



## The Role of Christian Religious Education in Responding to Moral Challenges among Adolescents

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### ABSTRACT

*Adolescence marks a formative stage of human development, where individuals encounter rapid physical, emotional, social, and spiritual changes while navigating the tension between personal identity and external cultural influences. In today's context, globalization and digital media expose young people to conflicting values, often undermining moral resilience and weakening ethical awareness. Christian Religious Education (CRE) carries the responsibility of responding to these challenges by equipping learners with a strong spiritual and moral foundation rooted in biblical principles. This study explores how CRE addresses moral challenges among elementary students, focusing on pedagogical strategies, student responses, and contextual barriers. A descriptive qualitative method was employed at SDN 0609323 Medan, involving interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Findings reveal that students, shaped by diverse socio-economic backgrounds, exhibit early signs of moral decline such as disrespect toward authority, individualistic behavior, inappropriate language, and dependence on digital media. CRE, however, provides a strategic avenue for moral formation through contextual storytelling, role-play, reflective discussions, and service-based activities that encourage students to embody values of love, honesty, forgiveness, and responsibility. Teachers' roles as moral exemplars proved central, as students often internalized Christian virtues through observation and imitation. Despite constraints such as limited instructional time, weak parental involvement, and unsupportive community environments, CRE demonstrated measurable positive impacts on respect, empathy, and self-control. This study concludes that CRE is not merely cognitive instruction but a transformative practice, requiring stronger collaboration between schools, families, and faith communities to nurture morally resilient and faith-driven young generations.*

**Keywords:** *Christian Religious Education teacher, Moral Challenges, Adolescents*

## INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a crucial stage of human development characterized by the transition from childhood to adulthood, involving rapid physical, emotional, social, and spiritual changes. It is often marked by identity formation and an intense search for meaning, while also being shaped by strong influences from peers, family, and the wider social environment. In the contemporary context, adolescents face increasingly complex moral challenges. Technological advancements and globalization have provided young people with vast access to information, yet simultaneously exposed them to values that frequently conflict with Christian teachings, such as hedonism, individualism, moral relativism, and the culture of instant gratification (Smith & Denton, 2005). These cultural pressures may weaken moral resilience and contribute to the erosion of ethical awareness among adolescents. Christian Religious Education (CRE) carries a crucial responsibility to respond to these challenges by offering adolescents a solid spiritual and moral foundation. Through CRE, learners are guided to understand Christian values rooted in the Word of God, such as love, faithfulness, honesty, and responsibility (Knight, 2006). CRE is not merely a transmission of religious knowledge or doctrinal memorization but rather an integral process of character formation and spiritual nurturing. The task of CRE is to ensure that Christian values are internalized, embodied, and practiced as daily habits, enabling adolescents to withstand cultural pressures while developing a resilient Christian identity. In the midst of today's moral crisis, CRE cannot remain limited to cognitive dimensions alone. Education that focuses only on knowledge risks creating a gap between belief and practice. Instead, CRE must encompass affective and psychomotor dimensions, ensuring that moral values are not only understood intellectually but also experienced emotionally and enacted behaviorally (Estep, Anthony, & Allison, 2008). This holistic approach provides adolescents with both the intellectual understanding of faith and the practical skills needed to live out Christian morality in their daily lives.

Empirical realities highlight the urgency of this task. Reports of increasing youth violence, misuse of digital technology, and declining empathy toward others point to worrying moral degradation (Barna Group, 2018). In such contexts, CRE should function as a transformative instrument capable of equipping adolescents to respond constructively. Teachers of CRE play a central role in this regard. They are not only curriculum facilitators but also role models and spiritual mentors. Their pedagogical strategies must move beyond rote teaching to embrace dialogical methods, critical reflection, and experiential learning that nurture students' moral agency (Astley, 2002). Moreover, by embodying Christian virtues in their own lives, teachers provide living examples that inspire students to emulate Christ-like character. The task is not without challenges. Teachers of CRE often confront limitations such as inadequate resources, minimal institutional support, and resistance from students who are heavily influenced by secular media culture (Pazmino, 2010). However, these challenges present opportunities for creative pedagogical approaches, including integrating technology positively, involving students in community-based service, and developing curricula that connect biblical teachings with contemporary moral issues. Such approaches help ensure that adolescents see the relevance of faith in navigating their real-life struggles. This study, therefore, seeks to examine how Christian Religious Education can effectively address moral challenges among adolescents. It explores the pedagogical approaches used by CRE teachers in shaping morality, the

obstacles encountered in the teaching process, and the implications of religious education for students' attitudes and behavior within today's social realities. By analyzing these dynamics, this paper aims to contribute both theoretically and practically to the development of Christian education that is responsive to contemporary change. Ultimately, CRE must empower adolescents to grow as a generation of faith-driven leaders, morally grounded, and rooted in the values of the Gospel. In this way, Christian education not only safeguards young people from moral decline but also equips them to become agents of transformation in their families, communities, and society at large.

## METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach with the primary aim of exploring in depth the role of Christian Religious Education (CRE) in addressing moral challenges among adolescents, with a specific focus on upper-grade students at the elementary school level. The research site was SDN 0609323 Medan, a public elementary school located in an urban environment that is socially, culturally, and religiously heterogeneous. The school was purposively selected because it provides Christian Religious Education for Christian students and demonstrates dynamic practices of moral formation that are relevant to be studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The choice of a descriptive qualitative method was based on its capacity to capture phenomena contextually and holistically, particularly regarding how CRE teachers communicate moral values and how students internalize these teachings in their daily lives. The research focused on three primary aspects: pedagogical strategies employed by CRE teachers, students' responses to moral instruction, and the supporting or inhibiting factors in the process of character formation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Such an approach makes it possible to uncover nuanced experiences of both teachers and students, reflecting the complexity of moral education in contemporary schooling. Data were collected through three main techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a CRE teacher who had more than five years of teaching experience, the school principal, and several fifth- and sixth-grade students. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility for deeper exploration of relevant issues while ensuring consistency in the main themes discussed (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Observations were carried out during classroom instruction as well as during students' extracurricular spiritual activities. These observations enabled the researcher to directly examine teaching methods, interactional dynamics, and students' responses to moral lessons in natural settings. In addition, documentary sources such as teaching plans, student journals, and evaluation records were analyzed to support and triangulate data from interviews and observations. Data validity was strengthened through triangulation of sources and methods, as well as by conducting member checking with participants to confirm the accuracy of interpretations. Peer debriefing was also undertaken with fellow scholars of religious education to enhance the reliability and objectivity of findings. This comprehensive methodological framework was designed to ensure that the study could provide a contextual and realistic portrayal of the contribution of Christian Religious Education to shaping elementary students' morality, while also highlighting the challenges that arise in the midst of today's educational realities.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The formative years of childhood education play a pivotal role in shaping students' moral reasoning, spiritual identity, and social responsibility. At the elementary level, students are at a crucial developmental stage where they begin to establish a sense of self and negotiate their values within both family and social contexts (Piaget, 1970; Kohlberg, 1981). In pluralistic and urban environments such as Medan, Indonesia, moral education cannot be separated from the socio-economic realities that shape children's daily experiences. Within this framework, Christian Religious Education (CRE) emerges as both a formal academic subject and a strategic vehicle for holistic character formation. This paper draws on observations and interviews conducted at SDN 0609323 Medan, a public elementary school located in an urban and heterogeneous environment. The findings reveal the unique socio-economic backgrounds of the students, the moral challenges they face, and the central role of Christian Religious Education in addressing those challenges. By exploring pedagogical strategies, contextual challenges, and the lived experiences of students and teachers, this study seeks to highlight the transformative potential of CRE in the moral development of elementary school students. Based on field observations and in-depth interviews, students participating in Christian Religious Education classes at SDN 0609323 Medan came from diverse family, social, and economic backgrounds. The majority were from lower-middle economic strata, with parents working primarily as laborers, small traders, or informal workers. These socio-economic realities significantly influenced parental involvement and patterns of moral supervision. Teachers reported that some students lacked adequate guidance at home, which resulted in moral and behavioral challenges being more prominently addressed through formal schooling. In such contexts, Christian Religious Education functioned as a substitute framework of guidance, filling the gaps left by absent or less-involved parents (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Economic hardship often compelled parents to prioritize survival needs over moral supervision. Interviews revealed that several parents left early in the morning for work and returned late in the evening, leaving children under the care of older siblings or neighbors. Consequently, parental absence weakened moral monitoring, leading students to rely heavily on media, peers, or online platforms as primary reference points for behavior (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007).

Although elementary school students have not yet encountered the complex moral dilemmas often associated with adolescence, the roots of moral degradation are already observable at an early age. At SDN 0609323 Medan, teachers noted recurring patterns of behavior that raise concern. For example, there is a visible disrespect toward authority figures, reflected in students' reluctance to greet teachers or their tendency to ignore instructions. Alongside this, many students display individualistic tendencies, such as unwillingness to share, excluding peers from group play, and prioritizing a "me-first" mentality. Another worrying trend is the use of inappropriate language, with children adopting harsh or vulgar words often picked up from adults, peers, or online media. Furthermore, teachers observed students' growing dependence on gadgets and social media, where smartphones are excessively used even during breaks, reducing opportunities for genuine face-to-face interaction. This situation is worsened by students' exposure to age-inappropriate digital content, where imitations of violent, rude, or

disrespectful behaviors—commonly found on platforms like YouTube or TikTok—are increasingly evident in their daily lives. During an interview, a Christian Religious Education (CRE) teacher with more than seven years of experience highlighted this problem by stating, *“Children nowadays imitate what they see on their parents’ phones. They cannot yet distinguish what is good from what is harmful.”* This testimony reflects the critical influence of digital media in shaping children’s behavior and value systems. It shows that media consumption has become a dominant moral reference for young learners, often surpassing the traditional role of parents, teachers, and religious leaders in guiding moral development (Buckingham, 2003). Christian Religious Education at SDN 0609323 Medan goes beyond doctrinal knowledge; it functions as a strategic instrument of moral and character formation. Teachers employ integrated approaches, emphasizing values such as love, forgiveness, honesty, and responsibility as grounded in Scripture.

One effective approach observed was narrative pedagogy, where biblical stories were contextualized for daily life. Stories such as Joseph forgiving his brothers (Genesis 45), Jesus blessing children (Matthew 19:13–15), and the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) were retold interactively. Students were encouraged to reflect and connect the stories to their own experiences—for example, forgiving a peer or helping a classmate in need. Narrative pedagogy was shown to foster empathy, moral imagination, and internalization of Christian values (Smith & Smith, 2011). Beyond storytelling, teachers implemented role-playing, group discussions, and service-oriented projects such as “sharing day,” where students brought food to distribute among classmates. These experiential activities created opportunities for embodied learning—students not only heard moral principles but lived them out in practice (Dewey, 1938).

Despite its promise, the implementation of Christian Religious Education (CRE) at SDN 0609323 Medan encountered several significant obstacles. One of the most pressing challenges was the limitation of instructional time, since CRE was allocated only one period per week. This restricted schedule left teachers with insufficient opportunities to explore biblical values in depth or to engage students in activities that could reinforce moral understanding. Another obstacle was the weakness of parental involvement. Many parents were either indifferent to their children’s religious formation or lacked the capacity to reinforce Christian values at home due to economic struggles or limited educational backgrounds. Beyond the family sphere, the social environment in which students lived also posed challenges. Most children resided in densely populated neighborhoods often characterized by social conflicts, the frequent use of harsh language, and a scarcity of positive role models. As the school principal explained in an interview, *“We try to cultivate values in school, but children return home to environments where conflict and harsh words are daily realities.”* This testimony highlights the persistent disjunction between school-based moral instruction and the less supportive influences of home and community environments, a challenge widely recognized in the field of moral education (Lickona, 1991).

Despite these limitations, CRE demonstrated measurable positive impacts on student character and behavior. Teachers observed that many students gradually showed greater respect toward authority figures, as demonstrated by their habit of greeting and

acknowledging teachers. Among peers, there was a noticeable increase in empathy, reflected in students' willingness to share food, lend materials, or offer comfort to classmates in distress. Language use also improved, with students beginning to replace harsh expressions with polite and affirming phrases such as "sorry," "thank you," and "please." In addition, there was evidence of stronger self-control, as some students who had previously engaged in impulsive or disruptive behaviors became more capable of managing conflict without resorting to aggression. Teachers' observation journals confirmed these behavioral transformations, particularly among students once identified as disrespectful or disruptive. Similarly, end-of-semester reflections revealed that many students highlighted love, honesty, and forgiveness as the moral lessons they most remembered and practiced. These findings confirm that moral instruction, when contextualized and reinforced through experiential learning, can shape not only students' cognition but also their daily conduct (Nucci & Narvaez, 2008). Central to these outcomes was the role of teachers as moral exemplars. In the context of elementary education, teachers were not merely transmitters of knowledge but embodied the very values they sought to instill. Consistent with Bandura's (1977) theory of social learning, students at this developmental stage learned more effectively through observation and imitation than through abstract reasoning. The CRE teacher at SDN 0609323 Medan was widely described by students as patient, humble, and consistent, qualities that created a safe and affirming classroom environment. Beyond instructional duties, the teacher engaged in pastoral visits to students' homes, particularly when children faced academic struggles or behavioral challenges. These efforts strengthened the teacher's role not only as an educator but also as a spiritual mentor and moral role model whose example carried lasting influence. At a broader level, the practice of CRE extended beyond the domain of personal morality to encompass social transformation. Lessons in Christian values consistently emphasized that students were called to be agents of peace, integrity, and compassion in their communities. Teachers believed that grounding children in biblical principles at the elementary level would equip them with resilience against moral corruption, peer pressure, and the complex challenges of adolescence. In this sense, CRE functioned as a long-term investment in nation-building, cultivating future citizens who were morally grounded, socially responsible, and spiritually resilient (Arthur, 2003). The study at SDN 0609323 Medan reveals that Christian Religious Education plays a strategic and transformative role in addressing the moral challenges of elementary students. Despite the constraints of limited time, weak parental support, and adverse social environments, CRE—when implemented with narrative pedagogy, active learning strategies, and strong teacher modeling—proved effective in shaping respect, empathy, self-control, and integrity among students. These findings point to the urgent need for greater institutional support, expanded instructional time, and stronger collaboration between schools, families, and communities to maximize the impact of moral education. Ultimately, when faithfully implemented, CRE is not merely a subject of religious instruction but a crucial foundation for social transformation in pluralistic and morally complex societies.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study affirm that Christian Religious Education (CRE) plays a crucial role in shaping students' morality from an early age, particularly at the elementary school level. In the context of SDN 0609323 Medan, CRE is not merely a subject concerned with religious dogma or rote memorization of Scripture verses; rather, it has functioned as an effective instrument for character and personality formation in alignment with Christian values. This is evident in the implementation of communicative and contextual teaching strategies employed by CRE teachers, including the use of biblical narratives, role-playing methods, reflective discussions, and activities grounded in love for others. The study further demonstrates that the moral challenges faced by elementary students should not be underestimated. The influence of digital technology, limited parental supervision, and unsupportive social environments are among the external factors that significantly shape student behavior. In such circumstances, the presence of Christian Religious Education becomes particularly crucial, providing a safe and structured space for instilling values of love, honesty, responsibility, as well as the willingness to live in mutual care and forgiveness. From a pedagogical perspective, the CRE teachers at SDN 0609323 Medan have shown significant roles not only as educators but also as moral exemplars. Their teaching approaches go beyond the transmission of content, extending to the cultivation of emotional relationships with students, motivating them toward virtuous actions, and embodying Christian virtues in daily life. This moral modeling has proven to be one of the key factors in the success of Christian-based character education in the school. This research also identifies a number of obstacles that hinder the effectiveness of CRE in addressing students' moral challenges. These include limited instructional time, the low level of parental involvement in children's moral education, and unsupportive social environments. Such obstacles highlight the necessity of fostering stronger collaboration between schools, families, and Christian communities in order to create a holistic and sustainable ecosystem for moral education. It concludes that Christian Religious Education holds significant potential as a strategic avenue for addressing and responding to the moral challenges faced by youth, with its foundation beginning as early as the elementary school years. Therefore, strengthening the CRE curriculum, enhancing teacher competencies, and actively involving families and faith communities in character formation are the primary recommendations of this study. In this way, Christian Religious Education serves not merely as a channel for knowledge transfer but as a transformative path of life that contributes meaningfully to the development of a God-fearing generation, rooted in Christian character, within a world of shifting values.

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