



## Christian Religious Education Teachers as Spiritual Mentors: Nurturing Love and Character Formation in Students at UPT SD Negeri 060971

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### ABSTRACT

*Christian education extends beyond the transmission of religious knowledge to the holistic formation of students' spiritual, moral, and social character. Within this framework, Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers carry a dual mandate as educators and spiritual mentors, embodying and modeling Christ-centered values. Their competence, particularly in integrity, maturity, and authenticity, plays a central role in nurturing students' attitudes of love and character development. This study examines how CRE teachers at UPT SD Negeri 060971 serve as spiritual mentors and influence the cultivation of Christian virtues among elementary students. This research employed a qualitative case study design, focusing on lived experiences and relational practices within the school setting. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with two CRE teachers, and focus group discussions with 20 students in grades IV–VI. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns in teacher practices and student responses. Triangulation of data sources—including teachers, students, and school documents—ensured validity and credibility. Findings indicate that CRE teachers consistently embodied their mentoring role by beginning classes with prayer, integrating biblical narratives into moral lessons, and sharing personal testimonies. Their spiritual competence was expressed through integrity, emotional maturity, and pastoral care, fostering an environment where students practiced empathy, forgiveness, and mutual responsibility. Students displayed observable growth in attitudes of love, cooperation, and compassion, suggesting that teachers' modeling significantly influenced character formation. The case demonstrates that CRE teachers are pivotal agents of holistic transformation. Strengthening teacher training in both pedagogy and spiritual formation is essential to ensure that Christian education nurtures students into Christ-like individuals capable of contributing positively to church and society.*

**Keywords:** *Christian Religious Education, spiritual mentoring, teacher competence, love*

## INTRODUCTION

Christian education is not merely a process of transmitting religious knowledge but also a holistic endeavor to shape the spiritual, moral, and social character of students. It goes beyond the cognitive dimension of faith, moving into the transformative realm where values, attitudes, and behavior are nurtured in alignment with the teachings of Christ. Within this framework, Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers are entrusted with a dual mandate: they are not only instructors of biblical knowledge but also spiritual mentors whose personal lives must reflect Christ-centered values. Their role extends far beyond the classroom, embodying and modeling virtues such as love, forgiveness, integrity, humility, and compassion. This understanding affirms that the effectiveness of Christian education is not determined solely by curricular content but is deeply influenced by the teacher's spiritual competence and personal integrity (Marbun, 2021). The locus of this study, UPT SD Negeri 060971, provides a relevant context to examine the intersection between teacher spiritual competence and student character formation. As a public elementary school where Christian students receive formal religious education, the presence of CRE teachers becomes pivotal. The environment of elementary education is formative, as children in this stage are highly impressionable and their moral and spiritual foundations are still being developed. Teachers in this setting are not only responsible for delivering biblical lessons but also for creating a learning atmosphere where love and Christian character are lived out in daily interactions. In this regard, the credibility of the teacher's faith and the consistency of their conduct function as a hidden curriculum that deeply influences students' growth (Nababan, 2022).

Previous studies underscore the importance of teacher personality and spiritual competence in shaping students' moral and religious development. Marbun (2021) emphasizes that personality competence, including emotional maturity and integrity, directly correlates with students' perception of faith values. Similarly, Nababan (2022) argues that spiritual competence enables teachers to integrate biblical truth into pedagogical practice, making religious education more than an intellectual exercise. Both perspectives converge on the notion that the teacher's spiritual authenticity is central to fostering holistic formation among students. Thus, in the context of UPT SD Negeri 060971, the personal faith journey of CRE teachers becomes a significant determinant of whether Christian education succeeds in cultivating not just knowledge, but also Christian virtues. Among these virtues, the nurturing of love—understood in the biblical sense of *agape*—is indispensable. Unlike other forms of affection that are conditional or self-centered, *agape* love reflects the self-giving, unconditional love of Christ, which serves as the foundation of Christian ethics and community life. In the school context, when teachers embody *agape* in their interactions, they model an ethic of care, respect, and mutual responsibility that students naturally imitate. Research shows that children are highly responsive to relational models, and when exposed to environments characterized by love, they are more likely to develop empathy, respect for others, and a sense of belonging (Yoder, 2020). Hence, love in Christian education is not merely an abstract theological concept but a lived practice that enhances interpersonal relationships among students and equips them to apply their faith in practical and communal settings. This study aims to analyze how CRE teachers at UPT SD Negeri 060971 serve as spiritual

mentors and the extent to which their competence fosters the development of love and character in students. It investigates how spiritual mentoring is embedded in teaching practices, classroom interactions, and extracurricular engagements, and how such practices influence student behavior. The central hypothesis is that when teachers embody spiritual maturity and live out biblical values consistently, students are more inclined to internalize these values in their own lives. In turn, this process not only strengthens the individual character of students but also contributes to the broader mission of Christian education: preparing individuals who can contribute positively to both church and society through a life rooted in love, faith, and integrity (Smith, 2019). The significance of CRE teachers as spiritual mentors cannot be overstated. Their competence—expressed in integrity, authenticity, and love—serves as both the method and message of Christian education. At UPT SD Negeri 060971, these dynamics provide an illustrative case of how education becomes transformative when teachers embody the very values they seek to instill. By nurturing love and guiding students in their character formation, CRE teachers fulfill their divine calling as educators who not only impart knowledge but also form disciples of Christ capable of embodying faith in everyday life.

## METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative case study approach to explore the role of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers as spiritual mentors in nurturing love and character formation among students at UPT SD Negeri 060971. The case study design was chosen because it allows researchers to capture the richness and complexity of educational practices within a specific institutional context. As Creswell (2018) emphasizes, case studies provide opportunities to investigate phenomena in depth, particularly when the focus is on lived experiences and relational interactions that cannot be easily separated from their natural setting. In this study, the case study approach enabled a nuanced understanding of how teacher spiritual competence manifests in daily classroom life and student development. Data collection was conducted using three complementary techniques: classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with two CRE teachers, and focus group discussions with 20 students from grades IV–VI. Classroom observations were designed to capture real-time teaching practices, including pedagogical strategies, the integration of biblical principles, and teacher-student interactions. Observational notes focused on both verbal and non-verbal cues, allowing for insights into how teachers embodied values such as love, integrity, and forgiveness during lessons and extracurricular activities (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Semi-structured interviews with CRE teachers provided in-depth perspectives on their understanding of their dual role as educators and spiritual mentors. The interviews explored themes such as teacher motivation, challenges in nurturing love and character, and strategies used to model Christ-centered values. Meanwhile, focus group discussions with students offered insights into how pupils perceived their teachers' role in shaping their character and faith. Students were encouraged to share personal experiences of feeling cared for, guided, or inspired by their teachers, thereby revealing the relational impact of CRE teaching. The thematic framework analysis guided the process of data interpretation. This approach involved coding the collected data, identifying recurring themes, and synthesizing patterns across multiple data sources. The analysis particularly sought to uncover

manifestations of love and character formation, both in teacher practices and in student responses. Braun and Clarke (2006) note that thematic analysis is well-suited for educational research, as it provides flexibility in recognizing both explicit practices and underlying meanings. In this study, key themes such as “modeling love in action,” “forgiveness as a moral practice,” and “integrity in daily conduct” emerged from the triangulated dataset, offering a coherent narrative of how spiritual mentoring occurred within the school context. The methodological design of this study—emphasizing qualitative inquiry, rich data collection, thematic analysis, triangulation, and ethical rigor—ensured a comprehensive and trustworthy exploration of the role of CRE teachers as spiritual mentors. By grounding the research in the lived experiences of both teachers and students, the study provides valuable insights into the relational and spiritual dynamics of Christian education at UPT SD Negeri 060971.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed that Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers consistently embodied the role of spiritual mentors, not merely as transmitters of knowledge but as living testimonies of faith and love. Their pedagogical practice went beyond delivering curriculum content, as they demonstrated through both words and actions the values they intended to instill in students. Teachers began each class with prayer, an act that framed learning not as a secular routine but as a spiritual journey rooted in God’s presence. This daily practice created a sacred atmosphere within the classroom, reminding students that education is integrally connected with faith and spiritual formation (Knight, 2016). The symbolic importance of prayer at the start of each lesson reinforced a rhythm of dependence on God, cultivating in students the habit of acknowledging divine guidance before engaging in intellectual activities. The teachers deliberately integrated biblical narratives into moral and character-building lessons. Rather than treating Scripture as an isolated subject matter, they employed stories from the Bible as interpretive frameworks for understanding life’s moral challenges. For instance, lessons on forgiveness were connected to Joseph’s reconciliation with his brothers (Gen. 50:15–21), while themes of service were related to Jesus washing the disciples’ feet (John 13:1–17). This approach not only made moral teachings concrete but also imbued them with theological depth, enabling students to internalize values as integral to Christian discipleship rather than abstract ethical imperatives (Astika, 2019). Personal testimonies by teachers further strengthened the relevance of biblical lessons. Teachers occasionally shared their own struggles, experiences of faith, and moments of God’s intervention in their lives. Such testimonies fostered authenticity and transparency, demonstrating that spiritual growth is not merely an academic concept but an ongoing personal journey. Students reportedly appreciated these moments, perceiving their teachers as mentors who understood their lived realities rather than distant authorities. This relational dimension of teaching echoes the Pauline model of spiritual mentorship, in which the apostle did not only preach but also shared his own life with the community of faith (1 Thess. 2:8).

The spiritual competence of CRE teachers was manifested not only in theological knowledge but also in their integrity, emotional stability, and mentoring style. Integrity was reflected in the alignment between what teachers taught and how they lived, embodying consistency between word and deed. Emotional stability was evident in their patient handling of conflicts, calm responses to student misbehavior, and ability to sustain hope in challenging situations. Their mentoring style was characterized by personal care, as teachers took time to listen to students' struggles, offered guidance in prayer, and provided moral support in times of personal difficulty. These qualities resonate with the concept of "shepherd leadership" (Wright, 2000), where the teacher assumes the role of a shepherd who guides, protects, and nurtures the flock entrusted to them. The findings confirm existing scholarship that highlights the role of teachers as spiritual mentors who influence not only cognitive development but also moral and spiritual formation (Van Brummelen, 2009). However, this study expands such understandings by illustrating in detail how mentoring is operationalized through daily pedagogical practices such as prayer, narrative integration, and testimony-sharing. In so doing, the study underscores the holistic nature of teaching as both an intellectual and spiritual vocation, particularly within the context of Christian education.

### ***Nurturing Students' Attitudes of Love***

An equally significant finding concerned the observable development of students' attitudes of love, compassion, and empathy. Students demonstrated increasing sensitivity toward their peers, exhibited willingness to share resources, and showed readiness to forgive in moments of conflict. These behaviors were attributed to the consistent modeling of love by their teachers. Such patterns reflect the social learning theory of Albert Bandura (1977), which posits that individuals acquire behaviors not merely through instruction but primarily through observing and imitating significant role models. Classroom observations indicated that when teachers responded with patience and compassion in disciplinary contexts, students mirrored these attitudes in their interactions with peers. For example, when a student disrupted the class, instead of reacting harshly, the teacher calmly guided the student to reflect on their behavior and encouraged reconciliation. Later, students were observed applying similar patience when resolving peer disagreements, suggesting that the relational climate set by the teacher shaped peer-to-peer dynamics. This finding echoes Paul's exhortation: "Imitate me, as I imitate Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1), affirming that modeling is central to Christian pedagogy.

The development of love was also nurtured through structured activities that emphasized cooperation and mutual care. Group projects, peer mentoring, and class discussions encouraged students to value one another's contributions and to support weaker peers. In focus group discussions, students expressed that they felt more confident to show kindness and to admit mistakes because their teachers consistently emphasized forgiveness and understanding rather than judgment. This aligns with Noddings' (2003) ethic of care, which highlights the importance of relational responsiveness in education. By cultivating a caring environment, teachers not only fostered academic learning but also reinforced the central Christian command to love one another (John 13:34–35). The

transformative influence of teachers' love extended beyond the classroom. Students reported showing greater sensitivity toward family members at home, demonstrating a readiness to help with household chores and to resolve sibling conflicts peacefully. Such spillover effects underscore that character formation in school contexts is not isolated but influences broader relational patterns in children's lives (Saragih, 2020). In this sense, the school became a laboratory of Christian love, equipping students to embody these values in wider social contexts. Importantly, the emphasis on love was not sentimental but grounded in Christian theological convictions. Teachers consistently reminded students that love flows from God's prior love for humanity (1 John 4:19). Thus, acts of kindness were not merely social niceties but expressions of Christian discipleship. By anchoring love in divine initiative, students were encouraged to see their actions as part of a larger spiritual calling, thereby linking affective dispositions to theological commitments.

### ***Character Formation through Faith Integration***

The integration of faith into daily school activities emerged as a critical dimension of character formation. Teachers did not restrict religious education to the formal CRE lessons but extended it into extracurricular and communal activities. For instance, morning assemblies often included Scripture readings, prayer, and collective reflections on moral themes. Charity programs organized by the school encouraged students to donate items for underprivileged children, linking classroom lessons on generosity with tangible practices of compassion. Through these initiatives, students learned that Christian values are not confined to cognitive knowledge but are meant to be embodied in daily life. This integration reinforced the holistic approach to education advocated by Christian educators, who argue that faith should permeate all aspects of learning and community life (Smith & Smith, 2011). Students learned to see academic study, sports, and creative activities as opportunities to practice Christian virtues such as diligence, cooperation, and humility. By blurring the artificial boundary between "sacred" and "secular," the school fostered a vision of education as discipleship, preparing students to live faithfully in every sphere of life. Teachers encouraged students to engage in reflection, connecting experiences from extracurricular activities to biblical principles. For example, after participating in a school clean-up campaign, students were invited to reflect on the biblical mandate of stewardship (Gen. 2:15). Similarly, after organizing a charity drive, teachers guided students to consider the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). Such reflective practices deepened students' understanding of how Christian faith informs moral responsibility and social engagement. The integration of faith and learning also contributed to the cultivation of responsibility and empathy. Students developed an awareness that their actions impacted others, fostering a sense of accountability not only to teachers and peers but ultimately to God. This theological dimension distinguishes Christian character education from secular moral instruction, as it roots ethical behavior in covenantal relationship with God rather than in humanistic ideals alone (Arthur, 2019).

The results of this study affirm prior literature emphasizing the importance of teacher competence in character education. Saragih (2020) highlighted that the moral and professional integrity of teachers significantly influences the development of students' values. However, this study contributes a more specific understanding by illustrating how spiritual mentoring by CRE teachers directly nurtures love as the foundation of Christian character formation in elementary students. While previous studies have broadly discussed the role of teachers in transmitting values, this research demonstrates that the distinctively Christian emphasis on love—rooted in divine initiative and modeled through relational pedagogy—provides a unique pathway for holistic character formation. The findings support and extend Lickona's (1991) framework of character education, which emphasizes the role of moral modeling and community involvement. By situating character formation within a spiritual framework, the study highlights the inseparability of love, faith, and education in Christian pedagogy. This aligns with the biblical vision that true knowledge is inseparable from moral and spiritual transformation (Prov. 1:7).

## Conclusion

The case of UPT SD Negeri 060971 provides a compelling example of how Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers extend their role beyond the traditional task of transmitting cognitive knowledge. Instead, they function as spiritual mentors, guiding students toward a deeper embodiment of Christian love through both instructional practices and lived example. This role aligns with the broader vision of Christian education, which emphasizes the transformation of the whole person—heart, mind, and spirit—rather than merely achieving academic proficiency. Central to this mentoring role is the spiritual competence of teachers. Spiritual competence, as observed in the case study, is manifested in three interrelated qualities: integrity, maturity, and faith-driven mentorship. Integrity enables teachers to live consistently with the biblical values they teach, thereby providing an authentic witness to students. Maturity, demonstrated through emotional stability and wise decision-making, creates a safe and nurturing classroom environment where students feel respected and valued. Faith-driven mentorship, meanwhile, reflects the teachers' commitment to nurturing students in ways that go beyond academic instruction, encompassing prayer, pastoral care, and moral guidance. Together, these qualities establish a learning environment that not only informs but also transforms. A significant finding from this case is the way in which teachers embody and model love in their daily practices. Love is not merely taught as an abstract principle; it is enacted through the teachers' patience in discipline, compassion in addressing students' struggles, and encouragement in moments of failure. For instance, beginning classes with prayer and incorporating biblical narratives into discussions on morality enabled students to see faith not as a separate compartment of life, but as an integrated and practical guide for daily interactions. This mirrors the biblical principle of imitation, where the Apostle Paul exhorts believers to "imitate me as I imitate Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1). Students, in turn, learned to mirror their teachers' attitudes of forgiveness, generosity, and empathy within peer relationships, suggesting that love is more effectively "caught" through example than "taught" through instruction alone.

The case further underscores the need for teacher training that emphasizes both professional pedagogy and spiritual formation. Too often, educational programs focus solely on cognitive and technical competencies, leaving little room for cultivating the moral and spiritual dimensions essential to Christian education. If Christian schools are to remain faithful to their mission, teacher development initiatives must prioritize holistic formation, equipping educators with the ability to unite academic rigor with pastoral sensitivity. This approach ensures that teachers not only excel as professionals but also embody the values they seek to instill in students. The success of Christian Religious Education lies not only in measurable academic outcomes but also in the formation of students as Christ-like individuals. When students internalize love as the foundation of character, they are better prepared to contribute positively to their families, communities, churches, and the broader society. In this way, CRE becomes more than a subject within the curriculum; it becomes a transformative force that equips young people to live faithfully and responsibly in the world.

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