



Teacher Competence and Students' Learning Interest in Christian Religious Education: A Qualitative Study in a Small-Class Context at SDN 1 Benangin 1

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role and implementation of teachers' professional competence in improving students' learning interest and learning outcomes in Christian Religious Education within a small-class learning environment. The research was conducted at SDN 1 Benangin 1, where classroom interaction between teachers and students occurs more intensively due to the limited number of learners. The purpose of this study is to analyze how teachers' professional competence contributes to fostering students' learning interest and enhancing their academic engagement in Christian Religious Education. This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with the teacher and students, and documentation analysis of learning materials and lesson plans. The participants consisted of the Christian Religious Education teacher and students involved in the learning process. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis involving data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing to identify patterns related to the implementation of teacher competence and its influence on students' learning interest. The findings reveal that teachers' professional competence plays a significant role in creating an engaging and supportive learning environment. In conclusion, the implementation of strong teacher competence contributes positively to improving students' learning interest and learning outcomes in Christian Religious Education. Effective teaching practices, combined with supportive teacher-student relationships, are essential for fostering meaningful learning experiences and promoting students' intellectual and spiritual development.

Keywords: Teacher Competence, Christian Religious Education, Reflection

INTRODUCTION

Education plays a crucial role in shaping students' intellectual, moral, and spiritual development. Within the context of Christian Religious Education (CRE), the learning

process is not only aimed at transferring knowledge about biblical teachings but also at fostering spiritual growth and moral character among students. Teachers therefore hold a strategic role in guiding students to understand Christian values and apply them in daily life. In this regard, teacher competence becomes a fundamental factor in determining the effectiveness of the educational process, particularly in religious instruction that requires both pedagogical skill and spiritual sensitivity. Scholars in educational research emphasize that teacher competence significantly influences student motivation, engagement, and academic achievement, as teachers serve as facilitators who design meaningful learning experiences that encourage active participation and deeper understanding of subject matter (Hattie, 2009). Teacher competence generally includes several dimensions, such as pedagogical competence, professional competence, social competence, and personal competence. Among these dimensions, pedagogical and professional competencies are particularly relevant in classroom instruction because they involve mastery of subject matter, effective teaching strategies, classroom management, and the ability to adapt learning methods according to students' needs. According to educational theory, competent teachers are able to create learning environments that stimulate curiosity and encourage students to actively participate in classroom activities (Darling-Hammond, 2017). In the context of Christian Religious Education, this competence becomes even more essential because teachers must translate theological concepts into accessible and meaningful lessons that resonate with students' everyday experiences.

Another important aspect of the learning process is students' interest in learning. Learning interest refers to a student's internal motivation and positive attitude toward participating in educational activities. Students who demonstrate strong learning interest tend to show greater concentration, enthusiasm, and persistence in completing academic tasks. Educational psychologists highlight that interest functions as a motivational force that directs attention and effort toward learning goals (Schiefele, 2009). When students feel interested in a subject, they are more likely to engage actively in the learning process and achieve better academic outcomes. Therefore, fostering learning interest is a key responsibility of teachers, particularly in subjects that involve moral and spiritual reflection such as Christian Religious Education. The relationship between teacher competence and students' learning interest has been widely discussed in educational literature. Competent teachers are able to use various instructional strategies, such as interactive discussions, contextual explanations, and reflective activities, which make learning more engaging and meaningful. When teachers demonstrate mastery of subject matter and communicate effectively with students, they create a classroom environment that supports curiosity and intellectual exploration. Research in education consistently shows that the quality of teaching practices has a direct influence on students' engagement and motivation in learning activities (Hattie, 2009). In Christian Religious Education, the role of the teacher becomes even more significant because students often perceive teachers not only as instructors but also as role models who exemplify Christian values in their behavior and interactions. The context of small-class learning environments also provides unique opportunities for strengthening teacher-student interaction. In smaller classes, teachers are able to provide more individualized attention to each student, monitor their progress more closely, and create a supportive learning atmosphere. Educational researchers note that smaller class sizes often contribute to

stronger relationships between teachers and students, which can enhance students' engagement and interest in learning (Finn, Pannozzo, & Achilles, 2003). Such environments enable teachers to adapt teaching methods more flexibly and encourage active participation among students. This study is conducted in the context of Christian Religious Education at SDN 1 Benangin 1, where the learning environment reflects characteristics of a small-class context. Understanding how teacher competence influences students' learning interest in this setting is important for improving the quality of religious education. By examining the interaction between teacher competence and student engagement, this research seeks to contribute to broader discussions on effective teaching practices in Christian Religious Education. The purpose of this study is to analyze the role of teacher competence in fostering students' learning interest in Christian Religious Education within a small-class learning environment. The findings of this research are expected to provide insights into how competent teaching practices can enhance students' motivation and engagement, ultimately supporting the development of both academic understanding and spiritual formation among students.

METHODS

A qualitative descriptive research design was used to explore the role and implementation of teachers' professional competence in improving students' learning interest and learning outcomes in Christian Religious Education. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to understand educational phenomena in depth through direct interaction with participants and contextual observation of teaching practices. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for examining classroom processes, teacher behavior, and students' responses to instructional strategies within a specific educational environment, enabling researchers to capture meanings and experiences that may not be fully represented through numerical data (Creswell, 2014). The research was conducted at SDN 1 Benangin 1, which represents a small-class learning context where teacher-student interaction occurs more intensively compared to larger classrooms. The participants in this study consisted of the Christian Religious Education teacher and students who were actively involved in the learning process. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a technique commonly used in qualitative research to select individuals who possess relevant knowledge or experience related to the research topic. This sampling method enabled the researcher to obtain detailed information about how teacher competence is implemented in classroom practice and how it influences students' learning interest and participation. Data were collected through several techniques to ensure the richness and credibility of the findings. Classroom observations were conducted to examine how the teacher applied professional competence in planning and delivering Christian Religious Education lessons. The observations focused on aspects such as instructional strategies, classroom management, communication patterns, and the teacher's ability to connect biblical teachings with students' daily experiences. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with the teacher and several students to gain deeper insights into their perceptions of the teaching and learning process. These interviews allowed participants to describe their experiences, opinions, and reflections regarding the role of teacher competence in the classroom. To ensure the validity and reliability of the research findings, the study applied data triangulation, which involved

comparing information obtained from observations, interviews, and documentation. Triangulation helps strengthen the credibility of qualitative research by verifying data from multiple sources and perspectives. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved several steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. During data reduction, the researcher organized and categorized the collected information according to relevant themes related to teacher competence and students' learning interest. The data were then presented in descriptive form to illustrate patterns and relationships observed during the study. Conclusions were drawn by interpreting the findings in relation to existing educational theories and research on teacher competence and student engagement. Through this methodological approach, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how teachers' professional competence contributes to enhancing students' interest and participation in Christian Religious Education within a small-class learning environment.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that teacher competence plays a crucial role in shaping students' learning interest and improving their learning outcomes in Christian Religious Education within the small-class learning context of SDN 1 Benangin 1. The analysis of classroom observations, interviews, and documentation indicates that the implementation of professional competence by the Christian Religious Education teacher significantly influences the dynamics of the learning process. In a small-class environment, the interaction between teacher and students becomes more personal and intensive, allowing the teacher to apply instructional strategies that are responsive to students' needs. The data show that students demonstrate higher engagement when the teacher actively employs varied teaching methods, communicates clearly, and creates a supportive classroom atmosphere. These results confirm the view that teacher competence is a key determinant of student engagement and learning motivation in classroom instruction (Hattie, 2009). One of the most visible aspects of teacher competence observed during the research was the teacher's ability to organize learning activities effectively. The teacher demonstrated strong professional preparation by designing lesson plans that integrated biblical teachings with students' everyday experiences. During classroom observations, the teacher presented Christian values not only through theoretical explanation but also through contextual examples that were familiar to the students' daily lives. This approach helped students understand the relevance of Christian teachings beyond the classroom context. When students are able to connect learning materials with real-life situations, their interest in the subject tends to increase because they perceive the material as meaningful and applicable to their personal experiences. Educational scholars emphasize that meaningful learning occurs when students actively construct knowledge through contextual understanding rather than passive memorization of information (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Another important finding relates to the teacher's communication skills. Effective communication is a fundamental component of teacher competence because it determines how well students understand the lesson content and how comfortable they feel participating in classroom discussions. In the observed learning sessions, the teacher

demonstrated clear and structured explanations, using language that was appropriate for the cognitive level of elementary school students. Students reported during interviews that they felt more motivated to participate when the teacher explained biblical concepts in simple and relatable ways. The teacher also encouraged students to ask questions and share their thoughts, creating a learning environment that supported open dialogue and mutual respect. Such practices are consistent with educational research highlighting that supportive teacher-student relationships contribute significantly to student motivation and engagement in learning (Hattie, 2009). The small-class setting further strengthened the effectiveness of the teacher's professional competence. With fewer students in the classroom, the teacher was able to provide individualized attention and monitor students' understanding more closely. During observation sessions, the teacher frequently moved around the classroom, assisting students who encountered difficulties and offering feedback on their responses. This personalized approach enabled students to feel recognized and supported in their learning process. Research on class size suggests that smaller classes often allow teachers to implement more interactive teaching strategies and provide more personalized instruction, which can positively influence students' learning outcomes (Finn, Pannozzo, & Achilles, 2003). In the context of Christian Religious Education, such interaction also allows teachers to guide students' moral reflection more effectively. The results also indicate that teacher competence influences students' emotional engagement with the subject. Emotional engagement refers to students' feelings of interest, enjoyment, and value associated with learning activities. Interviews with students revealed that they felt enthusiastic during Christian Religious Education classes because the teacher created a friendly and encouraging atmosphere. The teacher often used storytelling methods to explain biblical narratives, which made the lessons more engaging and easier to understand. Storytelling is widely recognized as an effective pedagogical method in religious education because it helps students visualize moral lessons and internalize spiritual values. By presenting biblical stories in an interactive manner, the teacher was able to capture students' attention and stimulate their curiosity about the meaning of the stories.

The teacher demonstrated competence in integrating moral reflection into classroom activities. Instead of focusing solely on theoretical explanations, the teacher encouraged students to reflect on how Christian values could be applied in their daily interactions with family members, classmates, and the broader community. For example, during discussions about biblical teachings on love and compassion, the teacher invited students to share personal experiences related to helping others or resolving conflicts. This reflective approach helped students recognize the practical implications of Christian teachings and motivated them to apply these values in real-life situations. Scholars in Christian education argue that effective religious instruction should not only transmit doctrinal knowledge but also foster moral and spiritual transformation among students (Pazmiño, 2008). The findings also highlight the role of teacher competence in promoting active participation among students. In the observed classroom sessions, the teacher frequently used interactive learning methods such as group discussions, question-and-answer sessions, and collaborative activities. These strategies encouraged students to express their ideas and engage more deeply with the learning material. Students reported that they enjoyed participating in discussions because they felt their opinions were valued

by the teacher and their classmates. Active participation is an important indicator of learning interest because it reflects students' willingness to invest cognitive effort in understanding the subject matter. Educational research suggests that student-centered teaching approaches, which emphasize interaction and collaboration, are more effective in fostering engagement and long-term learning outcomes than traditional lecture-based methods (Darling-Hammond, 2017). Another significant observation relates to the teacher's role as a moral and spiritual role model. In Christian Religious Education, teacher competence is not limited to pedagogical skills but also includes the demonstration of Christian character in daily behavior. Students often observe and imitate the attitudes and actions of their teachers, particularly in subjects related to moral and spiritual values. During interviews, several students mentioned that they respected their teacher because the teacher demonstrated patience, kindness, and fairness in dealing with students. These qualities contributed to the development of trust between the teacher and students, which in turn strengthened students' willingness to participate in the learning process. The importance of teacher authenticity in education has been widely discussed in educational literature, which emphasizes that students respond more positively to teachers who demonstrate integrity and genuine care for their students' development (Palmer, 1998). The analysis of documentation further supports these findings. Lesson plans and instructional materials prepared by the teacher show careful planning and alignment with curriculum objectives. The teacher incorporated various teaching resources, including biblical texts, visual aids, and interactive activities, to facilitate students' understanding of Christian teachings. The documentation also indicates that the teacher regularly evaluated students' progress through assignments and reflective activities, which allowed the teacher to assess both cognitive understanding and moral development. Effective assessment practices are an important component of teacher competence because they provide feedback that can guide future learning activities and help students recognize their own progress.

One challenge relates to the limited availability of instructional resources that specifically support religious education in small rural schools. Although the teacher demonstrated creativity in developing teaching materials, additional resources could further enhance the variety and quality of learning activities. Another challenge involves maintaining students' concentration during longer lessons, particularly for younger students who may have shorter attention spans. To address this issue, teachers may need to incorporate more varied instructional methods and interactive activities that maintain students' engagement throughout the learning session. The results of this study demonstrate that teacher competence plays a decisive role in fostering students' learning interest and improving their learning outcomes in Christian Religious Education. The combination of effective instructional strategies, supportive teacher-student relationships, contextual teaching approaches, and moral role modeling creates a learning environment that encourages active participation and meaningful understanding of Christian teachings. In the small-class context of SDN 1 Benangin 1, these factors work together to support a holistic educational experience that integrates intellectual learning with moral and spiritual development. These findings reinforce the importance of strengthening teacher competence as a key strategy for improving the quality of religious education. Professional development programs for Christian Religious Education teachers should

therefore focus not only on theological knowledge but also on pedagogical skills, communication strategies, and reflective teaching practices. By developing these competencies, teachers can create learning environments that inspire students to engage more deeply with Christian teachings and apply them in their daily lives. In this way, teacher competence becomes a central element in achieving the broader goals of Christian education, which include the formation of knowledge, character, and spiritual maturity among students.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that teachers' professional competence plays a significant role in fostering students' learning interest and improving learning outcomes in Christian Religious Education within the small-class learning environment of SDN 1 Benangin 1. The findings indicate that competent teachers are able to create meaningful and engaging learning experiences through effective instructional planning, clear communication, interactive teaching strategies, and supportive classroom management. These competencies enable teachers to present Christian teachings in ways that are understandable, relevant, and inspiring for students, thereby increasing their motivation to participate actively in the learning process. The results of the study show that the teacher's ability to integrate biblical teachings with students' daily experiences contributes significantly to students' interest in learning Christian Religious Education. By using contextual explanations, storytelling methods, and reflective discussions, the teacher helps students connect theoretical religious concepts with real-life situations. This approach not only enhances students' cognitive understanding of Christian values but also encourages them to internalize these values in their personal lives. In addition, the small-class context provides opportunities for more intensive interaction between teachers and students, allowing the teacher to provide individualized guidance and feedback that supports students' learning development. Another important finding of this study is the influence of the teacher's personal example in shaping students' attitudes toward learning. In Christian Religious Education, teachers function not only as knowledge transmitters but also as moral and spiritual role models. The demonstration of patience, fairness, and genuine care by the teacher strengthens students' trust and creates a positive learning atmosphere. As a result, students feel more comfortable expressing their ideas, asking questions, and participating in classroom discussions. Such conditions contribute to the development of a learning environment that supports both academic engagement and moral formation. The implementation of strong teacher competence is essential for enhancing the quality of Christian Religious Education. When teachers combine professional knowledge, pedagogical skills, and authentic character in their teaching practices, they are able to foster students' learning interest and support their intellectual and spiritual growth. Therefore, efforts to improve educational quality should include continuous professional development programs that strengthen teachers' competencies in both pedagogical practice and Christian character formation. Future research is recommended to explore similar themes in broader educational contexts in order to deepen understanding of the relationship between teacher competence and student engagement in religious education.

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