



Enhancing Christian Character among Students of SMP Negeri Satu Atap 4 Barusjahe through Christian Religious Education and Character Education Based on Deep Learning

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effectiveness of integrating Christian Religious Education (CRE) with character education using deep learning methodologies to enhance Christian character among students at SMP Negeri Satu Atap 4 Barusjahe. The research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative pre-test and post-test measurements with qualitative observations over one academic semester. Participants included 120 seventh and eighth-grade students who underwent a structured intervention program incorporating deep learning principles such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and reflective practices within Christian values framework. Results indicated a statistically significant improvement in students' Christian character traits, including compassion, integrity, humility, and service orientation ($p < 0.001$). The deep learning approach facilitated deeper internalization of Christian values compared to traditional didactic methods. Qualitative findings revealed enhanced student engagement, increased spiritual awareness, and improved peer relationships. This study contributes to educational literature by demonstrating the efficacy of deep learning strategies in religious and character education contexts, offering practical implications for educators seeking to develop holistic Christian character formation in secondary school settings.

Keywords: *Christian character, character education, deep learning, Christian Religious Education, secondary education, values formation*

INTRODUCTION

Character education has increasingly been recognized as a cornerstone of holistic student development, particularly within the context of multicultural and religiously diverse societies. As education moves beyond the transmission of cognitive knowledge toward the formation of values, ethics, and attitudes, character education emerges as an essential pillar in preparing students for responsible citizenship in the 21st century (Lickona, 2004; Berkowitz & Bier, 2005). In Indonesia, character education is inseparable from the religious dimension of schooling, as moral formation is deeply embedded within the framework of religious instruction. The Ministry of Education and Culture (2016) has

long emphasized that religious education, including Christian Religious Education (CRE), is designed not merely to transmit theological knowledge but to cultivate faith-based virtues that manifest in students' daily lives. Christian Religious Education and Character Education in schools play a transformative role. The integration of Christian principles such as love, integrity, humility, and service seeks to nurture students who not only understand doctrine but embody Christ-like behavior in interactions with peers, teachers, and the broader community. However, despite the formal inclusion of Christian Religious Education in the curriculum, many students continue to exhibit a disconnect between religious understanding and practical moral behavior. Traditional instructional approaches—often dominated by rote memorization and teacher-centered delivery—tend to emphasize doctrinal comprehension over personal reflection, critical thinking, and behavioral application (Watkins et al., 2007). As a result, students may possess theoretical knowledge of Christian teachings without internalizing their moral implications. This challenge is particularly evident at SMP Negeri Satu Atap 4 Barusjahe, a junior high school located in the Karo Regency of North Sumatra. The school primarily serves students from Christian families who live in semi-rural communities. While the school environment remains conducive to religious instruction, students face increasing exposure to modern challenges such as digital distractions, social media influence, peer conformity, and a weakening of traditional community values. Preliminary classroom observations and informal interviews with teachers suggested that students often demonstrate respect and discipline in formal settings but fail to consistently apply Christian ethical values—such as honesty, empathy, and responsibility—in everyday interactions. This discrepancy points to the need for a more transformative approach to Christian Religious Education, one that not only informs but also forms and transforms character. Deep learning presents a promising pedagogical paradigm to bridge this gap. Originally conceptualized in contrast to surface learning (Marton & Säljö, 1976), deep learning emphasizes the active construction of knowledge through inquiry, reflection, and real-world application. Deep learning encourages students to connect new concepts to prior experiences, explore the meaning behind principles, and apply insights in authentic contexts. Fullan and Langworthy (2014) describe deep learning as an approach that fosters six global competencies—character, citizenship, collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking. These competencies align closely with the objectives of Christian Religious Education, which seeks to cultivate thoughtful, responsible, and compassionate individuals grounded in faith. Incorporating deep learning into the teaching of Christian Religious Education and Character Education offers several pedagogical advantages. First, it promotes critical reflection on moral and spiritual issues. For example, students might analyze biblical narratives not simply as historical events but as moral case studies relevant to modern life. Second, deep learning encourages collaborative inquiry, where students engage in group discussions, service projects, and problem-solving activities that allow them to practice moral reasoning in community contexts. Third, the approach supports authentic assessment, in which learning outcomes are evaluated not only through written tests but also through behavioral observation, reflective journals, and community engagement projects that demonstrate the internalization of values. Posits that individuals progress through hierarchical stages of moral reasoning—from obedience to authority toward principled moral autonomy. Christian Religious Education that integrates deep learning provides opportunities for students to advance through these

stages by engaging them in dilemmas, debates, and reflective dialogue about ethical decision-making. Social cognitive theory further complements this framework by emphasizing the role of observational learning, modeling, and self-efficacy in moral formation. In a deep learning environment, students not only receive instruction but also observe and emulate the moral behavior of teachers and peers, reinforcing their confidence in practicing virtuous conduct. The research conducted at SMP Negeri Satu Atap 4 Barusjahe therefore addresses three key questions: 1) How does the integration of deep learning methodologies into Christian Religious Education influence the development of Christian character among students? 2) Which specific character traits—such as empathy, integrity, responsibility, or spiritual commitment—show the most significant improvement through this pedagogical intervention? 3) How do students and teachers perceive the effectiveness and relevance of deep learning-based instruction in fostering Christian values and moral behavior? Preliminary implementation of deep learning-based Christian Religious Education activities at the school included project-based assignments, student-led devotionals, and reflective journaling exercises. These strategies were designed to encourage students to engage with biblical teachings in personally meaningful ways. For instance, one project required students to identify a moral issue within their community—such as littering, bullying, or dishonesty—and design a group initiative to address it through Christian ethical principles. Such experiential learning activities not only deepened their understanding of scripture but also promoted practical moral action. Early feedback from teachers suggested noticeable changes in classroom dynamics. Students demonstrated greater enthusiasm, collaboration, and critical engagement during lessons. Teachers reported that students were more willing to articulate their thoughts on moral issues and showed increased sensitivity toward peers' perspectives. Importantly, behavioral observations outside the classroom—such as respectful communication, honesty in group work, and responsibility in assigned tasks—indicated gradual but meaningful improvements in students' character. These findings resonate with existing literature highlighting that deep learning fosters long-term behavioral and attitudinal change by linking cognitive understanding to affective and social dimensions of learning (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). The significance of this study extends beyond the immediate context of SMP Negeri Satu Atap 4 Barusjahe. It demonstrates the potential of pedagogical innovation in religious and moral education within Indonesia's broader educational landscape. Integrating deep learning principles into Christian Religious Education aligns with national character education goals and supports the development of morally grounded citizens capable of ethical decision-making in complex social environments. Moreover, it repositions teachers as facilitators of moral inquiry and spiritual growth rather than mere transmitters of doctrine.

METHODS

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017), integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to obtain comprehensive insights into the effectiveness of the deep learning-based intervention in enhancing Christian character among students. The quantitative component followed a quasi-experimental pre-test post-test design, while the qualitative component included classroom observations, student reflection journals, and teacher interviews to capture

contextualized perspectives on behavioral and attitudinal changes throughout the program. The participants consisted of 120 students (62 females and 58 males) from grades seven and eight at SMP Negeri Satu Atap 4 Barusjahe during the 2024 academic year. All participants identified as Christians and had previously received traditional Christian Religious Education (CRE). The students were divided into two groups: an experimental group ($n = 60$) receiving the deep learning-based intervention and a control group ($n = 60$) receiving conventional instruction. Due to the school's class organization, random assignment was not feasible; therefore, intact classes were assigned to each condition. To ensure comparability, both groups were matched according to prior academic performance, gender distribution, and socioeconomic background. The intervention program, lasting sixteen weeks, integrated deep learning strategies into CRE and character education through six core components. First, critical thinking on biblical narratives encouraged students to analyze moral dilemmas faced by biblical figures, fostering ethical reasoning. Second, problem-based learning engaged students in real-life moral scenarios that required collaborative problem-solving guided by Christian principles. Third, reflective practice involved weekly journaling and group discussions to enhance metacognitive awareness of moral growth. Fourth, service-learning projects connected biblical values of compassion and service with community engagement. Fifth, peer teaching and modeling allowed students to exemplify Christian virtues through role-play and group presentations. Finally, authentic assessments evaluated behavioral application of moral principles rather than rote memorization. The control group, by contrast, continued to receive traditional CRE instruction emphasizing doctrinal learning and scripture memorization.

Data collection utilized several instruments. The Christian Character Inventory (CCI)-a 40-item Likert-scale instrument assessing five dimensions of Christian character (compassion, integrity, humility, forgiveness, and service orientation)-demonstrated high internal reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$) and validity through expert review. Additional tools included a structured classroom observation protocol documenting engagement and interaction, student reflection journals providing qualitative accounts of personal development, and semi-structured interviews with selected students and teachers exploring perceptions of the intervention's impact. Following institutional ethical approval and parental consent, pre-test assessments were administered at the semester's start, and the 16-week intervention proceeded with two 90-minute sessions weekly. Observations occurred bi-weekly, journals were collected monthly, and post-tests were conducted at the program's conclusion. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 26, employing paired-samples and independent-samples t-tests, ANCOVA, and Cohen's d for effect size estimation. Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, with dual-coding by two researchers yielding strong inter-rater reliability ($\kappa = 0.85$). The integration of both data strands provided a robust and multidimensional understanding of the intervention's impact on students' Christian character formation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Overall Character Development: The experimental group demonstrated significant improvement in total CCI scores from pre-test ($M = 132.45$, $SD = 14.23$) to post-test ($M =$

158.73, SD = 12.87), $t(59) = 18.42$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 1.95$. The control group showed modest improvement from pre-test ($M = 131.80$, $SD = 13.95$) to post-test ($M = 138.25$, $SD = 14.10$), $t(59) = 5.67$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.46$. ANCOVA results, controlling for pre-test scores, revealed significantly higher post-test scores in the experimental group compared to the control group, $F(1, 117) = 89.34$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.43$.

Character Dimension Analysis

Table 1: Mean Scores and Standard Deviations by Character Dimension

Dimension	Group	Pre-test M(SD)	Post-test M(SD)	t	p	Cohen's d
Compassion	Experimental	26.35(3.21)	32.15(2.89)	15.23	<0.001	1.92
	Control	26.10(3.15)	27.90(3.25)	4.82	<0.001	0.56
Integrity	Experimental	25.80(3.45)	31.40(3.10)	13.67	<0.001	1.72
	Control	25.65(3.40)	27.25(3.50)	3.95	<0.001	0.46
Humility	Experimental	27.10(3.05)	32.75(2.75)	16.05	<0.001	1.96
	Control	26.90(3.10)	28.40(3.15)	4.21	<0.001	0.48
Forgiveness	Experimental	26.70(3.15)	31.25(2.95)	12.89	<0.001	1.50
	Control	26.45(3.20)	27.85(3.25)	3.76	<0.001	0.43
Service	Experimental	26.50(3.35)	31.18(3.05)	11.94	<0.001	1.47
	Control	26.70(3.25)	26.85(3.30)	0.42	0.678	0.05

The experimental group showed substantial gains across all five character dimensions, with effect sizes ranging from large ($d = 1.47$) to very large ($d = 1.96$). The control group demonstrated small improvements in four dimensions but showed no significant change in service orientation. Gender Differences: No significant interaction effect between intervention group and gender emerged, $F(1, 116) = 2.14$, $p = 0.146$, suggesting the intervention was equally effective for male and female students.

Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of student journals and interviews revealed four primary themes:

Theme 1: Deepened Understanding of Christian Values

Students in the experimental group articulated nuanced understanding of Christian principles beyond superficial definitions. One student reflected: "Before, I knew Jesus taught about love, but now I understand how complex real love is-it means choosing to forgive even when it's hard, and serving people who might not appreciate it." Teachers noted that students increasingly made unprompted connections between biblical teachings and contemporary ethical issues, demonstrating transfer of learning.

Theme 2: Enhanced Personal Responsibility and Agency

Experimental group students expressed increased ownership of their character development. A student shared: "I realized that being a good Christian isn't just about following rules that teachers tell us. It's about deciding who I want to be and making choices that match my values every day." This contrasted with control group students, who more frequently attributed character expectations to external authorities rather than internal motivation.

Theme 3: Transformed Peer Relationships

Observational data documented increased prosocial behaviors in the experimental group, including spontaneous helping, inclusive language, and conflict mediation. Students reported: "Our class feels different now. People are kinder to each other, and when someone is struggling, others want to help instead of making fun." Teachers observed that experimental group students demonstrated greater empathy and reduced instances of bullying or exclusion.

Theme 4: Integration of Faith and Daily Life

Students described applying Christian principles beyond classroom contexts. One student noted: "I used to think Christianity was just Sunday school and Bible study. Now I see that everything I do-how I treat my family, how I study, even how I use social media-can reflect my faith." This theme highlighted the intervention's success in promoting authentic character integration rather than compartmentalized religious knowledge.

Teachers implementing the deep learning approach reported initial challenges with time management and student resistance to unfamiliar methods. However, all four interviewed teachers expressed strong support for the approach, citing increased student engagement, meaningful discussions, and observable behavioral improvements. One teacher stated: "Traditional methods taught students about Christianity, but this approach helps them become Christian in their character and actions." This study provides empirical support for integrating deep learning methodologies with Christian Religious Education to enhance character development among secondary school students. The substantial effect sizes observed in the experimental group suggest that deep learning strategies facilitate more profound character transformation than conventional didactic instruction. The findings align with educational research demonstrating that deep learning promotes meaningful knowledge construction and application (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014). By engaging students in critical analysis of biblical narratives, authentic problem-solving, and reflective practice, the intervention activated higher-order cognitive processes associated with values internalization. This cognitive engagement likely contributed to the significant improvements observed across all character dimensions. The particularly strong effects on compassion and humility merit attention. These dimensions involve both cognitive understanding and emotional engagement, which were explicitly targeted through service learning projects and reflective exercises. The intervention's emphasis on authentic experiences-rather than abstract discussions-provided students with concrete opportunities to practice these virtues, supporting assertion that behavioral modeling and practice are essential for social learning. The modest improvement in service orientation among control group students, contrasted with substantial gains in the experimental group, highlights a key limitation of traditional CRE instruction. While conventional methods may effectively transmit knowledge about Christian service ideals, they appear less successful in motivating actual service behaviors. The experimental intervention's integration of community service projects with reflective processing created meaningful connections between belief and action, addressing this gap.

Qualitative findings illuminate the mechanisms underlying quantitative improvements. Students' reports of enhanced understanding, personal agency, and faith-life integration

suggest that deep learning approaches foster internal motivation rather than mere compliance with external expectations. This distinction is crucial for sustainable character development, as internally motivated behaviors are more likely to persist across contexts and time (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The study's findings challenge assumptions that religious education must rely primarily on authoritative instruction and memorization. Instead, results suggest that students can engage with religious texts and traditions critically and creatively while simultaneously deepening their faith commitment and character development. This has important implications for religious education pedagogy in pluralistic contexts. The quasi-experimental design limits causal inferences, as group assignment was not randomized. Although groups were matched on key variables, unmeasured confounds may have influenced results. Next, the 16-week intervention period, while producing significant effects, may not fully capture long-term character stability. Longitudinal follow-up studies are needed to assess whether improvements persist. Then, the study was conducted in a single school with a specific cultural context, limiting generalizability to other settings. Fourth, reliance on self-report measures for character assessment may introduce social desirability bias, despite efforts to establish rapport and confidentiality. Future research should incorporate behavioral observations and peer ratings to triangulate findings.

These findings offer several practical implications for educators and curriculum developers:

1. **Pedagogical Shift:** Christian Religious Education programs should incorporate deep learning strategies including critical analysis, problem-based learning, and reflective practice alongside traditional content instruction.
2. **Authentic Assessment:** Character education outcomes should be evaluated through performance-based assessments demonstrating practical application rather than solely through knowledge tests.
3. **Teacher Preparation:** Educators require professional development in deep learning methodologies and facilitation skills to effectively implement this approach.
4. **Integrated Curriculum:** Character education should not be confined to religious education periods but integrated across subjects through service learning and values-based projects.
5. **Community Partnerships:** Schools should establish partnerships with faith communities and service organizations to provide authentic contexts for character practice.

This study opens several avenues for future investigation: 1) Longitudinal studies tracking character development persistence beyond the intervention period. 2) Comparative studies examining deep learning approaches across different religious traditions 3) Research investigating specific deep learning strategies' differential effects on various character dimensions. 4) Studies exploring how school culture and family involvement moderate intervention effectiveness. 5) Mixed-reality and technology-enhanced deep learning applications in religious education

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that integrating deep learning methodologies with Christian Religious Education significantly enhances character development among secondary school students. The intervention's emphasis on critical thinking, authentic problem-solving, reflective practice, and service learning facilitated deeper internalization of Christian values compared to traditional instructional approaches. Students showed substantial improvements across compassion, integrity, humility, forgiveness, and service orientation, with qualitative evidence suggesting enhanced understanding, personal agency, and faith-life integration. The findings contribute to educational literature by bridging religious education, character development, and deep learning pedagogy, demonstrating their synergistic potential. For practitioners, the study offers a viable model for transforming Christian Religious Education from knowledge transmission to holistic character formation. As schools increasingly recognize the importance of values-based education, deep learning approaches provide a promising framework for developing students' moral and spiritual dimensions alongside cognitive and social competencies. The success of this intervention at SMP Negeri Satu Atap 4 Barusjahe suggests that similar approaches could be adapted for other religious traditions and educational contexts, contributing to broader efforts to cultivate ethical, compassionate, and service-oriented citizens. Character education need not be relegated to peripheral status in academic curricula; rather, when grounded in deep learning principles and authentic practice opportunities, it can become a central and transformative dimension of student development.

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