



## Understanding Student Characteristics as the Key to the Success of Christian Religious Education Learning: An Effort to Implement Pedagogical Competence at SDN 059 Sipituhuta

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### ABSTRACT

*This study explores the critical role of teachers' understanding of student characteristics in enhancing the effectiveness of Christian Religious Education (CRE) at the elementary level. Conducted at SDN 059 Sipituhuta-a rural public school in Indonesia-the research highlights how pedagogical competence grounded in empathy, contextual awareness, and adaptive strategies shapes both academic and spiritual growth among learners. Employing a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected through classroom observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis involving a CRE teacher, the principal, and students in grades IV–VI. The findings reveal that the students' diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds significantly influence their motivation, learning styles, and moral development. Teachers who recognize these differences and align instructional approaches with students' cognitive, emotional, and social profiles create classrooms that are more inclusive, engaging, and spiritually transformative. The CRE teacher demonstrated pedagogical sensitivity by integrating storytelling, role-playing, and reflective dialogue to make theological concepts accessible to children in the concrete operational stage. This relational and differentiated approach fostered increased participation, moral reflection, and emotional well-being among students. The study concludes that understanding learners' characteristics is not merely a technical competence but a theological and moral calling-reflecting the incarnational model of Christ as Teacher. In resource-limited contexts, such understanding becomes the cornerstone of educational success, transforming CRE from doctrinal instruction into a formative encounter where faith, empathy, and wisdom grow together.*

**Keywords:** *Characteristics, Christian Religious Education, Pedagogical Competence*

### INTRODUCTION

Christian Religious Education (CRE), or *Pendidikan Agama Kristen (PAK)*, at the elementary school level plays a foundational role in shaping the moral, spiritual, and social character of children from an early age. More than a vehicle for transferring theological or doctrinal

knowledge, PAK serves as a transformative process that nurtures faith, empathy, and moral responsibility in alignment with Christian values. In the formative years of childhood, education becomes the soil where seeds of integrity, compassion, and reverence for God are planted. The success of this process, however, depends not merely on curriculum design or technological innovation, but on the teacher's ability to understand and respond to the unique characteristics of their students (Arends, 2015). Each learner embodies a distinctive blend of cognitive abilities, emotional tendencies, social interactions, and cultural experiences. These variations profoundly influence how children perceive religious teachings, engage in moral reflection, and apply biblical lessons in everyday life. In the context of PAK, understanding such diversity is crucial, since spiritual learning is not a uniform process but a deeply personal journey shaped by context and experience. Teachers who fail to recognize learners' developmental stages or psychological dispositions risk creating a learning environment that is rigid, monotonous, and disconnected from students' realities. Conversely, educators who develop sensitivity toward the physical, emotional, and social characteristics of their pupils can foster classrooms that are more inclusive, dialogical, and spiritually alive (Hamalik, 2018). This underscores the essential role of pedagogical competence—a core domain of teacher professionalism that integrates knowledge, empathy, and adaptability. Pedagogical competence extends beyond technical teaching skills; it involves the capacity to interpret students' needs, design meaningful learning experiences, and evaluate outcomes holistically. According to *Permendiknas No. 16 of 2007 on Teachers' Academic Qualification Standards*, pedagogical competence includes the ability to understand learners' characteristics from physical, moral, social, cultural, emotional, and intellectual dimensions (Fitriani, 2021). Such competence reflects not only intellectual mastery but also pastoral sensitivity—the teacher's ability to see each student as a whole person created in the image of God. In Christian education, this relational dimension of pedagogy mirrors the incarnational model of Christ, who taught through compassion, contextual understanding, and personal engagement. The urgency of developing this competence becomes particularly evident in the context of rural education settings such as SDN 059 Sipituhuta, where this study is situated. The school, located in a rural area characterized by modest resources and diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, reflects the challenges faced by many public elementary schools in Indonesia. Despite limited facilities, teachers in such contexts often serve as the primary moral and spiritual mentors for their students. Here, the success of PAK learning is determined less by material resources and more by the teacher's ability to adapt pedagogical approaches to the students' realities. The diversity of learners—some coming from devout Christian families, others from less religiously active homes—requires a teaching approach that is both inclusive and transformative.

This research is grounded in the conviction that understanding student characteristics is the key to successful Christian Religious Education. It seeks to explore how PAK teachers at SDN 059 Sipituhuta identify and interpret the diverse traits of their students, and how this understanding is applied in daily instructional practices. The study also investigates how such pedagogical awareness contributes to improving learning outcomes and fostering holistic growth—spiritually, morally, and intellectually. Through this inquiry, the research aims to highlight the indispensable role of teacher empathy and contextual

understanding in faith-based education. This study contributes to the broader discourse on pedagogical renewal in Christian education. It emphasizes that the effectiveness of PAK does not rest on doctrinal transmission alone but on the capacity of teachers to transform the classroom into a space of encounter-where divine truth meets the lived experience of the learner. By grounding pedagogy in a deep understanding of student diversity, teachers can cultivate learning environments that are humanizing, contextual, and spiritually formative. Such an approach not only enhances learning effectiveness but also embodies the redemptive mission of Christian education: to nurture young lives in wisdom, love, and service to God and others.

## RESEARCH METHODS

A qualitative descriptive approach was designed to capture a deep understanding of the phenomena under investigation-specifically, the implementation of teachers' understanding of students' characteristics in Christian Religious Education (CRE) learning. The qualitative approach was selected for its strength in revealing meaning and context behind observable behaviors, allowing the researcher to interpret the lived experiences of teachers and students within their natural learning environment (Darmawan, 2020). Meanwhile, the descriptive design provided a systematic, factual, and accurate portrayal of the situation as it exists in the field, enabling an objective account of how pedagogical competence manifests in daily practice (Sugiyono, 2019). The research was conducted at SDN 059 Sipituhuta, a rural public elementary school characterized by diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds among its students. The site was purposively selected based on its representativeness of Christian Religious Education learning contexts in areas where teachers often face challenges related to limited pedagogical resources and professional training opportunities. The study involved three key participant groups: the CRE teacher, the school principal, and students from grades IV to VI. The CRE teacher served as the primary informant, given their direct engagement in the instructional process, while the school principal provided managerial and policy perspectives. Students were included as supporting informants to share firsthand accounts of their learning experiences and perceptions. Data collection utilized three complementary techniques: classroom observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Observations were conducted participatively, focusing on teacher-student interactions, learning strategies, and student engagement during CRE lessons. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with the CRE teacher and the principal to explore how teachers perceive and apply their understanding of students' characteristics in teaching practice. Data reduction involved sorting and categorizing raw information into meaningful units aligned with the research focus. Data display was presented in narrative descriptions and thematic matrices to visualize emerging patterns and relationships. Conclusions were continuously drawn and verified throughout the research process to ensure the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of findings, thereby producing a nuanced understanding of how pedagogical competence operates through the lens of student-centered learning in CRE.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of field observations and in-depth interviews reveal that the students of SDN 059 Sipituhuta come from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Most families

depend on agriculture as their primary source of livelihood, working as farmers or farm laborers. This economic condition places many of them within the lower-middle income group. Parental education levels are also generally low, as many of the parents have only completed elementary school or, in some cases, did not finish their formal education. This reality influences the way children are raised, their motivation to learn, and the extent of parental involvement in their education (Hamalik, 2018). The diversity of family backgrounds creates unique challenges in Christian Religious Education (CRE) learning. Some students receive strong spiritual guidance from home, while others have limited exposure to religious practices outside the classroom. For many, the CRE classroom becomes the main environment where they encounter structured teaching about faith, morality, and Christian values. In such a context, the teacher's role extends far beyond that of a knowledge transmitter - the teacher becomes a spiritual mentor, moral guide, and emotional anchor (Arends, 2015). From the developmental perspective, the students observed in this research were in grades IV to VI, corresponding to ages nine to twelve. According to Piaget's theory of cognitive development, this age range falls within the concrete operational stage, in which children begin to think logically about concrete objects but still struggle with abstract concepts (Piaget, 1972). This developmental stage profoundly affects how students grasp lessons in CRE, which often deal with abstract notions such as faith, love, forgiveness, and spiritual transformation (Joyce, 2018). Consequently, teachers need to adopt learning strategies that translate abstract moral and theological values into tangible, relatable experiences. The study also found that students exhibited varied learning styles. Visual learners responded more effectively to images, colors, and written texts; auditory learners were more engaged when lessons involved songs, storytelling, or verbal explanations; while kinesthetic learners learned best through movement, games, or manipulatives. Such diversity reflects the need for differentiated instruction that acknowledges and respects individual learning preferences. When teachers ignore these differences, the learning environment risks becoming monotonous and disengaging. However, when teachers accommodate these variations, students feel valued, motivated, and capable of contributing meaningfully (Slavin, 2020). Emotionally and socially, the research observed that some students struggled with self-confidence and were hesitant to express opinions in front of peers. Others, however, were expressive, assertive, and highly participatory. This mix of personalities underscores the necessity for a classroom climate that is emotionally safe and socially inclusive. In this sense, the teacher's empathy and responsiveness play vital roles in nurturing a supportive learning environment where students can thrive. As Nurkholis (2019) emphasizes, effective learning emerges when emotional bonds precede intellectual engagement - when students feel seen, heard, and understood.

### ***Teachers' Understanding of Student Characteristics***

Teacher understanding of student characteristics emerged as the central factor influencing the success of CRE learning at SDN 059 Sipituhuta. Interviews revealed that the teacher consciously develops close interpersonal relationships with students as a foundation for pedagogical insight. This understanding does not rely solely on administrative data such as age or test scores but rather on careful observation of students' daily behavior, emotional expressions, and social interactions. The teacher's

approach to building this understanding is highly relational. For instance, informal conversations before class, spontaneous interactions during breaks, and empathetic listening to students' personal stories help the teacher recognize their emotional states and motivational patterns. This relational pedagogy allows the teacher to discern subtle indicators — such as when a quiet student is actually struggling with comprehension, or when an active student seeks recognition rather than dominance. These interactions humanize the learning process, turning it into a dialogue rather than a monologue (Baharudin, 2017). The teacher also conducts informal observations outside the classroom - during recess, group activities, and even in religious events. Through these moments, the teacher identifies how students collaborate, handle conflicts, or express empathy. Such insights become the basis for differentiated instructional planning. For example, a shy student who finds it difficult to speak publicly is invited to participate through written reflection or role-playing rather than oral presentation. Conversely, active and expressive students are given leadership opportunities in group discussions or storytelling sessions. These adaptations reflect a genuine pedagogical sensitivity - an ability to align teaching strategies with the psychological and emotional profile of each student (Slavin, 2020). Understanding students also means acknowledging their cognitive boundaries. The teacher recognizes that some students find it difficult to comprehend theological abstractions such as “grace” or “forgiveness.” To bridge this gap, lessons are contextualized through concrete and familiar experiences. When teaching about love and forgiveness, for instance, the teacher encourages students to recall moments when they forgave a friend or helped a classmate in need. These tangible examples not only make abstract concepts accessible but also embed moral reflection into lived experience. This approach resonates with Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development theory - students learn best when teachers scaffold new ideas within the range of what they can relate to and understand.

### ***Implementation of Pedagogical Competence in CRE Learning***

The teacher's pedagogical competence, particularly in managing learning according to student characteristics, manifests through the interconnected stages of planning, implementation, and evaluation. In lesson planning, the teacher designs the *Rencana Pelaksanaan Pembelajaran* (RPP) with attention to students' cognitive and social development levels. Instead of adopting a rigid plan, the teacher allows flexibility to respond to classroom dynamics. Lesson plans integrate diverse learning methods such as storytelling, group discussions, role-playing, and games with Christian moral themes. Each activity is intentionally linked to a learning objective - for example, fostering forgiveness through drama or cultivating empathy through collaborative art projects. This flexible yet structured planning reflects an adaptive pedagogy that prioritizes student engagement over procedural formality (Fitriani, 2021). During classroom instruction, the teacher employs a dialogic and contextual approach. Rather than merely delivering doctrinal content, the teacher positions themselves as a facilitator, guiding students to explore Christian values through inquiry and dialogue. Media such as Bible character illustrations, Christian songs, and short videos are integrated to sustain interest. These resources serve as concrete mediators that connect students' sensory experiences with spiritual messages. Activities like drawing, singing, or creating moral stories further enhance

retention and enjoyment, particularly for students in the concrete operational stage. The teacher also ensures that classroom interaction promotes inclusivity and mutual respect. When students share personal reflections or testimonies, peers are encouraged to respond supportively, not judgmentally. This atmosphere of acceptance mirrors the Christian ethic of love and compassion being taught, turning the classroom into a living model of the values it seeks to cultivate (Joyce, 2018). Assessment extends beyond the cognitive domain. The teacher evaluates students' affective and behavioral growth through anecdotal records, observation checklists, and reflective discussions. For instance, indicators such as honesty, empathy, cooperation, and respect are monitored continuously. Instead of relying solely on paper-based tests, the teacher employs formative assessments that emphasize personal progress and moral growth. Students are also encouraged to engage in self-reflection by writing short responses to prompts like "What have I learned about loving others this week?" Such reflective practices align with Christian pedagogical principles that view learning as both intellectual and spiritual formation (Baharudin, 2017). These practices demonstrate that pedagogical competence in CRE teaching is not confined to technical proficiency but extends to relational wisdom, emotional intelligence, and moral discernment. The teacher at SDN 059 Sipituhuta exemplifies this holistic competence by aligning content, method, and assessment with the developmental and emotional realities of the learners.

The integration of student-centered understanding and pedagogical competence has produced tangible improvements in the effectiveness of CRE learning at SDN 059 Sipituhuta. Both quantitative and qualitative indicators show notable progress. Quantitatively, students' average scores in CRE subjects improved compared to previous semesters. This increase indicates better comprehension of biblical narratives, Christian doctrines, and moral reasoning. Students demonstrated greater ability to connect classroom discussions with real-life situations - for instance, applying lessons about forgiveness to everyday peer interactions. This outcome suggests that contextualized teaching not only enhances cognitive understanding but also strengthens moral application (Harun, 2022). Qualitatively, the improvement is even more pronounced. Students who were previously passive became more active and participatory. They began initiating discussions, volunteering for activities, and expressing their thoughts about faith and morality. The teacher observed a significant decline in negative behaviors such as teasing or exclusion among peers. Instead, there was an increase in cooperation, mutual respect, and empathy - clear indicators of internalized Christian values. This transformation validates the idea that understanding students' psychological and social characteristics contributes to moral education that is not merely theoretical but experiential. Students also exhibited higher emotional engagement. Many expressed joy and comfort during CRE sessions, citing the supportive and relational nature of the class as a motivating factor. They appreciated the teacher's empathy, approachability, and fairness, which fostered trust. Learning activities such as Christian songs, storytelling, and collaborative projects created emotional resonance, transforming the classroom into a safe space for expressing faith and emotion. This aligns with Vygotsky's notion that learning is most effective when embedded within emotionally meaningful interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). Interestingly, the study also revealed that the teacher's own pedagogical growth was reinforced through continuous reflection. By intentionally

observing, listening, and adjusting, the teacher developed greater self-awareness of their teaching philosophy and empathy. The teacher realized that effective CRE education cannot be standardized; it must be rooted in love and relational understanding. As one teacher noted, *"When I understand their hearts, I can guide their minds."* This insight captures the essence of Christian pedagogy - teaching as an act of ministry, not just profession.

The findings from SDN 059 Sipituhuta underscore a broader pedagogical truth: understanding learners is foundational to educational success, especially in value-based subjects like Christian Religious Education. This study reaffirms that cognitive development, emotional well-being, and social context are intertwined components of effective faith-based learning (Joyce, 2018; Harun, 2022). Pedagogically, these findings support differentiated instruction as a practical manifestation of pedagogical competence. Teachers who design flexible, student-centered strategies foster not only better comprehension but also moral growth. The success observed in this rural school suggests that educational effectiveness is not determined by material resources but by relational depth and pedagogical insight. This echoes Darling-Hammond's argument that the heart of quality education lies in "teachers who know their students deeply and teach them responsively" (Darling-Hammond, 2019). From a theological standpoint, the study resonates with Christian anthropology, which views every learner as a unique image of God. Recognizing each child's individuality, potential, and emotional needs becomes an act of honoring that divine image. Thus, understanding student characteristics is not merely a pedagogical task but also a theological responsibility - a manifestation of Christ-centered love in educational practice. Practically, the results suggest several implications for teacher training and policy. First, teacher education programs should emphasize the integration of psychological understanding and spiritual formation. Teachers of CRE need not only doctrinal mastery but also emotional literacy and cultural sensitivity. Second, schools - especially in rural areas - should provide reflective spaces for teachers to share experiences and strategies for understanding students. Peer mentoring, spiritual retreats, and collaborative planning sessions could strengthen pedagogical competence. Third, educational policymakers should recognize that improving teacher quality involves nurturing empathy as much as delivering technical training. Ultimately, the case of SDN 059 Sipituhuta illustrates that effective Christian Religious Education flourishes when pedagogical competence is rooted in genuine understanding of the learner. The transformation seen among students - increased motivation, stronger moral character, and deeper emotional engagement - proves that education guided by empathy and contextual awareness can overcome even the limitations of rural settings. Understanding student characteristics is not an auxiliary element but the very foundation of successful CRE teaching. It humanizes pedagogy, aligns faith with experience, and cultivates a classroom culture where Christian values are not only taught but lived. As the Apostle Paul reminds in 1 Corinthians 13:2, "If I have all knowledge but do not have love, I am nothing." In the same spirit, pedagogical competence without understanding and compassion remains incomplete. The true success of Christian education, therefore, lies not in how much students know about God, but in how deeply they experience His love through the way their teachers understand and guide them.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the success of Christian Religious Education (CRE) at the elementary level fundamentally depends on teachers' ability to understand and respond to the unique characteristics of their students. The case of SDN 059 Sipituhuta vividly demonstrates that pedagogical competence rooted in empathy, contextual awareness, and adaptive teaching is the key determinant of effective learning outcomes-both academically and spiritually. In contexts marked by limited material resources, such as rural schools, the teacher's personal understanding of each student becomes the most valuable educational asset. Rather than relying solely on formal pedagogical structures or standardized curricula, meaningful education arises from relationships built on trust, observation, and compassion. Teachers who recognize students' cognitive, emotional, social, and cultural differences can design learning experiences that are inclusive and transformative. The research findings affirm that when instruction is tailored to children's developmental stages and learning preferences, engagement and comprehension improve significantly. Students become more active participants, showing greater enthusiasm in discussing Christian values and applying them in real-life situations. The learning process thus evolves from a passive reception of doctrine into a dynamic encounter between faith and lived experience. This confirms the principle that understanding precedes transformation-when teachers understand their students, learning becomes a spiritual dialogue rather than a mechanical exercise. This study highlights that pedagogical competence in CRE must be holistic. It integrates cognitive insight, emotional intelligence, and moral discernment. Teachers at SDN 059 Sipituhuta demonstrated that the true measure of effective teaching lies not only in delivering content but in cultivating emotional safety, moral reflection, and relational depth in the classroom. By embodying Christ-like empathy and patience, the teacher transformed the classroom into a faith-nurturing environment-one where Christian values such as forgiveness, cooperation, and compassion were not only taught but lived. In this sense, pedagogical competence becomes a form of ministry, fulfilling the incarnational model of Jesus as the Teacher who meets learners where they are. The implications of this study extend beyond one school. It calls for a reorientation in teacher training programs and educational policies to emphasize relational pedagogy and psychological understanding as essential components of professional competence. Teacher development should focus not only on mastery of curriculum or assessment techniques but also on nurturing empathy, reflective practice, and contextual sensitivity. Schools should create collaborative spaces where teachers can share insights about their students' needs and experiences, fostering a culture of mutual learning and care. From a theological perspective, understanding student characteristics is also a moral and spiritual calling. Each learner is an image bearer of God, deserving to be understood and guided with love. When teachers take time to know their students deeply, they participate in the redemptive work of education-restoring dignity, nurturing faith, and cultivating wisdom. The findings reaffirm that Christian education achieves its highest purpose not through information transfer, but through formation-of character, conscience, and community. This study reaffirms that understanding is the heart of teaching. Pedagogical competence devoid of empathy becomes hollow, while understanding infused with love transforms education into an act of grace. In the words of 1 Corinthians 13:2, *"If I have all knowledge*

*but do not have love, I am nothing.*" The same truth applies to teaching: no matter how well-trained or knowledgeable a teacher may be, without understanding and compassion, learning loses its soul. Therefore, the true measure of success in Christian Religious Education lies not merely in how much students know about God, but in how deeply they encounter His love through the way their teachers teach, guide, and understand them.

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