



## The Role of Christian Religious Education Teachers in Shaping Students' Character in the Digital Era: A Qualitative Study at SMP Negeri 1 Siatas Barita

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### ABSTRACT

*Character formation is a fundamental objective of Christian Religious Education (CRE), especially in the context of rapid technological development in the digital era. The influence of digital media and online environments has significantly shaped students' attitudes, behaviors, and patterns of interaction, creating both opportunities and challenges for moral and spiritual development. In this situation, Christian Religious Education teachers play a strategic role in guiding students to develop character values rooted in Christian teachings. This study aims to examine the role of CRE teachers in shaping students' character in the digital era at SMP Negeri 1 Siatas Barita. The research employed a qualitative descriptive approach to obtain an in-depth understanding of how teachers contribute to students' moral and spiritual formation within the school environment. Data were collected through literature study, classroom observation, and documentation related to the implementation of Christian Religious Education. The findings indicate that CRE teachers play several important roles in character formation, including serving as role models, motivators, counselors, and evaluators of students' moral development. Through these roles, teachers integrate biblical values such as honesty, responsibility, humility, and love into the learning process and daily interactions with students. The integration of biblical teachings with contextual approaches helps students apply Christian values in their daily lives, including their interactions in digital environments. Therefore, the presence of committed CRE teachers is essential for fostering students' moral awareness, spiritual growth, and responsible behavior in the digital age.*

**Keywords:** *Character, Christian Religious Education, Digital Era*

### INTRODUCTION

The responsibility of education has expanded beyond the transmission of knowledge to include the formation of ethical values and personal integrity. The rapid development of

digital technology has significantly influenced students' lifestyles, communication patterns, and moral decision-making processes. While digital technology offers many benefits for learning, it also presents challenges such as cyberbullying, exposure to inappropriate content, academic dishonesty, and a growing tendency toward individualism. These realities make character education increasingly essential within the school environment. Character education has long been recognized as a central component of holistic learning. According to Thomas Lickona, character education involves the deliberate effort to cultivate virtues such as honesty, responsibility, respect, and compassion through consistent educational practices and moral guidance. Schools therefore function not only as institutions for academic learning but also as communities where moral values are nurtured and practiced. In this context, teachers become key agents in the development of students' character because their attitudes, behavior, and pedagogical approaches significantly influence students' personal development. Character formation is closely related to biblical values and spiritual maturity. Christian Religious Education (CRE) aims to guide students toward a life that reflects Christian virtues rooted in the teachings of Scripture and the example of Christ. As noted by Robert W. Pazmiño, Christian education is not merely about transferring doctrinal knowledge but about nurturing a transformative relationship with God that shapes attitudes, values, and behaviors. Consequently, CRE teachers hold a unique and strategic role in guiding students toward moral and spiritual growth while helping them apply biblical principles in everyday life.

The role of CRE teachers extends beyond the delivery of curriculum content. They function as spiritual mentors, moral guides, and role models who demonstrate Christian character through their daily interactions with students. Educational scholars emphasize that students often learn more effectively through example than through verbal instruction. This means that the authenticity of a teacher's character becomes a powerful influence in shaping students' attitudes and behavior. According to Thomas Groome, effective religious education requires an integration between faith, life experience, and educational practice so that students can connect religious teachings with real-life situations. The challenges of the digital era further highlight the importance of the teacher's role in character formation. The widespread use of smartphones, social media platforms, and digital communication has transformed the way young people interact and construct their identities. Although technology can enrich learning opportunities, it can also weaken moral boundaries when not accompanied by proper guidance. Students may encounter conflicting values from online environments that differ from the moral teachings promoted by schools and families. Therefore, educators must actively guide students in developing critical thinking, ethical awareness, and responsible digital behavior. The integration of biblical values into teaching practices becomes an essential strategy for addressing these challenges. Biblical principles such as love, humility, honesty, and self-discipline provide a moral framework that can help students navigate the complexities of modern life. CRE teachers are expected to translate these values into practical learning experiences that encourage students to reflect on their behavior and develop Christ-like character. Through teaching, mentoring, and pastoral care, teachers can help students internalize Christian values and apply them in both offline and digital environments.

SMP Negeri 1 Siatas Barita provides an important context for examining how CRE teachers contribute to character formation in the digital era. As a secondary school where students are actively exposed to digital technology and social media, the role of the teacher becomes increasingly significant in guiding students toward responsible and ethical behavior. Understanding how CRE teachers implement character-building strategies within this context can provide valuable insights for improving Christian education practices in similar educational settings. This study aims to explore the role of Christian Religious Education teachers in shaping students' character in the digital era at SMP Negeri 1 Siatas Barita. Specifically, the research seeks to examine how teachers function as role models, motivators, mentors, and evaluators in fostering Christian character among students. By analyzing these roles, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how Christian education can respond effectively to the moral challenges presented by contemporary digital culture while remaining faithful to its theological foundations.

## **METHODS**

A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to understand social phenomena in depth and to interpret participants' experiences, perceptions, and interactions within their natural context. According to John W. Creswell, qualitative research is particularly suitable for examining educational practices and human behavior because it emphasizes meaning, context, and participants' perspectives. Through this approach, the study aimed to gain a comprehensive understanding of how CRE teachers implement character formation strategies in everyday teaching and interactions with students. The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 1 Siatas Barita, a secondary school where Christian Religious Education is part of the formal curriculum. The participants consisted primarily of the Christian Religious Education teacher and several students who were actively involved in the learning process. The selection of participants was carried out purposively, meaning that individuals were chosen based on their relevance to the research objectives and their direct involvement in the teaching and learning process of Christian Religious Education. This purposive sampling technique enabled the researcher to obtain rich and meaningful data related to the teacher's role in character formation. Data were collected through three primary techniques: literature study, observation, and documentation. The literature study involved examining books, academic journals, and other scholarly sources related to character education, Christian Religious Education, and teacher roles in moral development. This step provided a theoretical framework that guided the analysis of the empirical data. Observation was conducted in the school environment to examine the interaction between the CRE teacher and students during the learning process. Through participatory observation, the researcher was able to observe how the teacher communicated biblical values, demonstrated character through behavior, and responded to students' attitudes in real classroom situations. Documentation was also used to support the data collection process by reviewing relevant school materials, lesson plans, and educational records related to Christian Religious Education activities. The data analysis process followed qualitative analytical procedures consisting of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The concept of qualitative data analysis proposed by Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman guided this process. The collected data were reduced by selecting and

organizing information relevant to the research focus on the role of CRE teachers in character formation. The data were presented in a structured narrative form in order to identify patterns, themes, and relationships among the observed phenomena. Finally, conclusions were drawn by interpreting the findings in relation to the theoretical framework and the research objectives. To ensure the credibility of the research findings, the study applied basic qualitative validation strategies such as data triangulation and careful interpretation of observational results. Triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from literature sources, observation results, and documentation in order to achieve consistency and reliability of the findings. Through these procedures, the research sought to provide a trustworthy and meaningful analysis of how Christian Religious Education teachers contribute to shaping students' character within the challenges of the digital era at SMP Negeri 1 Siatas Barita.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers play a crucial and multidimensional role in shaping students' character in the digital era at SMP Negeri 1 Siatas Barita. The analysis of observational data, literature insights, and documentation demonstrates that character formation within Christian education is not limited to cognitive learning but extends to behavioral transformation, moral guidance, and spiritual mentoring. In the context of rapid technological development and digital communication, the role of teachers becomes increasingly strategic because students are constantly exposed to a wide range of information, values, and behavioral influences that originate from online environments. Therefore, the presence of a CRE teacher who consistently models Christian values becomes a significant factor in guiding students toward responsible and ethical behavior. One of the most prominent findings of this research is the role of the CRE teacher as a model of character. Students tend to observe and imitate the attitudes and behaviors of their teachers, often more than they follow verbal instructions alone. The daily interactions between teachers and students provide opportunities for the demonstration of Christian virtues such as honesty, humility, patience, respect, and compassion. When teachers consistently demonstrate these values in classroom management, communication, and decision-making, students are more likely to internalize them as part of their own character development. This phenomenon aligns with the perspective of Thomas Lickona, who emphasizes that character education becomes effective when moral values are consistently modeled by adults within educational communities. In the case of SMP Negeri 1 Siatas Barita, the CRE teacher's behavior in treating students with fairness, patience, and empathy has created a positive moral atmosphere that encourages students to practice similar attitudes in their relationships with peers.

Another significant role identified in this research is the teacher's function as a motivator for moral and spiritual growth. In the digital era, students frequently encounter conflicting moral messages from social media platforms, online communities, and digital entertainment. Without proper guidance, these influences may shape attitudes that contradict Christian values. The CRE teacher therefore serves as a motivator who encourages students to reflect critically on their choices and to apply biblical principles in everyday life. Through classroom discussions, reflective questions, and contextual

examples, the teacher helps students connect the teachings of the Bible with contemporary issues they encounter in the digital world. This motivational role is essential in helping students develop moral awareness and ethical reasoning skills. The research findings also highlight the role of the CRE teacher as a counselor and mentor for students facing personal, social, or emotional challenges. Adolescence is a stage characterized by identity exploration, emotional fluctuation, and increased social pressures. These challenges are often intensified by digital environments where students may experience cyberbullying, peer comparison, or social anxiety related to online interactions. In this situation, the CRE teacher becomes a trusted figure who provides guidance, encouragement, and moral support. Students often feel more comfortable discussing personal struggles with teachers who demonstrate empathy and spiritual concern for their well-being. The counseling function of the CRE teacher therefore contributes not only to character formation but also to students' emotional resilience and psychological well-being. In addition to serving as a mentor and counselor, the CRE teacher also acts as a communicator of biblical values in a way that is relevant to the realities of modern student life. Effective communication is essential because biblical teachings must be translated into practical guidance that students can apply in real-life situations. The teacher at SMP Negeri 1 Siatas Barita demonstrates this by connecting biblical stories and teachings with contemporary ethical issues such as honesty in academic work, respectful online communication, and responsible use of digital technology. By contextualizing biblical principles in this way, students are able to see that Christian teachings are not abstract moral ideals but practical guidelines for navigating everyday decisions.

Another key finding of the study is the role of the CRE teacher as an evaluator of character development. Traditional educational evaluation often focuses on cognitive achievement, such as examination scores and academic performance. However, character formation requires a broader evaluation that considers students' attitudes, behaviors, and moral growth. The CRE teacher therefore observes students' interactions, responses to ethical dilemmas, and participation in classroom discussions related to moral issues. This evaluation process helps the teacher identify areas where students require further guidance and reinforcement of positive values. Although character assessment is inherently more complex than academic evaluation, it remains an important aspect of holistic education. The digital era presents unique challenges for character formation, particularly because students spend significant portions of their time interacting with digital devices and online platforms. Social media, online games, and digital communication tools have become integral parts of students' daily routines. While these technologies provide opportunities for creativity, learning, and social connection, they also expose students to potential risks such as misinformation, inappropriate content, and unhealthy social comparisons. Within this context, CRE teachers must help students develop digital responsibility and ethical awareness. The teacher at SMP Negeri 1 Siatas Barita addresses these challenges by encouraging students to evaluate digital content critically and to consider whether their online behavior reflects Christian values such as respect, honesty, and love for others. The findings of this research also demonstrate that character formation is most effective when it occurs within a supportive educational environment that promotes consistency between teaching and practice. The classroom atmosphere created by the CRE teacher plays an important role in shaping students'

moral development. A learning environment characterized by mutual respect, open communication, and spiritual reflection allows students to express their thoughts and questions about moral issues without fear of judgment. This environment encourages students to engage actively in discussions about ethical dilemmas and to reflect on the implications of their choices.

The research highlights the importance of integrating biblical teachings into everyday classroom activities rather than presenting them only as theoretical concepts. When students see how biblical principles relate to their experiences in school, family, and digital environments, they are more likely to internalize these values as part of their personal identity. According to Robert W. Pazmiño, Christian education becomes transformative when faith is integrated with real-life experiences and social contexts. The CRE teacher at SMP Negeri 1 Siatas Barita exemplifies this approach by encouraging students to apply biblical teachings in practical ways, such as demonstrating kindness toward classmates, practicing honesty in academic work, and showing responsibility in their use of technology. Another significant dimension of the teacher's role is spiritual leadership. In Christian education, teachers are not only instructors but also spiritual leaders who guide students in their relationship with God. This leadership is expressed through prayer, reflection on Scripture, and the encouragement of spiritual disciplines that help students grow in faith. Spiritual leadership provides a foundation for character formation because Christian morality is rooted in a personal relationship with God and a commitment to living according to His teachings. When students observe teachers who demonstrate genuine faith and integrity, they are more likely to view Christian values as authentic and meaningful rather than merely institutional requirements. The research also identifies several challenges faced in the digital era. One challenge is the influence of digital culture that often promotes instant gratification, individualism, and superficial communication. These cultural tendencies can make it difficult for students to develop virtues such as patience, humility, and self-discipline. Another challenge is the limited time available for character-focused activities within formal classroom schedules. Teachers must balance curriculum requirements with the need to address moral and spiritual issues that arise in students' lives. CRE teachers must adopt creative and contextual teaching strategies. Integrating discussions about digital ethics, encouraging collaborative learning activities, and fostering reflective dialogue can help students connect Christian values with contemporary realities. Additionally, cooperation between teachers, parents, and school administrators is essential in supporting character education. When the values promoted in the classroom are reinforced by families and the wider school community, students receive consistent moral guidance that strengthens their character development. The findings of this study therefore confirm that the role of Christian Religious Education teachers in shaping students' character extends far beyond academic instruction. Teachers function simultaneously as role models, motivators, counselors, communicators of biblical values, and evaluators of character growth. Through these roles, they create an educational environment where students can develop moral awareness, spiritual maturity, and responsible behavior in both physical and digital contexts. Character formation in the digital era requires intentional effort and consistent commitment from educators. While technology continues to transform the educational landscape, the fundamental importance of human relationships, moral guidance, and spiritual mentorship remains unchanged. The presence of dedicated CRE teachers who

embody Christian values provides students with a stable moral foundation that helps them navigate the complexities of modern life. In the context of SMP Negeri 1 Siatas Barita, the CRE teacher's dedication to modeling Christian character, guiding students spiritually, and addressing contemporary moral challenges demonstrates the enduring relevance of Christian education in shaping the next generation of responsible and compassionate individuals.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers in shaping students' character in the digital era at SMP Negeri 1 Siatas Barita. The findings indicate that the presence and influence of CRE teachers are highly significant in guiding students toward moral and spiritual maturity amid the complex challenges of contemporary digital culture. Character formation within Christian education is not limited to the transfer of knowledge but involves the transformation of attitudes, behaviors, and values that reflect Christian principles in daily life. The results of the study show that CRE teachers perform several essential roles in the character development process. Teachers function as role models whose attitudes, integrity, and consistency become examples that students observe and imitate. Teachers act as motivators who encourage students to apply biblical values such as honesty, responsibility, humility, and love in their everyday decisions. Teachers serve as counselors and mentors who provide guidance and emotional support when students face personal, social, or moral challenges. Teachers also play a role as evaluators of character development by observing students' behavioral changes and encouraging the growth of positive attitudes both inside and outside the classroom. In the context of the digital era, these roles become even more important because students are continuously exposed to diverse influences through digital technology and social media. The rapid flow of information and the presence of conflicting values in online environments can shape students' attitudes and behaviors in ways that may not always align with Christian teachings. Therefore, CRE teachers are required to integrate biblical values with contextual teaching strategies that help students develop ethical awareness, critical thinking, and responsible digital behavior. The findings also highlight that effective character formation requires an educational environment that emphasizes consistency between teaching and practice. When teachers demonstrate Christian values through their daily interactions with students, they create a positive learning atmosphere that encourages respect, empathy, and cooperation. This environment enables students to experience moral values not only as theoretical teachings but also as lived realities within the school community. Christian Religious Education teachers hold a strategic position in shaping students' character in the digital era. Through their roles as educators, mentors, and spiritual guides, they contribute significantly to the development of students who are morally responsible, spiritually grounded, and socially aware. The success of character education therefore depends not only on curriculum content but also on the commitment of teachers to embody the values they teach. Strengthening collaboration between teachers, schools, and families will further enhance the effectiveness of character formation and ensure that students are equipped to navigate the challenges of the digital world with integrity and faith.

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