



The Role of Christian Religious Education Teachers in Providing Exemplary Conduct to Grade VIII Students at SMP N 1 Pangaribuan

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ABSTRACT

Education is widely regarded as a strategic instrument for nurturing future generations who are both intellectually capable and morally grounded. In Indonesia's pluralistic context, Christian Religious Education (CRE) serves not only as cognitive instruction but also as a formative process in character development. This study investigates the role of CRE teachers as moral exemplars and their impact on the spiritual and ethical growth of Grade VIII students at SMP Negeri 1 Pangaribuan, North Tapanuli. Employing a qualitative case study design, the research engaged the CRE teacher, students, the school principal, and other teachers as informants. Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, then analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns. Findings demonstrate that students' moral and spiritual development was deeply influenced by the teacher's consistent embodiment of Christian virtues such as love, patience, integrity, and humility. Students testified that they better understood Christian teachings when observing their teacher's actions, confirming the pedagogical power of role modeling in shaping cognition, emotion, and behavior. The teacher's integrity established trust and credibility, while her pastoral care created a relational environment that nurtured empathy, respect, and resilience. However, systemic challenges- such as administrative burdens and limited classroom time - were found to hinder sustained exemplarity. The study concludes that authentic role modeling remains the most persuasive pedagogy in Christian education. By embodying values in daily practices, CRE teachers become living curricula whose influence extends beyond classrooms, offering a contextual and transformative model of character education within Indonesia's pluralistic society.

Keywords: *Christian Religious Education, Exemplary, Student*

INTRODUCTION

Education has long been recognized as a strategic instrument in shaping future generations who are not only intellectually capable but also morally and spiritually mature. In Indonesia's pluralistic society, religious education plays a vital role in character formation, functioning as a moral compass that guides young learners toward responsible citizenship and holistic growth (Tilaar, 2004). Christian Religious Education (PAK) in particular carries a distinctive mission: to cultivate core Christian values such as love, truth, patience, and forgiveness. These values, however, cannot be transmitted effectively through theoretical instruction alone; they must be embodied and demonstrated by teachers themselves. Hence, the role of the teacher in Christian education extends beyond the transmission of knowledge to becoming a living witness of the faith, a figure whose life reflects the very principles being taught (Hodges, 2017). The importance of exemplarity in teaching has been widely emphasized in educational scholarship. Students are often more influenced by the observable actions and consistent behaviors of their teachers than by verbal instruction alone (Bandura, 1997). In the context of early adolescence - particularly for Grade VIII students in junior high schools - authentic adult figures play a decisive role in shaping the trajectory of character development. This developmental stage is marked by heightened sensitivity to role models, as students seek figures of trust and authority who embody values worth emulating (Santrock, 2018). In this regard, Christian Religious Education teachers hold significant potential to shape not only the cognitive but also the affective and volitional dimensions of their students' character formation.

In North Tapanuli Regency, and more specifically at SMP Negeri 1 Pangaribuan, Christian Religious Education continues to be regarded as a crucial subject supporting the moral formation of students. Yet, challenges remain in the effective integration of Christian values into educational practice. Limited classroom hours, coupled with a lack of consistency in teachers' lived expressions of the values they teach, often hinder the transformative potential of the subject. When teachers fail to embody the values they proclaim, students may perceive Christian education as abstract, disconnected from real-life application (Sihombing, 2020). Conversely, when teachers consistently model virtues such as integrity, humility, and care, students experience Christian education not only as instruction but as a relational and existential encounter. The role of exemplary conduct is particularly critical in the Batak Christian context, where communal values and relational harmony are central cultural markers (Simanjuntak, 1993). In this cultural environment, teachers are not merely knowledge transmitters but also community figures entrusted with moral guidance. For Grade VIII students at SMP Negeri 1 Pangaribuan, whose identity formation is still in process, the daily interactions with teachers become formative experiences that shape their perception of Christian discipleship and moral responsibility. Teachers' actions in and outside the classroom - how they resolve conflicts, show patience, or treat others with respect - become pedagogical acts that teach as much, if not more, than the curriculum itself (Palmer, 2007). This research therefore seeks to analyze the role of Christian Religious Education teachers as moral exemplars and to assess the impact of their conduct on the character formation of Grade VIII students. The study argues that the authenticity of teachers' lives constitutes the most persuasive form of pedagogy, aligning with biblical principles that emphasize teaching by example (1

Timothy 4:12). By embodying Christian virtues, teachers provide students with a lived model of discipleship, enabling them to see faith not merely as doctrine but as a holistic way of life. The implications of this research extend beyond the classroom. The exemplary role of Christian Religious Education teachers serves as a bridge between faith and society, nurturing students to become individuals who embody Christian values in diverse social contexts. This integration of faith and practice represents an approach to education that is both contextual and transformative, addressing the moral and spiritual needs of students in North Tapanuli while contributing to the broader discourse on holistic Christian education in Indonesia (Nainggolan, 2019). The study underscores the necessity of viewing Christian Religious Education not merely as an academic subject but as a formational process in which teachers' exemplary conduct plays a central role. By embodying the values they teach, Christian Religious Education teachers at SMP N 1 Pangaribuan can profoundly shape the moral and spiritual development of Grade VIII students. Such an approach promises not only to strengthen Christian character within the local community but also to provide a model of religious education that resonates with global concerns for holistic, value-based, and transformative pedagogy.

METHODS

This study employed a case study design, a kind of qualitative one. Such an approach was selected because it allows the researcher to explore the phenomenon of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers' role modeling in a deep and contextual manner, particularly within the educational and social environment of SMP Negeri 1 Pangaribuan. Case study research is widely recognized as a method that enables a detailed examination of specific contexts and subjects, facilitating a holistic understanding of behaviors, interactions, and meanings in natural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The school was purposively chosen based on the consideration that it has a relatively dominant population of Christian students and a well-established Christian Religious Education program that actively supports students' spiritual and character formation. The research subjects included the CRE teacher of Grade VIII and the students enrolled in the subject. Additionally, the school principal and several other teachers were engaged as supplementary informants in order to obtain broader perspectives and ensure a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. This multi-informant strategy is considered essential in qualitative research, as it enhances the richness of data and ensures that different voices and perspectives are represented (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The data collection techniques consisted of participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Participant observation was conducted during the teaching and learning process to observe the teacher's behavior in instructing, interacting, and modeling values for the students in authentic settings. In-depth interviews were carried out using a semi-structured format, which allowed the researcher to maintain a balance between focusing on the research objectives and remaining open to emerging insights from participants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Document analysis complemented these methods by reviewing school records, curriculum documents, and teaching materials relevant to the CRE program. The data analysis process employed thematic analysis, where recurring themes and categories

were identified from the data collected through interviews and observations. The researcher systematically coded the data, grouped it into meaningful categories, and interpreted patterns to reveal how students responded to the teacher's role modeling in the classroom and school environment. Data validity and trustworthiness were ensured through triangulation of sources and methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The findings were then critically linked with relevant theories in Christian education, role modeling, and character education, ensuring that the discussion was firmly grounded in existing scholarship. Participation was entirely voluntary, and students and teachers were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that the Christian Religious Education (CRE) teacher at SMP Negeri 1 Pangaribuan plays a pivotal role in shaping the moral and spiritual character of students through life modeling. Based on participant observation and in-depth interviews, it became evident that students are highly attentive to the teacher's daily behavior, both within the classroom setting and in broader school interactions. The consistency with which the teacher demonstrated love, patience, and honesty produced a direct positive effect on how students interacted with one another, shaped their patterns of thought, and influenced their daily actions. This finding supports the claim that character education is most effective when values are embodied rather than merely transmitted verbally (Lickona, 2019). In particular, middle school students - who are in a transitional developmental stage between childhood and adolescence - tend to observe, evaluate, and replicate the behaviors of adult figures they respect (Bandura, 1977). Thus, the CRE teacher's consistent conduct becomes a powerful pedagogical tool, one that reinforces cognitive instruction with affective and behavioral alignment.

Students' Testimonies of Teachers as Living Examples

One striking testimony came from a student informant, RD, who remarked that he found it much easier to comprehend Christian teachings when he could observe the embodiment of those teachings in his teacher's actions. Specifically, RD highlighted how the teacher's inclusive treatment of all students, regardless of differences, deepened his personal understanding of Christ's command to love without favoritism. The teacher's small yet consistent practices - such as respecting time, beginning each class with prayer, and maintaining humility - were perceived by students as authentic demonstrations of Christian faith. As RD noted, "*I can better understand God's love when I see my teacher showing love to all of us in class.*" This reflects the incarnational pedagogy principle, which suggests that Christian education is most effective when the teacher functions as a living witness to the gospel (Estep & Kim, 2010). For students, the integration of word and deed created an enduring impression, one that extended beyond the classroom and served as a practical guide for daily living.

Teacher Integrity as the Foundation of Influence

Interviews with the school principal reinforced the notion that the CRE teacher's influence rests upon integrity and consistency. The principal observed that the teacher did not merely teach biblical principles but also embodied them in everyday interactions with both students and colleagues. Such congruence between word and deed was considered the key factor in the teacher's credibility as a moral exemplar. Research in moral education emphasizes that students are acutely sensitive to inconsistencies in adults' behaviors, which can undermine trust and erode moral authority (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2009). By maintaining integrity - avoiding discrepancies between speech and action - the teacher at SMP Negeri 1 Pangaribuan established herself as a reliable and trustworthy figure in the eyes of her students. The study also revealed that the teacher's role extended beyond academic instruction to encompass pastoral care and accompaniment. Observations showed that the teacher actively supported students struggling not only with academic performance but also with social and emotional challenges. By taking time to listen to students' personal difficulties and offering spiritual encouragement, the teacher embodied the pastoral dimension of Christian pedagogy (Groome, 2011). Such practices reflect the theological understanding of teaching as a ministry of care, where the educator embodies Christ's compassion and guidance. Students who experienced this accompaniment noted feeling valued, respected, and spiritually nurtured, thereby reinforcing the holistic impact of teacher role modeling. In terms of teaching methodology, the CRE teacher employed a humanistic and contextual approach. Lessons were not restricted to doctrinal explanations but were often connected to real-life experiences. For instance, during one observed classroom session, the teacher shared a personal testimony about navigating life challenges with faith. This narrative strategy inspired students to reflect on their own struggles and opened a communal space for dialogue and reflection. Such practices resonate with Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of dialogical pedagogy, where education is not merely about depositing knowledge but about generating shared meaning from lived experiences. In the Christian education context, these approaches not only increased student engagement but also presented the teacher as a real-life model of Christian discipleship.

Impact on Student Character and Behavior

The impact of teacher modeling was evident across three primary domains: cognitive, affective, and conative. On cognitive impact, students reported that they understood Christian values such as love, forgiveness, and honesty more effectively when these were demonstrated rather than only taught. For example, when the teacher recounted personal experiences of forgiving others, students internalized the lesson more deeply. This finding supports the view that moral learning requires concrete exemplification (Nucci & Narvaez, 2014). On affective impact, students expressed strong emotional bonds with the teacher, describing her as a spiritual parent who treated them with empathy and fairness. Such relational trust fostered a positive learning environment, in which students felt safe, valued, and motivated. This aligns with Noddings' (2013) ethics of care, which argues that meaningful learning requires emotional connection between teacher and learner. On conative impact, in terms of observable behavior, students increasingly displayed practices such as showing respect, offering forgiveness, and initiating prayer. During class observations, some students began emulating their teacher's habits,

including greeting peers warmly and volunteering to lead prayers. These behavioral shifts indicate the transformative potential of role modeling as a practical pedagogy of virtue.

Another significant finding was that the teacher's example acted as a moral filter against the negative influences prevalent in the broader social environment. In contexts where spiritual and moral values are increasingly marginalized, students relied on the teacher's example as a counter-narrative. By modeling discernment, self-control, and resilience, the teacher provided students with a living framework for navigating contemporary moral challenges. This finding echoes Bandura's (2001) concept of social learning as moral guidance, wherein role models shape not only immediate behaviors but also the frameworks through which individuals evaluate external influences. These challenges highlight the systemic constraints faced by CRE teachers, who are often expected to serve simultaneously as educators, administrators, and spiritual mentors. Without institutional support, sustaining authentic role modeling becomes difficult (Palmer, 2007). It also strongly affirms Albert Bandura's social learning theory, which posits that individuals acquire behaviors through observing and imitating role models (Bandura, 1977). The CRE teacher in this study served precisely this role, embodying the Christian virtues she sought to instill. Similarly, from a theological perspective, the results align with the Christian concept of incarnational pedagogy, where the presence and actions of the teacher mirror Christ's life and teachings (Groome, 2011). The teacher's example can be interpreted through the theological lens of *imago Dei*, which calls educators to reflect God's image in their actions and relationships (Grenz, 2001). This suggests that Christian education is not merely about doctrinal transmission but about living testimony, whereby students encounter Christ through the embodied practices of their teachers. The implications of this study are multifaceted. First, there is a need for continuous spiritual and moral formation of CRE teachers to ensure that they can sustain their role as authentic role models. Professional development programs should emphasize not only pedagogical skills but also spiritual resilience, pastoral sensitivity, and integrity of character. Second, schools and local governments should create structural support systems to reduce administrative burdens and allow teachers to prioritize relational engagement with students. Third, institutional policies should promote the recognition of CRE as a core subject essential for holistic education, rather than treating it as supplementary. Schools could implement mentoring programs facilitated by CRE teachers, whereby older students guide younger ones in moral and spiritual growth. This would extend the culture of role modeling beyond the teacher to the wider student body, thereby cultivating a collective ethos of integrity and compassion. This research contributes to the broader discourse on character education by demonstrating that teacher role modeling remains a critical factor in moral development, particularly in faith-based educational settings. It challenges the tendency to prioritize academic outcomes over character formation and argues for a reintegration of virtue-centered education into school systems. Furthermore, the findings highlight the contextual uniqueness of Indonesian Christian education, where cultural values, spiritual practices, and communal orientations intersect. By documenting the lived realities of a Batak Christian community, this study enriches global discussions on contextualized pedagogy and offers insights into how indigenous cultural wisdom and Christian theology can mutually reinforce moral education.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the role of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers as moral exemplars is both indispensable and transformative in the context of SMP Negeri 1 Pangaribuan. The findings underscore the principle that authentic character formation cannot be achieved solely through verbal instruction but must be grounded in the lived witness of teachers whose actions embody the values they teach. By consistently modeling virtues such as love, patience, humility, and integrity, the CRE teacher in this study served not merely as a transmitter of biblical knowledge but as a living curriculum—an incarnational pedagogue whose life and practices became the clearest articulation of Christian education. This alignment of word and deed was shown to have profound cognitive, affective, and behavioral impacts on students, confirming that role modeling remains one of the most powerful pedagogical strategies in character education. The significance of teacher exemplarity was particularly evident in the testimonies of Grade VIII students, who repeatedly pointed to their teacher's daily actions as the lens through which they understood and internalized Christian teachings. This suggests that the credibility of religious education rests less on the intellectual sophistication of the curriculum and more on the congruence between what is taught and how it is lived by educators. Students interpreted their teacher's practices - beginning classes with prayer, treating all students fairly, and demonstrating humility - as tangible manifestations of the gospel. Such practices resonate with both social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) and theological perspectives on incarnational pedagogy, in which truth is not merely spoken but embodied. In this regard, the teacher became not just an instructor but a spiritual parent whose influence extended beyond the classroom to shape the whole being of students. Beyond individual student outcomes, the study also revealed the teacher's role in shaping the moral culture of the school community. Through practices of pastoral care, conflict mediation, and active involvement in communal worship, the teacher functioned as a moral compass, cultivating a climate of trust, empathy, and mutual respect. This relational dimension highlights that the work of a CRE teacher is inherently holistic, encompassing academic, spiritual, emotional, and social dimensions. Such findings echo Palmer's (2007) vision of teaching as a relational practice where the integrity of the teacher's life becomes the very ground of educational authority. In a context such as North Tapanuli, where communal identity and relational harmony are highly valued, the exemplary role of teachers carries heightened significance for sustaining both cultural and spiritual continuity.

However, the study also identified systemic challenges that can undermine teachers' capacity to sustain authentic role modeling. Heavy administrative burdens, limited classroom hours for religious education, and societal pressures placed on teachers to embody perfection all pose barriers to the realization of their formative potential. These constraints highlight the need for structural and institutional support that enables CRE teachers to prioritize relational and spiritual engagement over bureaucratic tasks. Without such support, there is a risk that the transformative potential of Christian education will remain underdeveloped. The broader implication of this study is that Christian education must be re-envisioned not merely as cognitive instruction but as a formative process deeply rooted in exemplarity. Schools and policymakers must recognize

the critical importance of nurturing teachers' spiritual integrity, providing ongoing formation opportunities, and embedding relational practices into the fabric of school culture. Furthermore, mentoring programs facilitated by CRE teachers could extend the ethos of role modeling into peer relationships, creating a culture of mutual guidance and collective responsibility for moral development. The role of CRE teachers as exemplars is central to shaping the moral and spiritual trajectory of students, particularly during the formative years of adolescence. By embodying Christian virtues, teachers not only mediate knowledge but also invite students into a lived experience of faith that bridges belief and practice. This study affirms that authentic role modeling represents the most persuasive form of pedagogy - one that fosters holistic transformation in students and nurtures resilient Christian communities. In the context of Indonesia's pluralistic society, such an approach offers a compelling model for value-based and transformative education, demonstrating that character formation is most powerfully achieved when teachers' lives speak as clearly as their words.

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