



## Pedagogical Humility and Spiritual Formation: An Educational Interpretation of Matthew 23:12 at SD Negeri 173374 Simarsalaon

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### ABSTRACT

*Pedagogical humility has increasingly gained attention as a vital spiritual and ethical dimension in Christian education, particularly within formative learning environments at the elementary level. This study aims to explore the role of pedagogical humility as a spiritual strength in shaping students' spiritual formation, interpreted through the biblical perspective of Matthew 23:12. The research was conducted at SD Negeri 173374 Simarsalaon, involving 17 Christian students and seven Christian educators, including a Christian Religious Education teacher. Employing a qualitative research design, the study integrated field-based inquiry with a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to provide both contextual and theoretical depth. The findings reveal that pedagogical humility is manifested through teachers' attitudes of service, openness, and moral consistency, which significantly influence classroom climate and student engagement. Teachers who model humility foster relational trust and create learning environments conducive to spiritual growth and character development. Rather than diminishing authority, humility enhances teachers' credibility and strengthens their formative influence on students. The SLR supports these findings by highlighting humility as a core virtue in Christian pedagogy and spiritual formation, emphasizing its role in servant leadership and relational teaching. Interpreted educationally, Matthew 23:12 provides a theological framework that redefines pedagogical authority as service-oriented and example-based leadership. This study concludes that pedagogical humility functions as a transformative educational virtue that bridges theological conviction and professional practice. The findings suggest that integrating humility into teacher formation programs can strengthen spiritual formation in Christian education, particularly within pluralistic public school contexts.*

**Keywords:** *Pedagogical Humility, Christian Religious Education, Spiritual Formation*

### INTRODUCTION

Education is fundamentally a process of human formation that extends beyond cognitive achievement to include moral, spiritual, and character development. In this broader understanding, teachers play a decisive role not only as transmitters of knowledge but also as moral and spiritual models whose attitudes and behaviors significantly shape

students' values. Within Christian Religious Education (CRE), this formative dimension is inseparable from theological convictions, particularly those concerning humility, service, and obedience to God. One biblical text that strongly articulates this value is Matthew 23:12, where Jesus declares, "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (The Holy Bible, NRSV). Humility in education is increasingly recognized as a critical pedagogical virtue. Contemporary educational theorists argue that effective teaching requires openness, self-awareness, and relational sensitivity rather than authoritarian dominance (Palmer, 1998; Noddings, 2013). In Christian pedagogy, humility is not merely a personality trait but a spiritual posture rooted in faith, reflecting dependence on God and respect for others. This perspective aligns with the biblical understanding of humility as strength rather than weakness, a paradox emphasized in the teachings of Jesus and embodied in His life and ministry (Wright, 2004).

Matthew 23:12 is situated within Jesus' critique of religious leaders who prioritized status, recognition, and external piety over genuine obedience and service. The text challenges hierarchical and self-exalting models of leadership, replacing them with a vision of humility as the pathway to true honor before God. Scholars note that this passage underscores an ethical reversal in the Kingdom of God, where greatness is defined by humility and service rather than authority and prestige (France, 2007). When interpreted educationally, this teaching offers a powerful framework for understanding the role of teachers as humble servants committed to the holistic growth of their students. Pedagogical humility, therefore, can be understood as the integration of humility into teaching attitudes, instructional practices, and teacher-student relationships. It involves recognizing students as persons with dignity, acknowledging limitations, and fostering a learning environment grounded in respect and care. Shulman (1987) emphasizes that teaching is inherently a moral practice that requires judgment, responsibility, and ethical commitment. Within Christian education, pedagogical humility becomes a spiritual discipline that shapes not only instructional effectiveness but also spiritual formation. Spiritual formation itself refers to the ongoing process by which individuals are shaped into Christlike character through practices, relationships, and lived experiences (Foster, 1998). In the context of elementary education, spiritual formation is often implicit rather than explicit, occurring through daily interactions, attitudes, and examples set by teachers. Bandura's (1977) social learning theory supports this understanding, suggesting that children internalize values and behaviors primarily through observation of significant role models. Thus, the humble posture of teachers can have a profound influence on students' spiritual and moral development.

This study is conducted at SD Negeri 173374 Simarsalaon, a public elementary school context where Christian education is carried out within a pluralistic institutional environment. The school has 17 Christian students and seven Christian educators, including a Christian Religious Education teacher. In such a setting, explicit religious instruction is often limited by institutional frameworks, making pedagogical humility a particularly relevant and ethical approach to spiritual formation. Rather than relying on overt religious expression, teachers embody Christian values through professional conduct, relational care, and humble service. Previous studies on Christian pedagogy have highlighted the importance of teacher character and spirituality in shaping student

formation (Groome, 2011; Palmer, 1998). However, empirical and contextual studies that explicitly connect biblical texts, such as Matthew 23:12, with pedagogical humility and spiritual formation in Indonesian public schools remain limited. This gap indicates the need for research that integrates biblical interpretation, educational theory, and empirical investigation. This study aims to explore pedagogical humility as a form of spiritual strength and its role in students' spiritual formation, interpreted through Matthew 23:12, at SD Negeri 173374 Simarsalaon. By grounding educational analysis in both biblical theology and pedagogical theory, this research seeks to contribute to the discourse on faith-based education, character formation, and the ethical practice of teaching within diverse educational contexts.

## **METHODS**

A qualitative research design with an integrative approach combining field-based qualitative inquiry and a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was implemented in this research. The qualitative approach was selected to explore pedagogical humility as a lived educational practice and spiritual disposition, while the SLR was used to strengthen the theoretical and theological interpretation of Matthew 23:12 within educational contexts. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for examining values, meanings, and experiences that cannot be adequately captured through numerical measurement (Creswell, 2013). The field study was conducted at SD Negeri 173374 Simarsalaon, a public elementary school operating within a pluralistic educational environment. The research focused on the Christian education context within the school, involving 17 Christian students and seven Christian educators, including a Christian Religious Education (CRE) teacher. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, based on their direct involvement in Christian education and their role in teacher–student interaction. Purposive sampling is appropriate in qualitative research when the objective is to obtain in-depth understanding from information-rich cases (Patton, 2015). Field data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted with Christian teachers to explore their understanding and practice of pedagogical humility, including attitudes toward authority, service, and relational engagement with students. The Systematic Literature Review (SLR) followed established qualitative synthesis procedures to ensure rigor and transparency. Academic literature was sourced from reputable databases were peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly books published primarily in the last 20 years, written in English, and directly relevant to education, theology, or spiritual formation. The SLR provided a theoretical and theological framework that informed the interpretation of field data and ensured that the study was grounded in established scholarship (Snyder, 2019).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study reveal that pedagogical humility functions as a significant form of spiritual strength within the educational practices of Christian teachers at SD Negeri 173374 Simarsalaon. Through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, humility emerged not merely as an abstract theological concept but as a lived pedagogical posture shaping teacher–student relationships and contributing to students'

spiritual formation. These empirical findings resonate strongly with the theological message of Matthew 23:12, which emphasizes humility as the pathway to exaltation in God's economy rather than human systems of status and power (France, 2007).

Data from interviews indicate that Christian teachers at SD Negeri 173374 Simarsalaon understand humility primarily as an attitude of service and relational openness rather than self-deprecation. Teachers consistently described their role as "serving students" rather than exercising authority over them. This understanding aligns with theological interpretations of humility in the Gospel of Matthew, where humility is framed as voluntary self-lowering for the sake of others, modeled by Jesus Himself (Hagner, 1995). Classroom observations confirmed this perspective, as teachers frequently demonstrated patience, active listening, and willingness to admit limitations in front of students. This pedagogical posture reflects what Palmer (1998) describes as "teaching from the integrity of the self," where authenticity and humility become sources of pedagogical authority. Rather than weakening instructional effectiveness, humility strengthened teachers' credibility and relational influence. Students appeared more willing to engage, ask questions, and express difficulties when teachers adopted a non-dominating stance. These findings support Noddings' (2013) argument that ethical and caring relationships form the foundation of meaningful education, especially in formative stages such as elementary schooling.

### ***Humility and Authority: A Theological-Educational Tension***

A significant theme emerging from the data is the redefinition of authority in the classroom. Teachers at the research site did not equate authority with control or hierarchical dominance but with moral consistency and relational trust. This understanding reflects the theological reversal articulated in Matthew 23:12, where Jesus critiques religious leaders who sought honor and recognition while neglecting justice and mercy. Biblical scholars emphasize that Jesus' teaching here subverts conventional power structures and replaces them with servant leadership grounded in humility (Wright, 2004). Educationally, this redefinition challenges traditional teacher-centered models that emphasize control and compliance. Instead, pedagogical humility fosters what Freire (1970) describes as dialogical education, where teachers and students learn in mutual relationship. Observational data revealed that teachers who practiced humility were more inclined to invite student participation and affirm student perspectives, thereby creating a learning environment characterized by respect and mutuality. This environment supports spiritual formation by modeling values consistent with Christian ethics rather than merely transmitting doctrinal knowledge. One of the most significant findings of this study is the role of pedagogical humility as a form of implicit spiritual instruction. In a public school context where explicit religious expression may be limited, humility becomes a visible and ethically appropriate means of spiritual witness. Bandura's (1977) social learning theory provides a useful framework for interpreting this phenomenon, as students learn values primarily through observation of role models. Teachers' humble attitudes, manifested in fairness, patience, and respect, served as powerful formative influences on students' spiritual sensibilities. This finding is consistent with Groome's (2011) assertion that Christian education is inherently incarnational,

meaning that faith is taught as much through lived example as through verbal instruction. Interviews with teachers indicated an awareness that their daily conduct communicates spiritual values to students more effectively than formal lessons alone. Such awareness reflects a mature integration of faith and pedagogy, where humility is understood as spiritual strength capable of shaping character over time.

### ***Spiritual Formation in a Pluralistic Educational Context***

The context of SD Negeri 173374 Simarsalaon as a public school adds a critical dimension to the discussion. With only 17 Christian students and seven Christian educators, spiritual formation occurs within a pluralistic and institutionally neutral environment. Teachers emphasized that humility enables respectful coexistence with students and colleagues of different religious backgrounds while maintaining Christian integrity. This finding aligns with educational ethics literature that emphasizes humility as a virtue necessary for teaching in diverse contexts (Sockett, 2012). Humility functions as a bridge between conviction and openness. Matthew 23:12 does not call for withdrawal from public life but for a reorientation of motivation and posture. Teachers who embodied humility demonstrated that spiritual strength lies in consistency of character rather than overt religious assertion. This approach supports what Foster (1998) describes as spiritual formation through ordinary practices, where faith is cultivated through everyday faithfulness rather than extraordinary acts.

The Systematic Literature Review reinforces and deepens the interpretation of field findings. Across theological and educational literature, humility consistently appears as a foundational virtue for leadership, teaching, and spiritual growth (Augustine, trans. 1991; Snyder, 2019). The SLR identified recurring themes such as servant leadership, moral authority, and relational pedagogy, all of which correspond closely with observed practices at the research site. Notably, studies on teacher humility suggest that humble educators are more reflective, adaptable, and responsive to student needs (Owens & Hekman, 2012). These characteristics were evident in the teachers observed, particularly in their willingness to adjust instructional approaches and acknowledge student struggles. The integration of SLR findings with empirical data strengthens the validity of the conclusion that pedagogical humility functions as both an educational strategy and a spiritual discipline.

Interpreting Matthew 23:12 educationally reveals its relevance beyond ecclesial settings. Jesus' critique of self-exalting leadership offers a normative framework for pedagogical ethics, challenging educators to examine motivations underlying their teaching practices. France (2007) emphasizes that this text addresses not behavior alone but orientation of the heart, making it particularly applicable to professions involving moral influence, such as teaching. In the context of this study, Matthew 23:12 serves as a hermeneutical lens through which pedagogical humility is understood as spiritual strength. Teachers who internalize this teaching are less driven by recognition or control and more by faithfulness and service. This orientation supports spiritual formation by creating an environment where values are embodied rather than imposed. The findings suggest that pedagogical humility should be considered a core component of Christian Religious Education, particularly in public school settings. Rather than focusing exclusively on curriculum

content, CRE programs should emphasize teacher formation, including spiritual disciplines that cultivate humility. Such emphasis aligns with Shulman's (1987) concept of pedagogical content knowledge, expanded here to include moral and spiritual dimensions. Pedagogical humility offers a constructive response to contemporary educational challenges, such as authoritarianism, disengagement, and moral fragmentation. By embodying humility, teachers contribute to holistic education that integrates intellectual, moral, and spiritual development. This integrative approach reflects the biblical vision of formation articulated in Matthew 23:12 and supported by both theological and educational scholarship. The results of this study demonstrate that pedagogical humility operates as a form of spiritual strength that significantly contributes to students' spiritual formation at SD Negeri 173374 Simarsalaon. Grounded in the teaching of Matthew 23:12, humility reshapes authority, enhances relational trust, and functions as implicit spiritual instruction. The integration of qualitative field data and SLR findings confirms that humility is not peripheral but central to faithful and effective Christian pedagogy in pluralistic educational contexts.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that pedagogical humility functions as a foundational spiritual strength in Christian education, particularly within elementary school contexts where character formation and relational learning are central. Interpreted through Matthew 23:12, humility emerges not as a passive or weak disposition, but as a transformative pedagogical virtue that reshapes teacher identity, classroom dynamics, and students' spiritual development. The biblical principle that "whoever humbles himself will be exalted" provides a theological lens through which educational authority is redefined, not as domination, but as service-oriented leadership grounded in example and integrity. The qualitative findings from SD Negeri 173374 Simarsalaon demonstrate that teachers who embody pedagogical humility foster learning environments characterized by trust, openness, and moral authenticity. Teachers' willingness to listen, admit limitations, and position themselves as co-learners reflects an educational practice aligned with Christ-centered humility. This aligns with contemporary educational scholarship that emphasizes relational pedagogy and moral modeling as critical factors in effective teaching and spiritual formation. In this context, humility becomes a lived curriculum, implicitly taught through daily interactions rather than explicitly stated instructional content. The integration of a Systematic Literature Review reinforces the empirical findings by situating pedagogical humility within broader discussions of spiritual formation, servant leadership, and faith-based education. Literature consistently affirms that humility enhances ethical sensitivity, relational depth, and reflective teaching practice. When educators internalize humility as a spiritual discipline, pedagogical practice moves beyond technical competence toward formative influence, shaping students' character, values, and spiritual awareness. This study highlights that spiritual formation in public educational settings is possible without violating institutional neutrality, as humility is expressed through universal virtues such as respect, empathy, and self-restraint. In this sense, pedagogical humility bridges theological conviction and educational professionalism. Teachers at SD Negeri 173374 Simarsalaon exemplify how Christian educators can faithfully live out biblical values while remaining inclusive and

contextually sensitive within a pluralistic school environment. The findings also suggest that pedagogical humility contributes to sustainable teacher authority. Rather than diminishing instructional control, humility strengthens moral credibility and relational influence. Students are more receptive to guidance when teachers model consistency between belief and behavior. This reinforces Matthew 23:12 as not merely a spiritual axiom but a practical educational principle with enduring relevance. Pedagogical humility should be recognized as a core component of spiritual formation in Christian education. Teacher education programs, particularly in Christian Religious Education, are encouraged to integrate humility as a reflective and formative competence alongside pedagogical and professional skills. Future research may expand this inquiry by exploring comparative contexts, longitudinal impacts on student character development, or the integration of humility within broader faith-based pedagogical frameworks. Through humility, education becomes not only a transmission of knowledge but a sacred space for transformation.

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