevance for modern Christian education, offering a timeless relational model capable of transforming both teacher behavior and student experience in meaningful, holistic, and Christ-centered ways.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Matthew 10:16 offers a powerful and transformative framework for shaping relational dynamics in Christian education, particularly within the context of SMP Negeri 1 Silima Pungga Pungga. Through a synthesis of exegetical insights, systematic literature review findings, and supplementary interview data, the research confirms that Jesus’ instruction to be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves” provides an essential pedagogical paradigm for navigating the complexities of contemporary classrooms. The balance between discernment and innocence, prudence and purity, strength and gentleness emerges as a holistic relational ethic that equips Christian Religious Education teachers to respond wisely to diverse student behaviors while embodying Christlike compassion. The study concludes that relational wisdom, rooted in biblical *phronesis*, empowers teachers to anticipate challenges, interpret underlying emotional needs, and implement restorative rather than punitive approaches to discipline. Simultaneously, moral innocence shapes the ethical quality of teacher–student interactions, ensuring that authority is exercised with fairness, kindness, and spiritual integrity. Together, these qualities create relational spaces where students feel safe, respected, and valued, which in turn enhances engagement, reduces conflict, and contributes to holistic character formation. The results underscore that Christian teachers who embody the serpent–dove paradigm naturally assume the role of relational leaders within their classrooms, influencing student behavior and attitudes through consistent modeling of patience, empathy, and self-control. This leadership strengthens classroom communities and fosters spiritual growth as students encounter biblically grounded relational values lived out in daily interactions. The findings also highlight that relational wisdom contributes significantly to teacher resilience by helping educators maintain emotional stability, healthy boundaries, and a reflective spiritual posture amid challenges. The study affirms that Matthew 10:16 is not merely a spiritual exhortation but a practical and deeply relevant pedagogical guide. Its balanced relational ethic provides Christian educators with a timeless strategy for transforming classroom relationships, nurturing student character, and cultivating learning environments marked by trust, mutual respect, and Christ-centered love.

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