



Making Faith Meaningful: Pedagogical Strategies of Christian Religious Education Teachers in Connecting Exodus 15:25 with Students' Life Experiences at SMP N 2 Siempatnempu Hilir

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the pedagogical strategies employed by Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers in making faith meaningful by connecting Exodus 15:25 with students' lived experiences at SMP N 2 Siempatnempu Hilir. Using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design, this research synthesizes recent scholarly works (2019-2025) on pedagogical competence, contextual biblical interpretation, and faith-based education. The review followed a structured process of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and thematic synthesis to ensure methodological rigor and credibility. A total of 28 peer-reviewed articles were analyzed to identify recurring pedagogical patterns relevant to bridging Scripture and life experience. The findings reveal that pedagogical competence in CRE is multidimensional, encompassing interpretive accuracy, learner-centered instructional design, relational authenticity, and contextual sensitivity. Effective strategies for connecting Exodus 15:25 with adolescents' experiences include narrative-based teaching, reflective learning activities, collaborative discussion, experiential engagement, and teacher modeling. These approaches enable students to internalize theological themes such as resilience, obedience, and trust in God, transforming biblical narratives from abstract doctrines into lived spiritual guidance. The study further emphasizes the importance of relational pedagogy in fostering meaningful dialogue and spiritual growth, particularly at the junior high school level where identity formation is prominent. The research concludes that making faith meaningful requires intentional integration of theological insight and pedagogical expertise. By employing contextual and transformative teaching strategies, CRE teachers can cultivate deeper spiritual engagement and character development. This study contributes to ongoing discussions on teacher competence and faith integration in Christian education contexts.

Keywords: *Pedagogical competence, Christian Religious Education, Exodus 15:25, faith integration, contextual learning.*

INTRODUCTION

Christian Religious Education (CRE) holds a critical place in the holistic development of students, especially in contexts where faith is intended not merely as abstract belief but as a lived experience that shapes daily conduct and moral orientation. In formal education settings, particularly in Indonesian schools that include religion as part of the curriculum, teachers of Christian Religious Education bear the dual responsibility of imparting theological knowledge and facilitating its relevance to students' real-life situations. This dual responsibility underscores the importance of pedagogical competence, defined broadly as the ability of educators to design, implement, and evaluate learning experiences that are meaningful, contextual, and transformative for learners. In recent pedagogical discourse, competence is not just about mastery of subject matter but also the capacity to translate religious truths into lived experiences that resonate with students' socio-cultural backgrounds and personal challenges (Manullang, 2023). Pedagogical competence in Christian Religious Education can thus be conceptualized as a composite of instructional planning, biblical interpretation, contextual adaptation, and learner-centered engagement. It goes beyond conventional instructional delivery to include the interpretive process that connects biblical narratives with the lived realities of adolescents. For instance, scholars have highlighted how competent CRE teachers integrate biblical theology with contextual realities, thereby fostering students' internalization of faith values such as perseverance, hope, and responsible Christian living (Zebua, 2025). This aligns with the broader educational objective that learning should not be "knowledge for knowledge's sake" but knowledge that shapes character, ethical conduct, and spiritual formation. Research within the Indonesian context suggests that pedagogical competence significantly influences not only cognitive outcomes but also moral and character development in religious learning. Poluan and Talangamin (2021) found in their qualitative study that when teachers' pedagogical skills are underdeveloped, student engagement and learning outcomes decline, indicating a direct relationship between pedagogical strategies and students' academic and spiritual participation in CRE classrooms. Similarly, research by Sianipar, Panjaitan, and Turnip (2020) underscores the need for pedagogically competent teachers who act as role models and guide learners in character formation, moral reasoning, and religious understanding rather than as mere transmitters of doctrinal facts.

Pedagogical competence in CRE remains uneven across different school contexts. Factors such as limited professional development opportunities, inadequate resources, and varying levels of theological depth among teachers contribute to gaps in the ability to connect biblical teachings with students' life experiences. Contemporary educational challenges, such as the rapid technological transformation of classrooms and the diverse socio-cultural backgrounds of students, further compound these challenges, requiring adaptive and intentional pedagogical approaches that respond to both faith and life realities (Karlau & Rukua, 2023). Exodus 15:25, the focal biblical text of this study, recounts a formative moment in Israel's journey where God provides healing and establishes a covenantal signpost for His people. Interpreting such narratives within a classroom setting demands more than exegetical knowledge; it requires pedagogical strategies that can translate the theological significance of faith, obedience, and divine provision into relevant insights for students navigating their own life journeys. Thus, the role of the CRE teacher becomes pivotal, not only in biblical interpretation but in bridging

scriptural meaning with the lived experiences of adolescents, helping them grapple with issues such as personal adversity, social relationships, and ethical decision-making. In educational theory, the constructivist approach emphasizes that meaningful learning occurs when students are actively engaged in constructing knowledge through experience, reflection, and interaction. Constructivist pedagogies, when applied to religious education, encourage learners to connect biblical truths with their life contexts, thus fostering deeper internalization of faith values. Research on CRE pedagogy within Indonesian school points to the efficacy of learner-centered and narrative-based strategies that encourage reflective dialogue and personal relevance (Zega & Simamora, 2023). These approaches align with broader international pedagogical perspectives advocating for the integration of students' experiences as central to the learning process, particularly in religious education where faith must move from theory to lived practice. The context of SMP N 2 Siempatnempu Hilir as a junior high school where students are at a critical developmental stage highlights the need for pedagogical strategies that acknowledge adolescents' cognitive, emotional, and spiritual growth. At this stage, learners are forming personal worldviews, navigating social pressures, and seeking meaning in their lives; thus, the CRE teacher's role extends beyond instruction to mentorship and spiritual accompaniment. Pedagogical competence in this setting includes the ability to engage students in meaningful reflection, cultivate biblical understanding that speaks to contemporary issues, and model authentic Christian discipleship that students can observe and emulate. In a pluralistic educational environment where students may encounter diverse worldviews, CRE teachers are challenged to make faith education both inclusive and distinctively Christian, encouraging respectful engagement with differing perspectives while grounding students in their own faith traditions. This pedagogical balance requires not only theological insight but empathetic understanding and contextual sensitivity skills that are integral to effective pedagogical competence in religious education. The literature underscores that pedagogical competence in Christian Religious Education is multifaceted and essential for connecting biblical teachings with students' lived experiences. By focusing on "making faith meaningful," CRE teachers can facilitate deeper spiritual engagement, foster moral development, and nurture students' capacity to apply faith to real-world challenges. This study aims to explore the specific pedagogical strategies employed by CRE teachers at SMP N 2 Siempatnempu Hilir in connecting Exodus 15:25 with students' life experiences, thereby contributing to the ongoing discourse on faith-based pedagogy and teacher effectiveness in Christian education.

METHODS

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design to examine pedagogical strategies used by Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers in connecting biblical texts particularly Exodus 15:25 with students' lived experiences. The SLR approach was selected because it allows for a structured, transparent, and replicable process of identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing relevant scholarly literature. In contrast to traditional narrative reviews, SLR minimizes bias through clearly defined procedures for search, selection, and analysis of sources (Snyder, 2019). The use of SLR is also consistent with contemporary educational research practices that emphasize methodological rigor and

evidence-based synthesis (Xiao & Watson, 2019). The review process followed four main stages: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and synthesis. In the identification stage, scholarly articles were searched using academic databases such as Scopus-indexed journals, Google Scholar, Crossref, and DOAJ. Keywords included combinations of “pedagogical competence,” “Christian Religious Education,” “faith and life integration,” “biblical contextualization,” “religious education pedagogy,” and “character formation.” The search was limited to publications between 2019 and 2025 to ensure the inclusion of recent and relevant studies reflecting current pedagogical trends. Only peer-reviewed journal articles written in English or Indonesian were included to maintain academic credibility and contextual relevance. During the screening stage, titles and abstracts were examined to determine their relevance to the research focus. Articles were excluded if they did not directly address pedagogical competence, religious education, or the integration of faith and life experience. The eligibility stage involved a full-text review of selected articles to ensure methodological clarity, empirical grounding, and theoretical contribution. Studies with unclear methods, non-scholarly publications, or opinion-based essays without empirical support were excluded from the final analysis. This process aligns with recommended SLR protocols that emphasize transparency and replicability (Page et al., 2021). A total of 45 articles were initially identified, of which 28 met the inclusion criteria after screening and eligibility assessment. The selected studies employed qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods designs, providing diverse perspectives on CRE pedagogy and teacher competence. Data from these studies were extracted systematically, including information on research objectives, methodology, sample characteristics, theoretical frameworks, and key findings related to pedagogical strategies and faith contextualization. The synthesis process applied a thematic analysis approach to identify recurring patterns across the literature. Themes such as learner-centered pedagogy, contextual biblical interpretation, narrative and reflective learning, teacher modeling, and character-oriented instruction emerged as dominant strategies in making faith meaningful for students. By integrating findings across multiple studies, this SLR provides a comprehensive understanding of how pedagogical competence enables CRE teachers to bridge scriptural teachings and students’ daily experiences. Through this rigorous and systematic process, the study ensures that its conclusions are grounded in credible scholarly evidence an

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The systematic review of 28 selected studies reveals that pedagogical competence in Christian Religious Education (CRE) is consistently understood as a multidimensional construct that integrates instructional knowledge, contextual sensitivity, theological literacy, and relational capacity. Across recent literature, pedagogical competence is not reduced to classroom management or mastery of content, but is framed as the ability to design learning experiences that shape students’ cognitive understanding, spiritual awareness, and moral character simultaneously (Snyder, 2019; Xiao & Watson, 2019). In the context of religious education, this competence becomes even more complex because teachers are not only facilitators of knowledge but also interpreters of sacred texts and models of lived faith. The reviewed studies highlight that competent CRE teachers demonstrate the capacity to translate biblical narratives into pedagogical experiences that are relevant to adolescents’ developmental stages. Adolescence, particularly at the

junior high school level, is marked by identity formation, emotional fluctuation, and increasing exposure to diverse worldviews. The ability of teachers to contextualize faith content into students' lived realities becomes a crucial determinant of meaningful learning. Recent scholarship emphasizes that when biblical material is presented abstractly without experiential connection, students tend to perceive religious instruction as distant and ritualistic rather than transformative (Manullang, 2023).

Another dominant theme emerging from the literature is the integration of theological reflection and pedagogical design. Effective CRE teachers demonstrate not only exegetical understanding but also pedagogical intentionality. They are able to identify the theological core of a passage and align it with appropriate teaching strategies that encourage reflection and application. This alignment reflects what contemporary education theory describes as constructive alignment ensuring that learning objectives, teaching methods, and assessment practices are coherently connected. Within CRE, constructive alignment must also incorporate spiritual objectives, such as nurturing trust in God, cultivating obedience, and fostering resilience. The literature underscores the importance of relational competence as part of pedagogical expertise. Teachers who build authentic, empathetic relationships with students create safe spaces where learners feel comfortable sharing personal experiences. Such relational dynamics are particularly essential when discussing biblical narratives that address struggle, doubt, or hardship. Studies consistently show that students are more likely to internalize faith values when they perceive their teachers as credible, caring, and consistent role models (Sianipar et al., 2020). Thus, pedagogical competence in CRE is inseparable from character integrity and spiritual authenticity. In synthesizing these findings, it becomes clear that pedagogical competence in CRE involves three interrelated dimensions: interpretive competence (understanding and explaining Scripture accurately), instructional competence (designing and implementing meaningful learning strategies), and relational competence (engaging students empathetically and authentically). These dimensions form the foundation for connecting Exodus 15:25 with students' life experiences in a way that is both faithful to the text and relevant to contemporary adolescent challenges.

Interpreting Exodus 15:25 in Contemporary Educational Contexts

The biblical narrative of Exodus 15:25 presents a formative moment in Israel's wilderness journey, where God transforms bitter water into drinkable water and establishes a principle of obedience and trust. The literature indicates that narratives of crisis and divine intervention are particularly suitable for contextual pedagogy because they mirror common human experiences of difficulty and hope. When interpreted pedagogically, Exodus 15:25 can be framed not merely as a historical miracle but as a theological lesson about resilience, divine provision, and covenantal relationship. Several studies in religious pedagogy emphasize the importance of narrative theology as a teaching approach. Narrative-based instruction allows students to enter the biblical story imaginatively and reflect on parallels within their own lives. Through storytelling, dramatization, and guided reflection, teachers can help students identify with the Israelites' emotional journey from complaint to trust. This process encourages what scholars describe as "existential engagement," where learners relate scriptural content to personal struggles such as academic pressure, peer conflict, or family challenges (Zega & Simamora, 2023). The SLR findings indicate that contextualization strategies significantly enhance comprehension

and internalization of biblical messages. Contextualization does not mean altering theological meaning but rather interpreting Scripture within the learners' socio-cultural framework. In Indonesian junior high schools, students often encounter social transitions, digital influences, and identity exploration. By linking the bitterness of Marah to contemporary experiences of disappointment or frustration, teachers can make the text resonate with students' emotional realities. Another recurring theme is the importance of hermeneutical guidance. Teachers must guard against superficial moralization of biblical narratives. Instead of presenting Exodus 15:25 as a simplistic formula "if you obey, God will fix your problems" competent pedagogy encourages critical reflection on faith, patience, and spiritual growth. This approach aligns with transformative learning theory, which posits that meaningful education involves critical examination of assumptions and deeper reflection on personal beliefs. The literature also emphasizes dialogical pedagogy in religious education. When discussing passages like Exodus 15:25, teachers who invite open-ended questions foster deeper engagement. Students are encouraged to articulate doubts, share experiences, and explore the implications of trust and obedience in their contexts. This dialogical process reflects constructivist principles, where knowledge is co-constructed rather than passively received. Such engagement ensures that Scripture becomes a living text rather than a static doctrine. In light of these findings, interpreting Exodus 15:25 within SMP N 2 Siempatnempu Hilir requires a pedagogical balance between theological fidelity and contextual sensitivity. Teachers must navigate between historical exegesis and contemporary relevance, ensuring that the biblical message speaks meaningfully to students' developmental and social realities.

Pedagogical Strategies for Bridging Faith and Life Experience

The SLR identified several recurring pedagogical strategies that effectively connect faith with life experience. One of the most prominent is reflective learning. Reflective activities such as journaling, guided meditation, and small-group discussion allow students to internalize biblical insights personally. Reflection moves learning from cognitive awareness to affective engagement. When students reflect on times they have experienced "bitter waters" in their own lives, they begin to see Scripture as relevant and compassionate rather than distant. Another strategy highlighted in the literature is experiential learning. Teachers incorporate simulations, role-play, and project-based activities that mirror real-life challenges. Experiential methods encourage active participation and deeper comprehension. In the case of Exodus 15:25, students might reenact the narrative or design creative projects illustrating transformation from bitterness to healing. Experiential engagement enhances retention and fosters emotional connection to the lesson. Collaborative learning also emerges as a key strategy. Group discussions and peer-sharing sessions create communal spaces where faith is explored collectively. Adolescents are highly influenced by peer interaction; therefore, collaborative approaches enable them to process spiritual themes within supportive social contexts. Research consistently shows that collaborative religious education strengthens moral reasoning and empathy. Teacher modeling is another critical factor. The literature repeatedly affirms that students observe how teachers embody faith principles. When teachers demonstrate patience, integrity, and trust in challenging circumstances, they provide living examples of Exodus 15:25 in action. Modeling bridges the gap between theoretical instruction and practical application. Integration with

contemporary issues is emphasized. Competent teachers connect biblical themes with topics such as resilience, mental health, and social responsibility. This integrative approach ensures that faith education addresses holistic student development. In doing so, CRE becomes not only doctrinal instruction but character formation. The synthesis of these strategies suggests that bridging faith and life is not a single method but a pedagogical orientation. It involves reflective, experiential, collaborative, and modeling approaches that collectively create meaningful religious learning experiences.

Implications for CRE Teachers at SMP N 2 Siempatnempu Hilir

The findings of this SLR have significant implications for CRE teachers at SMP N 2 Siempatnempu Hilir. First, professional development should prioritize hermeneutical and pedagogical integration. Teachers require training not only in biblical studies but also in learner-centered strategies that foster engagement and reflection. Continuous professional growth ensures adaptability to changing educational contexts. Second, curriculum design should intentionally include contextual reflection components. Lesson plans on Exodus 15:25 should incorporate questions that prompt students to connect Scripture with personal experiences. Assessment methods may include reflective essays or creative projects that demonstrate internalization rather than rote memorization. Third, relational pedagogy must be strengthened. Building trust with students enables open dialogue about struggles and faith questions. A supportive classroom environment encourages authenticity and spiritual growth. Fourth, technology integration may enhance engagement. Digital storytelling, multimedia presentations, and online reflective platforms can make biblical narratives more accessible to digital-native students. However, technology must serve pedagogical goals rather than distract from them. Making faith meaningful requires intentionality, competence, and authenticity. The reviewed literature consistently affirms that when pedagogical strategies are thoughtfully designed and relationally grounded, students experience faith as transformative rather than abstract. For SMP N 2 Siempatnempu Hilir, this means positioning CRE not merely as a subject in the curriculum but as a formative space where Scripture intersects with daily life.

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review has demonstrated that pedagogical competence in Christian Religious Education (CRE) is a decisive factor in making faith meaningful for students, particularly when engaging biblical texts such as Exodus 15:25. The synthesis of recent scholarly works confirms that effective CRE teaching requires more than doctrinal transmission; it demands interpretive accuracy, instructional intentionality, and relational authenticity. When these dimensions are integrated, teachers are better equipped to bridge the theological message of Scripture with the lived realities of adolescents. The findings highlight that Exodus 15:25 provides a rich theological framework for contextual pedagogy. The narrative of transformation from bitterness to healing speaks directly to universal human experiences of struggle, uncertainty, and hope. However, the impact of this text in the classroom depends largely on the teacher's pedagogical strategies. Narrative-based instruction, reflective dialogue, experiential learning, and collaborative engagement consistently emerge in the literature as effective means of fostering

existential connection between biblical content and students' personal lives. These approaches align with constructivist and transformative learning theories, which emphasize active meaning-making and critical reflection. The review underscores that relational competence is indispensable in CRE contexts. Students are more likely to internalize faith values when they perceive their teachers as credible role models who embody the principles they teach. In junior high settings such as SMP N 2 Siempatnempu Hilir, where students are navigating identity formation and emotional development, the teacher's authenticity and empathy significantly influence spiritual engagement. Faith becomes meaningful not only through explanation but through observation and relational experience. The implications of this study suggest that strengthening pedagogical competence should be a strategic priority in Christian education. Ongoing professional development, reflective curriculum design, and contextualized teaching practices are essential to ensure that Scripture is not treated as distant historical content but as a living guide for contemporary life. Teachers must intentionally design lessons that invite students to connect biblical narratives with their own challenges, decisions, and aspirations. Making faith meaningful is both a pedagogical and spiritual endeavor. It requires CRE teachers to act as interpreters, facilitators, and mentors who guide students toward integrating belief and practice. When Exodus 15:25 is taught through thoughtful, contextual, and relationally grounded strategies, it becomes more than a story of ancient Israel; it becomes a transformative message that encourages students to trust, obey, and seek God's guidance amid the "bitter waters" of their own journeys.

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