



Teachers' Social Competence in Optimizing Christian Religious Education for Preserving Cultural Diversity: A Case Study at SMA Negeri 7 Medan

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ABSTRACT

Cultural diversity within the school environment represents a social reality that demands an inclusive and adaptive educational approach. In the context of Christian Religious Education (CRE), teachers are required not only to master the subject matter but also to possess strong social competencies in order to serve as effective facilitators in fostering harmony among students from diverse cultural backgrounds. This study aims to examine the implementation of teachers' social competence in CRE instruction and how such competence contributes to preserving cultural diversity at SMA Negeri 7 Medan. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The findings reveal that the social competence of CRE teachers is reflected in their ability to build empathetic communication, create a safe space for dialogue, and prioritize the values of love and tolerance in every learning interaction. Teachers are able to act as bridges that connect differences while serving as agents of value transformation in a multicultural environment. The implications of these findings affirm that strengthening teachers' social competence is not only relevant but also urgent in optimizing the role of CRE as a medium for character formation in a pluralistic society. This research contributes to the development of contextual CRE teaching strategies that are sensitive to cultural plurality and offers new insights into the importance of integrating teachers' interpersonal skills with the faith values conveyed in religious education.

Keywords: social competence, CRE teachers, cultural diversity, multicultural education, senior high school

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is widely recognized as a nation rich in cultural diversity. This plurality is not only reflected in its languages, traditions, and customs but also in the ways of thinking, value systems, and social interaction patterns of its people. Such diversity, while being a source of pride, also presents challenges for social harmony, particularly within

educational institutions where students from different cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds converge. Schools are therefore entrusted with a critical role: to safeguard and nurture this diversity so that it does not become a source of division or conflict but rather serves as a collective strength that enriches the nation's social fabric (Tilaar, 2004). In this regard, education should not be confined merely to the transfer of knowledge but must also serve as a formative arena for cultivating multicultural awareness and character building. Christian Religious Education (CRE), as one of the subjects taught in Indonesian schools, occupies a strategic position in this process. CRE emphasizes universal values such as love, tolerance, justice, and brotherhood, which are essential for enabling students to coexist peacefully amidst cultural and religious differences (Eliastam, 2015). However, the effectiveness of CRE in a pluralistic context is closely tied to the competence of teachers, particularly their social competence. Social competence refers to teachers' ability to build healthy interpersonal relationships, demonstrate empathy, understand the diverse cultural backgrounds of their students, and create an inclusive and conducive learning atmosphere (Darling-Hammond, 2017). Without such competence, there is a risk that religious education may inadvertently reinforce exclusivity or doctrinal rigidity rather than fostering mutual understanding and dialogue.

SMA Negeri 7 Medan serves as a relevant case study because it accommodates students from a wide range of cultural and religious backgrounds, reflecting the multicultural nature of Indonesian society. This context poses both opportunities and challenges for CRE teachers. On the one hand, cultural diversity provides a fertile environment for students to learn tolerance and appreciation of differences. On the other hand, teachers must ensure that the delivery of CRE materials is fair, inclusive, and relevant to all students, avoiding approaches that could alienate or marginalize certain groups (Banks, 2019). In this setting, CRE teachers are not only required to master theological content but also to exercise a high degree of social sensitivity and pedagogical adaptability. The central issue addressed in this study is how CRE teachers at SMA Negeri 7 Medan implement their social competence in daily teaching practices and to what extent such competence contributes to maintaining and strengthening cultural diversity within the school community. This focus is significant because the challenge of moral and cultural education today lies not in transmitting doctrinal knowledge but in nurturing students who are capable of living harmoniously in difference while holding firmly to their faith identity (Hefner, 2011). Thus, CRE must be understood not only as religious instruction but also as a transformative educational practice that engages with real-life pluralism.

The aim of this research is to analyze the implementation of teachers' social competence in teaching CRE at SMA Negeri 7 Medan. By examining teachers' communication patterns, classroom interactions, and pedagogical strategies, this study seeks to identify practical models of how social competence is enacted in educational practice. Such analysis is crucial because it can demonstrate how teachers embody Christian values not only through explicit instruction but also through relational practices that foster inclusivity, respect, and cooperation (Arthur, 2019). Furthermore, this research is expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it enriches the discourse on religious education in multicultural contexts, highlighting the inseparable link between pedagogy and social competence. Practically, it offers insights for teachers,

school leaders, and policymakers on how to strengthen CRE as an instrument of character formation and cultural preservation in Indonesia's plural society. The role of teachers' social competence in optimizing CRE cannot be overstated. The findings from this study will not only shed light on the challenges faced by CRE teachers at SMA Negeri 7 Medan but also highlight the transformative potential of socially competent teaching in preserving cultural diversity. When CRE is taught through an inclusive, dialogical, and relational approach, it can function as a powerful educational tool for preparing future generations who are both spiritually grounded and socially responsible, embodying Christian values while contributing positively to Indonesia's multicultural landscape.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive method, chosen to provide an in-depth understanding of the process of implementing teachers' social competence in Christian Religious Education (CRE), particularly in the context of preserving cultural diversity within the school environment. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate because it allows researchers to explore complex social realities, interpret meanings, and capture the dynamics of human interaction in natural settings rather than reducing them to numerical data (Creswell, 2018). The research was conducted at SMA Negeri 7 Medan, a public high school widely recognized for its high level of cultural heterogeneity among students. This setting provided a rich context for investigating how teachers enact social competence in classrooms characterized by cultural plurality. The research subjects consisted of the CRE teacher and students enrolled in the subject. Data collection techniques included participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Participant observation was carried out during classroom sessions to observe how the teacher established communication, fostered a conducive learning atmosphere, and responded to the dynamics of a multicultural classroom. Through this method, the researcher was able to capture not only explicit instructional practices but also implicit relational patterns that reflected social competence (Spradley, 1980). In-depth interviews were conducted with the CRE teacher and a number of students from different cultural backgrounds to explore their perceptions of how social competence was applied in teaching. These interviews provided valuable insights into both the teachers' pedagogical intentions and the students' lived experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Document analysis was performed on the syllabus, lesson plans (RPP), and teachers' notes related to instructional strategies in CRE, allowing for cross-checking of observed practices against formal pedagogical designs.

The data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (1994), which involves three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. Data reduction referred to the process of selecting, focusing, and simplifying raw data obtained from observations, interviews, and documents. Data display involved organizing the information in a systematic manner, such as matrices or narrative descriptions, to facilitate interpretation. Finally, conclusion drawing or verification was carried out through iterative reflection and constant comparison of data sources to ensure that the findings accurately represented the phenomena under study. To maintain the validity of the data, triangulation of sources and methods was applied, where

observational data were corroborated with findings from interviews and document analysis (Denzin, 2017). The emphasis of this research was on the interpretation of meaning within teachers' actions in the socio-cultural context of the classroom. Therefore, the success of the research was not determined by the generalizability of the findings but by the depth of understanding achieved regarding the social processes occurring in educational interactions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher positioned themselves as the primary instrument, directly involved in both data collection and analysis, which is a hallmark of qualitative inquiry. This reflexive role required sensitivity to context, openness to participants' perspectives, and critical reflection throughout the research process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Through this methodology, the study sought to provide a comprehensive picture of how the CRE teacher's social competence was implemented in practice, and how it contributed to the creation of a learning environment that respected and celebrated cultural diversity. The research focus extended beyond cognitive aspects of teaching to encompass affective and behavioral dimensions that emerged in everyday educational interactions. By highlighting these dimensions, the study underscores that social competence is not merely an additional skill but an integral component of transformative religious education in multicultural schools.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The contemporary educational landscape is marked by cultural plurality, especially in societies such as Indonesia where multiple ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups coexist within a shared national framework. In such contexts, schools inevitably become microcosms of wider cultural interaction, making them strategic spaces for nurturing respect, tolerance, and inclusivity among young generations (Banks, 2009). Within this framework, the role of teachers is paramount. Teachers do not merely transmit knowledge but also function as cultural mediators, shaping how students perceive and engage with diversity in their everyday lives (Gay, 2010). This study specifically investigates the implementation of social competence by Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers at SMA Negeri 7 Medan. As a state school known for its high cultural heterogeneity, SMA Negeri 7 Medan provides a fertile ground for analyzing how Christian educators navigate cultural pluralism while remaining faithful to the values and goals of religious instruction. The findings of this research highlight the complexity and significance of teacher social competence in safeguarding cultural diversity through classroom practices, interpersonal relations, and broader school engagement.

The central argument of this paper is that the CRE teacher at SMA Negeri 7 Medan operationalizes social competence through five interrelated dimensions: empathetic communication, inclusive learning strategies, the cultivation of tolerance and love, the role of the teacher as an agent of harmony, and adaptive strategies in facing multicultural challenges. Each of these aspects demonstrates how faith-based education can contribute to the promotion of pluralism and peace within a public-school setting. A core indicator of teacher social competence lies in the ability to engage in empathetic communication with students. In the context of SMA Negeri 7 Medan, the CRE teacher demonstrates this competence by adopting a dialogical rather than a monological

approach to teaching. Communication is not limited to the one-way transmission of doctrinal content but becomes a reciprocal process where students feel heard, respected, and valued regardless of their cultural or religious backgrounds (Noddings, 2012).

Observation revealed that the teacher often begins classes with personal greetings, using names and eye contact to establish relational intimacy. Such gestures are not trivial; they signal recognition of students' individuality and foster a classroom climate of mutual trust. Moreover, when intercultural tensions arise, as sometimes happens in a diverse classroom, the teacher plays the role of mediator, encouraging open dialogue and de-escalating conflict through calm and impartial intervention. Non-verbal communication also plays a significant role. Smiles, nods, and supportive gestures embody warmth and convey affirmation, thereby reducing barriers between teacher and students. This style of communication aligns with principles of culturally responsive pedagogy, which emphasize the teacher's responsibility to affirm students' identities while guiding them toward shared values (Gay, 2018). Through such empathetic communication, the CRE teacher contributes to a relational foundation upon which inclusive and transformative education can be built.

Another significant dimension of social competence is the capacity to design and implement learning strategies that are inclusive of all cultural backgrounds represented in the classroom. The CRE teacher at SMA Negeri 7 Medan makes a conscious effort to contextualize biblical and theological content within the lived experiences of students. For example, when discussing the Christian ethic of love and justice, the teacher employs examples that resonate with the students' multicultural environment, thereby reinforcing the relevance of Christian values across cultural divides (Sleeter, 2011). Group discussions are often organized in heterogeneous formations to maximize intercultural interaction. By working with peers from different cultural and religious backgrounds, students learn to listen to alternative perspectives, negotiate meaning, and appreciate the richness of diversity. The teacher further integrates reflective methods, inviting students to narrate personal experiences of cultural difference and inclusion. Such reflective exercises not only deepen cognitive engagement with Christian principles but also cultivate empathy and cross-cultural awareness. This inclusive pedagogical approach resonates with the broader goals of multicultural education, which aims not only at cognitive mastery but also at the transformation of attitudes and behaviors toward cultural diversity (Banks, 2016). By situating Christian Religious Education within such a framework, the teacher ensures that the subject contributes to building a more inclusive and equitable school culture.

Cultivating Tolerance and Love as Core Christian Values

The ultimate aim of Christian Religious Education is not merely the transmission of theological doctrines but the internalization of values such as love, tolerance, and peace. At SMA Negeri 7 Medan, the CRE teacher emphasizes these values not as abstract ideals but as lived practices. For instance, biblical narratives such as the parable of the Good Samaritan are interpreted in ways that directly address contemporary challenges of

prejudice, exclusion, and intolerance (Wright, 2010). Students are repeatedly reminded that love, from a Christian perspective, transcends cultural and religious boundaries. The teacher underscores that every human being, as *imago Dei*, deserves dignity and respect. This theological principle is consistently reinforced through classroom discussions, collaborative projects, and conflict-resolution simulations. Students are thus encouraged to embody tolerance not only in theory but also in their daily interactions with peers. Interviews with students confirm that such pedagogical practices have a transformative impact. Several students expressed that they had come to view Christian faith not merely as a set of rituals but as an ethical orientation toward fairness, compassion, and openness. This finding highlights the affective dimension of religious education, which shapes moral sensibilities and social behavior in ways that extend beyond academic achievement (Groome, 1998).

The Teacher as an Agent of Harmony in the School Community

Beyond classroom instruction, the CRE teacher functions as an agent of harmony within the broader school community. This role involves active participation in extracurricular activities, interfaith dialogues, and collaborative social projects. For instance, the teacher has facilitated community-service programs where students from diverse backgrounds work together on environmental and humanitarian initiatives. Such activities operationalize the Christian ethic of service while simultaneously fostering solidarity across cultural divides (Palmer, 2007). The teacher's professional conduct also serves as a model for inclusivity. In interactions with colleagues of different faiths and cultures, the CRE teacher consistently demonstrates openness and respect, thereby setting an example for students. School administrators have noted that the teacher's contribution to promoting peace and inclusivity has been significant, particularly in navigating sensitive cultural and religious issues within the school environment. In this sense, the CRE teacher embodies the dual role of educator and peacebuilder. By leveraging social competence, the teacher contributes not only to the academic and spiritual growth of students but also to the cultivation of a school culture that is hospitable to diversity (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000). Despite the evident successes, the implementation of social competence in multicultural classrooms is not without challenges. One major difficulty lies in students' varied interpretations of religious and moral teachings. For some students, particularly those from different cultural or religious backgrounds, certain Christian doctrines may appear irrelevant or even alienating. This challenge necessitates a pedagogical approach that is both faithful to Christian principles and sensitive to cultural pluralism (Byrne, 2014). Another challenge involves the risk of cultural bias in the selection of examples and narratives. To mitigate this, the CRE teacher employs adaptive strategies such as broadening cultural references, engaging students in open dialogue, and continually reflecting on personal teaching practices. Professional development opportunities, including workshops on multicultural education, have also been utilized to enhance adaptive capacity. Collaboration with other subject teachers further strengthens these adaptive strategies. By integrating CRE themes with broader curricular objectives, the teacher contributes to a holistic educational framework where tolerance and inclusivity

are reinforced across disciplines. Partnerships with parents and local communities also provide a supportive ecosystem for sustaining the values promoted within the classroom (Epstein, 2010).

Impact on Classroom Dynamics and Student Identity Formation

One of the most tangible outcomes of implementing teacher social competence is the creation of a harmonious classroom dynamic. Observations revealed that students in the CRE class at SMA Negeri 7 Medan feel safe to express their opinions and interact openly with peers from different backgrounds. Classroom rules are co-constructed in a democratic manner, embedding Christian values such as love, justice, and equality into the fabric of daily classroom life. Such dynamics not only enhance academic engagement but also contribute to the formation of student identity. Students gradually come to see their Christian faith as compatible with pluralism, enabling them to construct identities that are both religiously grounded and socially open. This identity formation is crucial in a multicultural society, as it prepares students to navigate diversity without resorting to exclusivism or intolerance (Hermans, 2014). The study further reveals that social competence does not operate in isolation but synergizes with other dimensions of teacher professionalism. The CRE teacher's mastery of subject matter ensures that biblical and theological principles are articulated clearly and relevantly. Pedagogical competence, meanwhile, enables the teacher to translate these principles into effective and inclusive instructional strategies. This synergy enhances the overall effectiveness of Religious Education, positioning it as both academically rigorous and socially transformative (Shulman, 1987). Although the research is situated within the specific context of SMA Negeri 7 Medan, its implications resonate more broadly. In an era of globalization and digital connectivity, cultural diversity is no longer confined to certain regions but constitutes the lived reality of students worldwide. Thus, the cultivation of teacher social competence in faith-based education is globally relevant (Merryfield, 2000). The findings affirm that Christian Religious Education, when implemented with strong social competence, can transcend doctrinal exclusivity and function as a medium for fostering tolerance, justice, and peace. This aligns with global educational agendas that emphasize the role of schools in promoting intercultural understanding and preventing conflict (UNESCO, 2017).

The research points to several practical implications for curriculum development and teacher training in Christian Religious Education. First, curricula should explicitly integrate themes of diversity, tolerance, and inclusivity, ensuring that students engage with religious teachings in ways that are relevant to multicultural realities. Second, teacher training programs must prioritize the development of social competence, equipping educators with skills in intercultural communication, conflict management, and reflective pedagogy. Finally, institutional support in the form of inclusive school policies and interfaith dialogue initiatives is essential for sustaining the values promoted by socially competent teachers. It concludes that the implementation of teacher social competence in Christian Religious Education at SMA Negeri 7 Medan is both complex and transformative. Through empathetic communication, inclusive learning strategies, the

cultivation of tolerance and love, the embodiment of harmony, and adaptive strategies in multicultural contexts, the CRE teacher significantly contributes to the preservation of cultural diversity within the school community. These practices not only enhance classroom dynamics and student identity formation but also resonate with global imperatives for inclusive and peace-oriented education. The study thereby underscores the necessity of embedding social competence at the heart of religious education, positioning teachers as critical agents in shaping future generations that are spiritually grounded and culturally inclusive.

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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