



Enhancing Students' Tolerance through Christian Religious Education and Teachers' Social Competence: Insights from UPT SDN Percobaan Medan

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ABSTRACT

Indonesia's pluralistic society, marked by ethnic and religious diversity, requires education that not only imparts knowledge but also fosters tolerance as a foundation for peaceful coexistence. Christian Religious Education (CRE) has the potential to play a dual role in nurturing students' spiritual growth and preparing them to engage respectfully with differences. However, the effectiveness of CRE in promoting tolerance is closely linked to the social competence of teachers, who serve not only as educators but also as role models. This study explores how CRE, when mediated through socially competent teachers, contributes to tolerance formation among students at UPT SDN Percobaan Medan, a public elementary school in a multicultural setting. A qualitative case study design was adopted to capture the lived experiences of teachers, students, and parents. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and parental testimonies, and analyzed using thematic coding guided by indicators of tolerance (respect, openness, cooperation) and dimensions of teacher social competence (empathy, communication, conflict management). Ethical protocols, including informed consent and confidentiality, were observed throughout. The findings highlight four interconnected themes: teachers' social competence as role models, the integration of biblical principles within the CRE curriculum, constructive classroom dynamics in a multicultural context, and students' observable growth in tolerance. Teachers' empathy and inclusiveness were consistently mirrored by students in their interactions. Biblical lessons on love and forgiveness were applied in daily classroom practices, while group activities fostered collaboration across diverse backgrounds. Over time, students demonstrated reduced conflict, increased respect, and greater openness to difference. The study concludes that CRE, when delivered by socially competent teachers, can significantly enhance tolerance in elementary schools. It recommends strengthening teacher training in social competence and tolerance-based pedagogy while recognizing limitations such as the single case study design. Future research should expand to comparative and quantitative approaches, including integration with interfaith education.

Keywords: Tolerance, Christian Religious Education, Social Competence

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia, as the world's largest archipelago and one of the most religiously diverse nations, is often celebrated for its motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity). The nation is home to hundreds of ethnic groups and six officially recognized religions, creating a vibrant social fabric that both enriches and challenges its society. Within this pluralistic context, tolerance is not merely an abstract virtue but a practical necessity to sustain harmony in daily life, particularly in the field of education where young people first encounter diversity in structured ways. Schools, as microcosms of society, become pivotal spaces in which values of respect, empathy, and peaceful coexistence can be cultivated. Yet, intolerance, prejudice, and religious exclusivism continue to emerge among students in various regions of Indonesia, revealing gaps in value-based education (Syihab, 2019). These challenges underscore the urgency of embedding tolerance education systematically within the curriculum and school culture. Christian Religious Education (CRE) in Indonesia plays a distinctive role in this regard. Unlike in predominantly Christian countries where CRE may focus mainly on deepening theological knowledge, in the Indonesian setting CRE also serves as a vehicle for moral and social formation that supports pluralism. Rooted in biblical teachings of love, justice, and peace, CRE has the potential to nurture students not only as faithful Christians but also as responsible citizens capable of engaging with those of different backgrounds. In the elementary school context, CRE teachers introduce fundamental Christian values that can shape children's character at an early stage, laying the foundation for tolerant attitudes in later life (Nainggolan, 2020). For instance, biblical principles such as "*love your neighbor as yourself*" (Mark 12:31) or Christ's command to forgive provide concrete ethical bases for teaching respect, patience, and openness to others. In this way, CRE contributes simultaneously to faith formation and civic responsibility.

The effectiveness of CRE in cultivating tolerance, however, does not rest solely on curriculum content. Teachers play a decisive role in translating values into lived experiences. Here, the concept of "social competence" becomes crucial. Social competence refers to a teacher's ability to build empathetic relationships, communicate effectively, manage classroom diversity, and model respectful behavior (Denham et al., 2012). In practice, a socially competent CRE teacher not only explains abstract concepts of love and tolerance but demonstrates them through interactions with students. For example, when a teacher mediates conflicts fairly, respects each child's dignity, and encourages cooperative learning, students experience tolerance as a lived reality rather than a distant moral principle. Thus, the teacher's social competence bridges the gap between theory and practice, making tolerance education credible and impactful (Lestari & Manullang, 2021). Despite its importance, the intersection between Christian Religious Education and teachers' social competence in shaping tolerance remains underexplored in Indonesian scholarship. Many studies on tolerance education emphasize civic education or interfaith programs, while relatively few investigate how CRE, particularly in elementary schools, can contribute to tolerance formation (Simanjuntak, 2021). This gap is especially significant in public schools such as UPT SDN Percobaan Medan, where Christian students learn in a context marked by religious plurality. In such a setting, CRE teachers are required not only to nurture students' Christian identity but also to equip them with the capacity to live harmoniously with peers of other faiths. The challenge is

ensuring that faith formation and tolerance are not seen as contradictory aims but as complementary dimensions of holistic Christian education. Based on this background, the central problem of this study can be formulated as follows: How does Christian Religious Education, mediated by teachers' social competence, enhance tolerance among elementary school students? This problem statement acknowledges that tolerance is not an automatic outcome of religious instruction but one that depends heavily on the relational and pedagogical qualities of teachers. To address this problem, the study sets out two main objectives. First, it seeks to analyze the ways in which CRE teachers at UPT SDN Percobaan Medan employ their social competence to foster tolerance. Second, it aims to explore the observable effects of such practices on students' attitudes, interactions, and behaviors within the classroom. Corresponding research questions include: first, what dimensions of teachers' social competence are most influential in fostering tolerance through CRE? And, second, how do students demonstrate tolerance as a result of their engagement in CRE? The novelty of this study lies in its focus on tolerance formation within the specific context of Christian Religious Education in a public elementary school in Indonesia. Previous research often frames CRE narrowly as a domain of spiritual and doctrinal development, while this study expands its scope to examine its social implications, particularly in nurturing tolerance. Moreover, by situating the inquiry at UPT SDN Percobaan Medan—a school embedded in a multicultural urban setting—this research highlights how CRE can function as a practical instrument for peace-building in plural societies. This case study is expected to provide insights not only for CRE teachers in Indonesia but also for global discussions on the role of religious education in fostering tolerance in diverse contexts. Ultimately, the study aspires to demonstrate that when CRE is mediated through socially competent teachers, it can become a transformative force that shapes students into tolerant and empathetic members of society.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design, chosen for its strength in capturing the complexity of educational practices within their natural context. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate because the research sought to explore how Christian Religious Education (CRE), mediated through teachers' social competence, contributes to the enhancement of tolerance among students. Case study methodology allows for an in-depth examination of real-life classroom practices, providing rich and contextual insights rather than generalizable statistical data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By focusing on one specific site, the study aimed to illuminate the nuanced interactions between teachers, students, and parents that influence the development of tolerance. The research was conducted at UPT SDN Percobaan Medan, a public elementary school situated in Medan, North Sumatra. The school was selected because of its multicultural environment and the presence of Christian Religious Education classes within a broader context of religious diversity. Such a setting offers a relevant locus for investigating how CRE can be an instrument for nurturing tolerance among young learners while simultaneously strengthening Christian identity (Siregar, 2020). Participants in the study included two CRE

teachers, thirty students, and five parents who were purposefully selected to represent diverse experiences and perspectives. The teachers were chosen based on their active role in delivering CRE lessons, while students were drawn from upper elementary grades where tolerance-related behaviors become more observable. Parents were involved to provide complementary perspectives on students' character development outside of school (Patton, 2015). Data collection relied on semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Interviews with teachers and parents focused on their perceptions of tolerance education, while student interviews were designed to elicit their lived experiences of tolerance and respect in class. Classroom observations were conducted over a six-week period, paying particular attention to teacher-student interactions, peer relationships, and the integration of biblical values into tolerance-related practices. Observations were recorded through detailed field notes and reflective memos (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The data analysis process employed thematic coding guided by two primary frameworks: tolerance indicators (respect, openness, cooperation) and dimensions of teacher social competence (empathy, communication, conflict management). Through iterative coding, themes were generated that connected teacher practices with observable student outcomes. Triangulation of interviews, observations, and documents was used to enhance the trustworthiness of findings (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2019). Confidentiality was maintained by assigning pseudonyms to participants and securing all data in encrypted files. Given the sensitivity of religious topics in Indonesia, the researcher exercised particular care to respect cultural and religious diversity within the school community, ensuring that participation was voluntary and non-coercive (Silverman, 2020). These steps ensured that the research upheld both academic rigor and ethical integrity.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight how Christian Religious Education (CRE), mediated through teachers' social competence, fosters tolerance among elementary students at UPT SDN Percobaan Medan. Data derived from interviews, classroom observations, and parental perspectives revealed four interconnected themes: (1) teachers' social competence as role models, (2) CRE curriculum and biblical principles in action, (3) classroom dynamics in multicultural settings, and (4) students' observable growth in tolerance. Each theme illustrates not only how tolerance emerges in practice but also how it is shaped by the interplay between pedagogical strategies and the social environment.

Teachers' Social Competence as Role Models

One of the strongest findings from the data was the central role of teachers' social competence in modeling tolerance for students. Teachers in the study consistently demonstrated empathy, patience, and inclusiveness in their interactions with students. For instance, during classroom observations, teachers often listened attentively to students' questions without dismissing them, even when answers were off-topic or incorrect. This empathetic response communicated to students that their voices mattered and that differences in expression were respected. Such modeling of patience and inclusivity became a powerful pedagogical tool, as students gradually mirrored these

behaviors in peer interactions. The interviews with students revealed that many perceived their CRE teacher as a figure who treated everyone equally, regardless of academic ability or religious background. One student noted, "Our teacher never laughs at us when we make mistakes. She always tells us that everyone learns at their own pace." This sentiment aligns with research on social learning theory, which emphasizes that children acquire behaviors by observing the modeled conduct of significant adults (Bandura, 1986). When teachers consistently embody values of empathy and fairness, students internalize these values and reproduce them in their own social relationships. From a theoretical standpoint, this finding underscores the role of teachers not only as conveyors of knowledge but also as moral exemplars. In the Indonesian context, where schools are diverse and religious sensitivity is crucial, teachers' capacity to demonstrate empathy and fairness directly influences how children perceive and engage with difference (Nainggolan, 2020). It is noteworthy that the CRE teachers in this study did not simply preach tolerance; rather, they embodied it in the ways they mediated conflicts, acknowledged students' feelings, and encouraged participation from all voices in the classroom. This aligns with findings from Denham et al. (2012), who argue that teachers' social competence is foundational to fostering students' socioemotional development. The role of teachers as role models is especially significant in elementary education, where children are still forming their core social attitudes. As parents interviewed in the study emphasized, children frequently carried lessons from school into the home, reflecting their teachers' words and behaviors in everyday conversations. Thus, the teacher's social competence functioned as a multiplier effect: not only shaping classroom dynamics but also influencing broader community interactions.

CRE Curriculum and Biblical Principles in Action

The second major theme identified in the study is the integration of biblical principles within the CRE curriculum, which served as a framework for promoting tolerant behavior. The CRE lessons observed frequently revolved around values such as love, forgiveness, humility, and respect for others. These values were not presented as abstract theological concepts but were contextualized in practical classroom scenarios. For instance, during one lesson on the parable of the Good Samaritan, students were asked to role-play situations in which they helped classmates who were left out or marginalized. This activity encouraged them to apply biblical teachings to their social interactions in school. Teachers also made explicit connections between scripture and tolerance. A common theme across lessons was the emphasis on Jesus' commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31), which teachers used to underline the importance of respect and care for peers, regardless of differences. One teacher shared in an interview: "When I teach forgiveness, I use simple examples, like when two friends fight over a toy. I tell them, just as Jesus forgave, we too must forgive and be friends again." Such direct applications of biblical principles reinforced the notion that tolerance is an integral aspect of living out one's Christian faith. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that religious education, when grounded in authentic values, can foster inclusivity and respect (Schreiner, 2018). Rather than isolating faith development from civic values, the CRE teachers in this study integrated the two, showing that spiritual growth and tolerance can coexist harmoniously. This contrasts with critiques that religious education may

sometimes promote exclusivity or dogmatism. Instead, the evidence here suggests that when CRE is intentionally framed around biblical imperatives of love and forgiveness, it becomes a catalyst for tolerant dispositions. The discussions with parents further reinforced this point. Several parents noted that their children began using language at home that reflected biblical lessons about kindness and acceptance. One parent remarked: “My child tells me, ‘Mom, Jesus teaches us not to be angry too long, we must forgive.’ It is from school that she learned to forgive quickly.” This illustrates how the curriculum extended beyond the classroom, influencing family practices and strengthening the moral foundation for tolerance.

Classroom Dynamics in Multicultural Setting

A third key finding of the study relates to how classroom dynamics in a multicultural school environment shape tolerance. UPT SDN Percobaan Medan hosts students from various ethnic and religious backgrounds, creating a diverse learning environment. Within this context, teachers played a crucial role in managing diversity and encouraging collaboration across differences. Classroom observations revealed that teachers intentionally created group activities that required cooperation among students of different backgrounds. For example, during a group assignment on environmental stewardship, students were randomly assigned into diverse teams to work on a presentation. Teachers monitored the groups to ensure that all voices were heard and that dominant students did not overshadow quieter peers. By structuring tasks that required interdependence, teachers encouraged students to appreciate contributions from peers they might not ordinarily engage with. Such practices reflect the pedagogical principle of cooperative learning, which has been shown to reduce prejudice and foster intergroup friendships (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). In a multicultural classroom, collaboration not only improves academic outcomes but also nurtures interpersonal skills necessary for living in a pluralistic society. The teachers’ ability to navigate potential tensions—such as misunderstandings across cultural or religious lines—was critical in maintaining a respectful and inclusive learning environment. During interviews, students shared that they felt comfortable working with peers of different religions and ethnicities because their teachers emphasized fairness and respect. One student noted, “Our teacher always reminds us that everyone has strengths, so we must work together.” This reflects an internalization of the idea that diversity is not a barrier but a resource for collective learning. Teachers’ interventions in conflict situations also demonstrated tolerance in practice. When disputes arose, teachers guided students to resolve them through dialogue and reconciliation, rather than punitive measures. From a broader perspective, this theme illustrates the unique role of public schools in Indonesia as spaces where diversity is lived daily. While CRE provides a religious framework, the actual practice of tolerance is reinforced through classroom interactions that bring different groups together. This synergy between curriculum and social environment is critical in building sustainable tolerance (Syihab, 2019).

Students' Observable Growth in Tolerance

Perhaps the most compelling evidence of the impact of CRE and teachers' social competence was the observable growth in students' tolerance over time. Both classroom observations and parental testimonies indicated that students displayed increased respect, reduced conflict, and greater openness to differences as a result of their participation in CRE. In classrooms, teachers reported that students were more willing to share materials, listen to one another, and collaborate without exclusion. Instances of name-calling or teasing diminished over the semester, replaced by gestures of inclusion. Teachers also noted that students became more adept at resolving conflicts independently, often invoking lessons on forgiveness and respect from CRE. For example, one teacher shared: "Now, when two students quarrel, sometimes another student will remind them, 'Remember what the Bible says, we must forgive.'" Such peer-to-peer reinforcement of tolerance indicates that values taught in CRE had begun to shape the students' collective ethos. Parents observed similar changes at home. Several reported that their children demonstrated greater patience with siblings, were quicker to apologize, and expressed curiosity rather than fear toward people of different backgrounds. One parent noted, "My son used to be shy and only play with his close friends. Now, he tells me stories about his new friends from different religions. He says the teacher told them to respect each other." These testimonies highlight how school-based tolerance education can ripple outward into family and community contexts. The growth observed aligns with developmental theories that suggest elementary years are critical for forming prosocial behaviors and intercultural attitudes (Eisenberg et al., 2015). Exposure to structured opportunities for tolerance, reinforced by teachers' social competence and biblical teaching, provides children with tools to navigate diversity positively. Importantly, this growth was not superficial but demonstrated behavioral and attitudinal changes over time. These findings resonate with international scholarship emphasizing the potential of religious education to serve as a bridge between faith formation and civic responsibility. Schreiner (2018) and Gearon (2019) both highlight that religious education, when framed inclusively, can cultivate dispositions of respect and intercultural dialogue. The case of UPT SDN Percobaan Medan adds an Indonesian perspective to this discourse, showing how CRE in a pluralistic public school context can function as an instrument for peace-building.

Taken together, the four themes reveal a holistic process by which tolerance is nurtured through CRE and teachers' social competence. Teachers model tolerance through their social interactions, reinforce it through biblical principles in the curriculum, structure opportunities for practicing it in diverse classroom settings, and witness its growth in students' behaviors. This multi-layered approach demonstrates that tolerance is not an accidental byproduct but an intentional outcome of pedagogical practice. The implications for practice are significant. First, teacher training programs in Christian Religious Education should prioritize the development of social competence, recognizing that teachers' relational skills are as crucial as their theological knowledge. Second, curriculum design should continue to integrate biblical principles in ways that connect faith to social responsibility. Third, schools should embrace diversity as a pedagogical resource, creating spaces for students to practice tolerance in real-life interactions.

Finally, ongoing assessment of students' socioemotional growth should be incorporated into CRE evaluation, ensuring that tolerance is measured alongside cognitive learning outcomes.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Christian Religious Education (CRE), when facilitated by teachers with strong social competence, plays a vital role in nurturing tolerance among elementary school students in Indonesia. The findings from UPT SDN Percobaan Medan reveal that the intersection of biblical principles, relational teaching practices, and inclusive classroom strategies contributes significantly to the cultivation of respect, empathy, and openness among children. The study affirms that tolerance does not emerge automatically from curricular content but is deeply shaped by how teachers embody and model these values in their everyday interactions with students. Through their empathy, patience, and inclusiveness, teachers become living examples of the values they seek to instill, bridging the gap between theory and practice. The conclusion that emerges from these findings is that teachers must be seen not merely as transmitters of religious knowledge but as role models whose behavior is as instructive as their words. Students learn tolerance not only through direct instruction but also by observing how teachers handle conflict, communicate respect, and include diverse voices in the classroom. The credibility of CRE in promoting tolerance, therefore, rests heavily on the teacher's ability to integrate social competence with pedagogical expertise. This highlights the dual identity of teachers as both educators and exemplars of Christian virtues, whose influence extends beyond the classroom to shape students' character and behavior in wider social contexts. From a practical perspective, the study recommends the strengthening of teacher training programs to emphasize social competence alongside theological knowledge. Professional development for CRE teachers should include training in empathy, communication, conflict resolution, and inclusive pedagogy, ensuring that they are equipped to translate biblical principles into lived experiences of tolerance. Such training would not only enhance the effectiveness of CRE in fostering tolerant attitudes but also contribute to building peaceful and harmonious school environments in multicultural societies like Indonesia. Additionally, integrating tolerance-based pedagogy into teacher education curricula could provide future educators with the tools needed to address the challenges of pluralism constructively. This study acknowledges certain limitations that shape its scope and generalizability. The research was based on a small sample size and focused on a single case study in one elementary school, which limits its capacity to represent the broader landscape of Christian Religious Education in Indonesia. Furthermore, the study concentrated only on the elementary school level, leaving questions open about how tolerance might be cultivated through CRE in secondary or higher education contexts. These limitations underscore the need for caution in extending the findings too broadly, while also pointing to promising directions for further inquiry.

Future research could build on this study by conducting comparative investigations across multiple schools in different regions to capture a wider range of practices and contexts.

Quantitative approaches might also be employed to measure the extent of tolerance growth among students more systematically, providing statistical evidence to complement the qualitative insights presented here. Moreover, given Indonesia's religious diversity, future studies could explore the integration of interfaith education approaches within CRE, examining how dialogue and collaboration across religious boundaries can further strengthen tolerance. Such research would enrich the discourse on how religious education can function not only as a means of faith formation but also as a powerful instrument for social harmony in pluralistic societies. Shortly, this study underscores the transformative potential of Christian Religious Education when mediated through socially competent teachers. By embodying empathy, inclusiveness, and biblical values in practice, teachers create environments where tolerance can flourish, preparing students to live peacefully and respectfully in a diverse world.

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