



The Importance of Social Relationships Between Christian Religious Education Teachers and Students: Implementation of Social Competence at SD Alam Bukit Hijau

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the significance of social relationships between Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers and students through the implementation of social competence at Bukit Hijau Nature School. The research investigates how teachers' social competence influences the quality of teacher-student relationships and its impact on students' spiritual and character development. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five CRE teachers, classroom observations, and document analysis. The findings reveal that social competence significantly enhances teacher-student relationships through effective communication, empathy, and collaborative learning environments. Teachers who demonstrate strong social competence create meaningful connections that facilitate students' spiritual growth, moral reasoning, and positive behavioral changes. Three key dimensions emerged: interpersonal communication skills, emotional intelligence in pedagogical practice, and the cultivation of inclusive learning communities. The study concludes that social competence is fundamental to effective Christian religious education, as it bridges theological instruction with lived experiences, thereby fostering holistic student development. Implications for teacher training programs and educational policy in faith-based schools are discussed.

Keywords: *Christian religious education, social competence, teacher, relationship*

INTRODUCTION

The quality of teacher-student relationships has been recognized as a cornerstone of effective education, influencing not only academic achievement but also students' social, emotional, and spiritual development. In the context of Christian Religious Education (CRE), these relationships assume additional significance as they serve as tangible expressions of Christian values such as love, compassion, and fellowship. Teachers are not merely transmitters of theological knowledge but also role models who embody the principles they teach, making their social competence a critical factor in educational

effectiveness. Social competence, defined as the ability to effectively navigate social interactions, demonstrate empathy, communicate clearly, and build positive relationships, has emerged as an essential pedagogical skill. For CRE teachers, social competence extends beyond general interpersonal skills to encompass the ability to create spiritually nurturing environments where students feel valued, understood, and supported in their faith journey. This competence becomes particularly crucial in contemporary educational contexts where students face diverse challenges, including secularization, moral relativism, and digital disconnection.

Bukit Hijau Nature School, located in North Sumatra, Indonesia, represents an innovative educational model that integrates Christian values with nature-based learning. The school's pedagogical approach emphasizes holistic development, experiential learning, and community building, creating a unique context for examining teacher-student relationships. The natural setting provides opportunities for informal interactions, collaborative activities, and authentic relationship building that may differ from conventional classroom environments. Despite growing recognition of social competence's importance in general education, limited research has specifically examined its role in Christian religious education settings, particularly in nature-based schools. This gap is significant given that CRE aims not only to impart knowledge but also to nurture faith, shape character, and develop ethical reasoning—outcomes that are deeply relational in nature. Understanding how CRE teachers' social competence influences their relationships with students and, consequently, students' spiritual and moral development, can inform teacher preparation programs and enhance educational practices in faith-based institutions. This study addresses the following research questions: (1) How do CRE teachers at Bukit Hijau Nature School implement social competence in their teaching practice? (2) What is the nature and quality of social relationships between CRE teachers and students? (3) How do these relationships influence students' spiritual and character development? By exploring these questions, this research contributes to both the theoretical understanding of social competence in religious education and the practical improvement of CRE teaching methodologies.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to provide an in-depth exploration of social relationships between CRE teachers and students at Bukit Hijau Nature School. The case study approach was selected for its capacity to capture the complexity, context-specificity, and nuanced dynamics of teacher-student interactions within a unique educational setting. The research was conducted at Bukit Hijau Nature School, a Christian primary and secondary school in North Sumatra, Indonesia, which integrates formal curriculum with nature-based experiential learning. The school serves approximately 180 students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and employs a holistic educational philosophy grounded in Christian values. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure rich information sources. Five CRE teachers (three female, two male) with teaching experience ranging from 4 to 15 years participated in the study. Additionally, 12 students (grades 5-9) were selected through stratified random sampling to represent different age groups and gender. Parents and school administrators also provided contextual information, though teachers and students constituted the primary data sources.

Data analysis followed thematic analysis procedures. Interview transcripts and field notes were coded using open coding to identify initial patterns. Axial coding then organized these codes into categories representing key dimensions of social competence and teacher-student relationships. Finally, selective coding identified core themes and their interrelationships. The analysis was conducted iteratively, with constant comparison between emerging themes and raw data. MAXQDA software was used to facilitate coding and theme management. Multiple strategies ensured research trustworthiness: (1) triangulation of data sources and methods, (2) member checking with participants to verify interpretations, (3) prolonged engagement at the research site, (4) peer debriefing with experienced qualitative researchers, and (5) maintenance of an audit trail documenting analytical decisions. The study received approval from the institutional ethics committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with parental consent for minor students. Participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw without consequences. Pseudonyms are used throughout this report to protect participant identity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Effective communication emerged as the foundational element of social competence, with CRE teachers demonstrating varied strategies to establish meaningful dialogue with students. Teachers emphasized active listening, described by one teacher as "not just hearing words but understanding the heart behind them." Observations confirmed that teachers frequently employed reflective listening, paraphrasing students' statements, and asking clarifying questions that conveyed genuine interest. Communication extended beyond formal classroom discourse to informal conversations during nature walks, meal times, and outdoor activities—opportunities unique to the school's nature-based approach. One teacher explained: "In the forest, barriers come down. Students share things they wouldn't in a traditional classroom. It's where real connection happens." Students corroborated this, with one stating: "When we're outside, teachers feel more like friends who understand us, not just people who teach us." Teachers also demonstrated cultural and developmental sensitivity in their communication, adapting vocabulary, examples, and interaction styles to students' ages and backgrounds. Younger students received more concrete, story-based instruction, while older students engaged in abstract theological discussions. This differentiation reflected teachers' understanding that effective communication requires meeting students where they are developmentally and culturally. Importantly, teachers used communication to model Christian principles. They consistently employed respectful language, admitted mistakes openly, and encouraged student voice. As one teacher noted: "I teach love and humility—I have to communicate with love and humility. My words need to match what I'm teaching about Christ."

Emotional Intelligence in Pedagogical Practice

Emotional intelligence constituted the second critical dimension of social competence, encompassing self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and relationship management. Teachers demonstrated heightened awareness of their own emotional states and their impact on students. One teacher reflected: "If I'm stressed or impatient, students feel it

immediately. I need to manage my emotions before entering the classroom because I set the emotional tone."

Empathy emerged as particularly significant, with teachers showing consistent ability to perceive and respond to students' emotional needs. Observations documented numerous instances where teachers recognized subtle signs of distress—a withdrawn posture, lack of participation, or emotional expressions—and responded appropriately. One observed interaction involved a teacher noticing a student's sadness, privately inquiring about the cause, and later integrating a lesson about God's comfort during difficult times, indirectly addressing the student's need without exposing them publicly. Students highly valued this empathetic responsiveness. One student shared: "My CRE teacher always knows when something is wrong. She doesn't force me to talk, but she lets me know she cares. That makes me trust her with my problems." This trust, built through consistent empathy, created safe spaces where students felt comfortable exploring spiritual questions, expressing doubts, and sharing personal struggles. Teachers also employed emotional intelligence to navigate conflicts constructively. Rather than punitive responses, teachers used conflicts as teaching moments about forgiveness, reconciliation, and Christian ethics. One observed conflict resolution session involved a teacher mediating a disagreement between students by facilitating dialogue, encouraging perspective-taking, and guiding them toward mutual understanding and apology—explicitly connecting the process to biblical teachings about peacemaking.

Cultivating Inclusive Spiritual Communities

The third theme highlighted how teachers' social competence contributed to creating inclusive learning communities where all students felt valued and belonged. Teachers intentionally designed collaborative activities that fostered peer relationships and collective spiritual exploration. Group projects, service learning, and worship activities were structured to ensure equal participation and mutual support. Inclusion extended to acknowledging diverse learning styles, abilities, and faith development stages. Teachers avoided judgmental attitudes toward students' varying levels of faith commitment or understanding. One teacher explained: "Faith is a journey, not a destination. Some students are deeply committed; others are questioning. My role is to welcome everyone wherever they are and help them take their next step." The nature school setting enhanced community building, as outdoor activities required cooperation, mutual support, and shared experiences that transcended typical classroom dynamics. Students frequently mentioned how activities like camping, nature conservation projects, and outdoor worship services strengthened their sense of community. One student stated: "When we work together outside, taking care of nature, we feel like a family. It's not just about learning about God—it's experiencing God's creation together." Teachers also modeled inclusive behavior by acknowledging their own ongoing spiritual growth, sharing appropriate personal faith experiences, and demonstrating that Christian life involves continuous learning. This vulnerability humanized teachers and made spiritual development feel accessible rather than unattainable. Furthermore, teachers connected classroom learning to broader community service, organizing activities where students applied Christian values by serving others. These experiences reinforced that Christian faith involves action and relationship with wider communities, not just knowledge acquisition.

The implementation of social competence through these three dimensions yielded observable impacts on students' spiritual and character development. Students demonstrated increased engagement with religious content, asking deeper questions and showing greater willingness to discuss faith-related topics. Teachers reported that strong relationships made students more receptive to spiritual guidance and moral instruction. Character development was evident in students' increased empathy toward peers, improved conflict resolution skills, and greater willingness to help others. Several students described changing behaviors based on their relationships with teachers who modeled Christian values. One student shared: "My teacher taught me that forgiveness isn't just saying sorry—it's really trying to understand and change. I'm trying to do that with my brother now." Students also exhibited growing spiritual confidence, with many reporting feeling more comfortable praying, sharing faith with others, and participating in church activities. The supportive relationships with teachers provided scaffolding for students' emerging spiritual identities. The findings illuminate how social competence serves as a critical pedagogical tool in Christian religious education, functioning as the medium through which theological concepts become lived realities. Three key insights emerge from this study. First, effective communication in CRE transcends information transmission to become a relational practice that embodies Christian love and respect. The teachers' communication strategies reflect Paulo Freire's concept of dialogical education, where learning occurs through mutual exchange rather than one-way instruction. In the CRE context, this dialogue becomes sacramental—a means through which divine love is experienced. The nature school setting uniquely facilitates this by providing informal contexts where hierarchical barriers diminish, enabling more authentic communication. This finding suggests that physical learning environments significantly influence relational dynamics, a consideration for school design and pedagogical planning. Second, emotional intelligence emerges not as a secular skill but as an expression of Christian spirituality. The teachers' empathy, self-awareness, and emotional responsiveness reflect theological concepts of compassion, self-examination, and bearing one another's burdens. This integration challenges false dichotomies between spiritual and emotional domains, suggesting that effective CRE requires teachers who are emotionally mature and spiritually grounded. The finding has implications for teacher preparation programs, which should incorporate both theological education and social-emotional learning. Third, the cultivation of inclusive spiritual communities addresses a critical need in contemporary religious education—creating spaces where questioning, doubt, and diverse faith expressions are welcomed rather than suppressed. In an era of increasing religious disaffiliation among youth, particularly in pluralistic contexts like Indonesia, the teachers' non-judgmental, journey-oriented approach may be essential for sustained engagement. By prioritizing belonging before believing, teachers create conditions where authentic faith can develop organically rather than through coercion or conformity. The study also reveals tensions worth noting. Teachers balanced between being relational and maintaining appropriate professional boundaries—a challenge requiring ongoing discernment. Additionally, while nature-based settings offered relational advantages, they also presented logistical challenges and were weather-dependent, suggesting that replication in conventional settings would require creative adaptation.

These findings contribute to educational theory by demonstrating that in values-based education, particularly religious education, the medium truly is the message. Teachers' social competence does not merely facilitate content delivery; it constitutes the curriculum itself. Students learn Christian love by experiencing it, learn forgiveness by practicing it in relationships, and develop faith community skills by participating in inclusive communities. This embodied pedagogy challenges transmission models of religious education, advocating instead for relational, experiential approaches. Practically, the study suggests several implications. Teacher preparation programs should integrate social competence training, including communication skills, emotional intelligence, and community-building strategies, alongside theological education. Professional development should include opportunities for teachers to reflect on their relational practices and receive mentoring in social competence. Schools might also consider how physical environments and scheduling can facilitate informal teacher-student interactions that complement formal instruction. Limitations of this study include its single-site focus, which limits generalizability, and its reliance on self-reported data, which may reflect social desirability bias. The relatively short observation period may not capture long-term relationship dynamics or seasonal variations. Future research could employ longitudinal designs to track relationship development and its sustained impacts, comparative studies across different school types, and quantitative approaches to measure relationships between specific social competence dimensions and student outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that social competence is fundamental to effective Christian religious education, serving as the bridge between theological instruction and lived Christian experience. At Bukit Hijau Nature School, CRE teachers' implementation of social competence through effective communication, emotional intelligence, and inclusive community-building significantly enhanced teacher-student relationships and fostered students' spiritual and character development. The findings reveal that in CRE, relationships are not merely supportive of learning—they are constitutive of it. Students learn Christian values by experiencing them in relationship with teachers who embody those values. Social competence enables teachers to create the relational conditions necessary for authentic spiritual exploration, moral reasoning, and faith development. As educational contexts become increasingly diverse and complex, the ability to build meaningful relationships across differences becomes ever more critical. For faith-based schools, investing in teachers' social competence is not optional but essential to their educational mission. This study provides evidence that such investment yields significant returns in students' holistic development, suggesting that social competence should be recognized as a core professional competency for religious educators. This research affirms that Christian education is fundamentally relational, reflecting the relational nature of Christian theology itself. Just as Christian faith centers on relationship with God and community, effective Christian education centers on teachers who can create relational spaces where students encounter divine love through human connection. In this sense, teachers' social competence becomes a form of ministry—a practical expression of incarnational theology where the Word becomes flesh in daily interactions.

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