



The Implementation of Christian Religious Education in Strengthening Students' Religious Identity at SMA Negeri 1 Sitolu Ori

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to describe and analyze the implementation of Christian Religious Education (CRE) in strengthening students' religious identity at SMA Negeri 1 Sitolu Ori. In this era of digitalization, students are constantly occupied with gadgets—playing games, engaging with social media, creating content, and more. Frequently, students prioritize their gadgets over studying, ignore parental advice, neglect household responsibilities, and even rarely participate in family prayer gatherings. If this condition continues unchecked, it may lead students astray, resulting in the loss of their true identity as Christians. This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach. The researcher seeks to gather information and understand real-life occurrences within the setting of SMA Negeri 1 Sitolu Ori. The primary data were collected through direct interviews with key informants, including the principal of SMA Negeri 1 Sitolu Ori, the student affairs coordinator, other Christian Religious Education teachers, spiritual development mentors, homeroom teachers, and students of the school. The findings of this study reveal that the implementation of CRE in strengthening students' religious identity has not yet been fully optimized. Therefore, to enhance students' religious identity at SMA Negeri 1 Sitolu Ori, several efforts have been undertaken by Christian Religious Education teachers. These include integrating technology into CRE learning, conducting monthly worship services, organizing weekly spiritual development activities, leading praise and worship sessions in class, and requiring students to bring their Bibles and church worship journals during CRE lessons.

Keywords: *Christian Religious Education, Religious Identity, Students*

INTRODUCTION

Christian Religious Education (CRE) plays a crucial role in shaping students' character and strengthening their religious identity within the educational context. Beyond transmitting Christian values and teachings, CRE serves to nurture and reinforce students' sense of religious belonging, enabling them to live according to the principles of their faith and to

bring positive contributions to society. When implemented effectively in schools, CRE is expected to produce individuals with a deep understanding of their religion and a strong personality grounded in Christian values. In today's digital era, students are often preoccupied with gadgets, such as playing games, engaging on social media, or creating online content. Frequently, students prioritize their devices over academic learning, neglect parental advice, ignore household responsibilities, and even avoid participating in family prayers. If left unchecked, these behaviors may lead students astray, ultimately causing a loss of their authentic Christian identity. From another perspective, however, such tendencies can be seen as part of the natural developmental stage of adolescents, particularly at the senior high school level, as they search for self-identity.

The issue of identity formation among Christian adolescents today, especially high school students, is closely linked to the influence of social media. Social media has become a benchmark for self-presentation and lifestyle, serving as a platform for adolescents to gain recognition within the digital community (Awang, Prayitno, & Engel, 2021, p. 99). In addition, popular culture also plays a significant role in this process. The expert explains that popular culture, such as K-pop and K-drama, shaped by postmodern thought, has introduced paradigm shifts—including in identity construction. Such cultural trends inevitably influence Christian adolescents' worldview and self-concept. Another phenomenon observed among Christian youth is their engagement during worship services or youth fellowships; instead of focusing on worship, many are distracted by their smartphones or by conversations about viral content circulating on social media. If such patterns are not addressed constructively, they may erode the essence of students' religious identity. Religious identity itself refers to an individual's understanding, belief, and practice of the religion they embrace. This identity cannot be imposed externally but develops from personal conviction. Specifically, Christian religious identity involves faith in Jesus Christ as Savior, understanding and following the teachings of Scripture, engaging in worship through church services, personal prayer, and participation in sacraments such as Baptism and the Lord's Supper, as well as active involvement in Christian organizations and ministries.

Christian religious identity is the way individuals and communities of faith recognize, embody, and express their beliefs in everyday life, encompassing convictions, values, rituals, and social relationships rooted in biblical teaching. Given the growing tendency of students to become absorbed in digital life, strengthening religious identity through Christian Religious Education at school becomes an essential factor in guiding students both personally and socially. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate how CRE contributes to reinforcing students' religious identity and to explore the challenges encountered in its implementation, particularly in the context of SMA Negeri 1 Sitolu Ori.

METHODS

A method can be understood as a practical procedure that must be followed, whereas methodology is a set of scientific principles designed to uncover the truth. Accordingly, research methodology refers to systematic, scientifically grounded steps undertaken in the investigation of a particular research problem. In this study, the researcher adopted

a descriptive qualitative approach. This approach was selected to capture and interpret the real conditions at SMA Negeri 1 Sitolu Ori, especially regarding the practice of Christian Religious Education (PAK). Qualitative research emphasizes non-numerical data, focusing on the collection and interpretation of narrative information (Sugiyono, 2015:3). Within this framework, the researcher acts as the central instrument who defines the focus of inquiry, identifies and selects informants, manages the process of data collection, evaluates data credibility, conducts analysis, and formulates interpretations before arriving at conclusions (Sugiyono et al., 2015:306). Field data were collected through observation, interviews, and the review of relevant documents, which were subsequently analyzed and presented narratively. The primary data consisted of insights obtained directly from informants, including the school principal, the vice principal for student affairs, Christian education teachers, the spiritual advisor, homeroom teachers, and students. Secondary data were derived from supporting materials such as spiritual activity reports, worship schedules prepared by the spiritual advisor, and other related documents. Data analysis was carried out through three interrelated phases: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing with verification. This methodological design was expected to provide a comprehensive answer to the central research question, namely the implementation of Christian Religious Education in reinforcing students' religious identity at SMA Negeri 1 Sitolu Ori.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on the findings derived from observation and interviews with students, the principal of SMA Negeri 1 Sitolu Ori, the vice principal for student affairs, Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers, the school's spiritual advisor, homeroom teachers, and students themselves, it was revealed that the implementation of Christian Religious Education (PAK) in strengthening students' religious identity at SMA Negeri 1 Sitolu Ori presents both encouraging practices and significant challenges. SMA Negeri 1 Sitolu Ori is a secondary school located in Hilisaloo Village, Sitolu Ori District, North Nias Regency, North Sumatra Province. The school accommodates 327 students, drawn from various family backgrounds. Out of these, three students are Catholic while the remaining 324 identify as Protestant Christians, largely affiliated with denominational churches such as BNKP and GNKPI. Despite belonging to the same faith tradition, the students' understandings of Christianity differ considerably. These variations stem primarily from the diverse educational backgrounds and religious commitments of their parents, which in turn shape the faith formation of their children. This disparity highlights that religious identity cannot be assumed to be uniform even within a shared denominational context, but rather is significantly mediated by family upbringing and parental example.

The school employs three Christian education teachers, all of whom hold undergraduate degrees in Christian Religious Education (PAK) or Theology and are part of a teacher working group (MGMP). Within classroom practice, a regulation has been established requiring students to bring both their Bible and their church worship report book to every CRE class. However, observations show that many students fail to comply with this

regulation. The reasons provided vary: some students reported that their Bibles were being used by siblings, some stated they did not own a personal copy, while others relied solely on digital Bibles available through their smartphones. Similarly, some students neglected to bring their church worship report books, offering excuses that were often repetitive. Interviews also revealed that many students acknowledged that their parents did not regularly attend Sunday worship services and did not consistently conduct family devotions either in the morning or evening. This was further confirmed by the researcher, who as a member of the same church community observed a significant absence of parents and students from weekly services. In response to these findings, the researcher, serving as a CRE teacher at the school, undertook several interventions. These included providing direct guidance to students who consistently failed to bring their Bibles or church worship reports, as well as those who admitted to neglecting church attendance. In cases of repeated non-compliance, parents were summoned to receive additional pastoral support and counseling. Such measures were deemed essential, as without corrective action, students risked developing a nominal or superficial Christian identity, treating religion merely as a label rather than as an authentic expression of faith.

The implementation of Christian Religious Education at SMA Negeri 1 Sitolu Ori has not yet reached optimal levels. While certain religious practices are in place, such as beginning school activities with prayer and the singing of hymns during morning assemblies coordinated by the student council (OSIS) and the spiritual development coordinator, other elements remain inconsistent. For instance, school worship services are not always conducted regularly or punctually, and extracurricular religious activities are not consistently integrated into students' daily routines. Students themselves reported that the partial and irregular implementation of PAK within the school had limited impact on strengthening their personal faith and religious identity. Although monthly communal worship services and celebrations of major Christian holidays such as Christmas and Easter are maintained, these alone were insufficient to create sustained spiritual formation. At the family level, the situation was similarly concerning. Parental involvement in nurturing the spiritual lives of students appeared minimal, often limited to reminding their children to pray or read the Bible without consistent follow-up or modeling. Many parents admitted that their children were reluctant to attend worship services and seldom opened the Bible at home. This lack of sustained parental engagement contributed to a weakened environment for the reinforcement of religious identity.

Another prominent challenge identified was the excessive use of mobile phones among students. Many students spent more time engaged in gaming, social media, or consuming digital content than in prayer, Bible study, or church participation. This reliance on digital entertainment significantly distracted them from spiritual practices and often introduced them to content that undermined their Christian faith. Several students openly admitted to preferring mobile phone use over attending church services, while others confessed to experiencing doubts about their faith after encountering secular or atheistic content on platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and other social media. These findings underscore the pervasive influence of digital culture on the spiritual identity of adolescents, necessitating greater involvement of parents, teachers, and spiritual mentors in guiding students to navigate technology responsibly. The study also found evidence of positive

identity development among students. Despite distractions, many students demonstrated a conscious recognition of their Christian identity. When interviewed, several students explicitly affirmed their faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and personal Savior, expressed awareness of the importance of maintaining a relationship with God through prayer, Bible reading, and worship, and recognized the centrality of God in their daily lives as adolescents. These findings suggest that, while external challenges such as technology and parental disengagement persist, the seeds of Christian identity are present among students and can be nurtured through consistent religious education. This aligns with Groome's (2014:161) perspective that self-identity involves self-image, value systems, and worldview. Students at SMA Negeri 1 Sitolu Ori have begun to form self-awareness as Christian adolescents by acknowledging God's role in their lives and recognizing Scripture as a guiding framework. The challenges posed by technology cannot be underestimated. The pervasive presence of mobile phones in students' lives reflects the broader reality of Generation Z, who were born and raised in an era of rapid technological development. Subowo (2021:384) notes that the lives of Generation Z are inseparable from the use of mobile phones, given that all information is now available instantly online. While this technological integration brings opportunities for creative engagement, it also introduces risks of misuse, particularly in ways that damage moral and spiritual development. This observation highlights the dual role of technology: it can either be harnessed for educational and spiritual purposes or become a destructive force when left unchecked.

Despite these challenges, the study found that the implementation of Christian Religious Education did contribute meaningfully to strengthening students' religious identity. Evidence of this can be seen in the use of the "Merdeka Curriculum" for religion and character education in grades X and XI, as confirmed by CRE teachers through teaching modules, lesson plans (ATP), and teacher-student handbooks. Harianto (2012:16) argues that curricula are educational programs that include objectives, materials, and strategies designed to foster student development. In the context of CRE, the curriculum is deeply rooted in biblical content, with the specific goal of leading students to know, understand, and accept Jesus Christ as their personal Savior. This objective corresponds with Nuhamara's (2009:53) theory of self-identity, which emphasizes the process of self-discovery and recognition of one's true self. In this sense, the CRE curriculum at SMA Negeri 1 Sitolu Ori guides students toward developing a clear understanding of themselves as Christian adolescents. Teachers have also taken concrete steps to reinforce students' religious identity. For example, technology is increasingly being used in CRE classrooms to create more engaging and reflective learning environments. Video presentations of biblical themes not only make lessons more interactive but also evoke emotional and spiritual reflection among students. Monthly school-wide worship services have been designed to provide opportunities for reflection, repentance, and renewal, often accompanied by music, modern liturgy, and audiovisual media. These activities not only strengthen students' religious identity but also teach them how to integrate technology in constructive ways. Additionally, extracurricular spiritual development programs held weekly after school allow students to develop practical skills such as playing church music, organizing worship services, leading praise sessions, memorizing

Scripture, and even preparing and delivering short sermons. Such activities contribute to students' ability to live out their Christian faith in both practical and meaningful ways.

Daily practices also play a role. Students are encouraged to lead praise sessions at the beginning of each school day and during classroom activities. This routine reinforces the discipline of worship and cultivates gratitude and acknowledgment of God's presence in daily life. Moreover, the requirement for students to bring Bibles and church worship report books has continued, with non-compliance addressed through guidance and, if necessary, parental involvement. These practices, though simple, create consistent opportunities for students to integrate faith into the rhythm of their schooling. The findings also highlight the broader role of Christian Religious Education as both informative and transformative. As Tando (2013) explains, CRE is not merely about transferring knowledge but about shaping students to become more Christlike in thought, attitude, and action. Within the Indonesian educational context, CRE is embedded in the national curriculum as a means of fostering spiritual and moral development among Christian students. Its purpose is to ensure that faith is not limited to intellectual understanding but is lived out through personal, family, community, and national life. Thus, CRE at SMA Negeri 1 Sitolu Ori plays a vital role in bridging the gap between knowledge and practice, helping students internalize values and live them out authentically.

The results of this study further confirm that religious identity formation is a complex process shaped by multiple factors, including curriculum, teacher competence, school environment, parental involvement, and the pervasive influence of technology. Teachers serve as central figures in this process, not only by delivering lessons but also by modeling faith, guiding reflection, and creating opportunities for practice. Parents, on the other hand, play a decisive role in either reinforcing or undermining school-based efforts, as their engagement—or lack thereof—directly affects students' spiritual development. Technology, while challenging, can also serve as a powerful tool for learning if properly guided. The implementation of Christian Religious Education at SMA Negeri 1 Sitolu Ori reflects both strengths and weaknesses. While students are beginning to develop awareness of their Christian identity, challenges such as irregular worship practices, weak parental involvement, and overreliance on mobile technology continue to hinder deeper spiritual formation. Nevertheless, through consistent application of curriculum, integration of technology in meaningful ways, monthly and weekly religious programs, and teacher-led initiatives, CRE continues to serve as a crucial means of strengthening students' religious identity. Ultimately, the findings underscore that Christian Religious Education, when implemented effectively, provides not only knowledge of Christian faith but also transformative experiences that shape students into committed, Christ-centered individuals capable of living out their faith authentically in family, church, and society.

Conclusion

The implementation of Christian Religious Education in strengthening students' religious identity has not yet reached its optimal potential. This is reflected in the inconsistency of worship practices, which are not always carried out punctually or regularly according to the schedule. Nevertheless, the school maintains a spiritual foundation in its daily activities by beginning learning sessions with prayer and Christian songs during morning assemblies, coordinated by OSIS and the teacher in charge of spiritual development. To further strengthen students' religious identity, Christian Religious Education teachers have adopted several strategies, including the integration of technology into PAK learning, the facilitation of monthly worship services, weekly spiritual development programs, leading praise sessions in the classroom, and requiring students to bring the Bible during Christian Religious Education classes along with maintaining church worship reports. These practices demonstrate the significant role of PAK teachers not only as educators but also as spiritual mentors who foster students' faith, identity, and character in alignment with Christian values.

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