



Teachers' Spiritual Competence in Times of Testing: A Study of Matthew 26:40-41 at SDN 26 Pangkatan

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ABSTRACT

This study explores teachers' spiritual competence as an inner source of strength during times of testing, interpreted through the biblical text of Matthew 26:40-41. In contemporary educational settings, teachers often encounter emotional, moral, and professional challenges that require more than pedagogical expertise. Spiritual competence, understood as vigilance, prayerfulness, and self-control, provides an essential foundation for sustaining ethical practice and personal resilience. This research aims to examine how spiritual competence is understood and embodied by Christian teachers in a public school context. The study employed a qualitative research design with a descriptive-interpretative approach. Data were collected at SDN 26 Pangkatan, Labuhan Batu, involving four Christian teachers, including one Christian Religious Education teacher, and fifteen Christian students. Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The data were analyzed thematically, using Matthew 26:40-41 as a theological and interpretative lens. The findings indicate that teachers' spiritual competence is primarily expressed through inner vigilance, prayer-oriented reflection, emotional regulation, and moral consistency. Teachers who cultivate spiritual alertness are better equipped to respond patiently to professional pressures, maintain integrity in challenging situations, and foster respectful teacher-student relationships. This study concludes that spiritual competence is a foundational dimension of holistic teacher competence. Interpreted through Matthew 26:40-41, spiritual vigilance and prayerfulness strengthen teachers' resilience and ethical commitment in times of testing. The study recommends that teacher education and professional development programs integrate spiritual reflection and character formation to support teachers' personal and professional sustainability.

Keywords: *Spiritual Competence, Christian Religious Education, Testing*

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary education increasingly recognizes that teacher competence extends beyond pedagogical knowledge and technical skills to include deeper personal and spiritual dimensions. In times of rapid social change, moral uncertainty, and increasing

professional pressure, teachers are often confronted with moments of testing that challenge their emotional resilience, ethical integrity, and inner strength. Within this context, spiritual competence emerges as a crucial yet frequently underexplored dimension of teacher professionalism, particularly in faith-based educational studies (Palmer, 2017; Wolterstorff, 2004). Spiritual competence may be understood as a teacher's capacity to draw upon transcendent values, spiritual awareness, and inner discipline to respond faithfully and responsibly to professional challenges. In Christian educational thought, this competence is closely related to practices such as vigilance, prayerfulness, self-control, and dependence on God, qualities that sustain educators during moments of fatigue, discouragement, and moral testing (Groome, 2011; Knight, 2006). Despite its importance, spiritual competence is often marginalized in formal teacher competency frameworks, which tend to prioritize cognitive, managerial, and instructional dimensions (Hattie, 2009).

The biblical text of Matthew 26:40-41 offers a profound theological lens for examining spiritual competence in times of testing. In this passage, Jesus finds His disciples sleeping during a moment of intense spiritual struggle and admonishes them, saying, "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (New International Version). Exegetically, this statement highlights the tension between human vulnerability and spiritual intention, emphasizing the necessity of vigilance and prayer as disciplines that sustain faithfulness under pressure (France, 2007; Keener, 2009). While the immediate context concerns the disciples' failure to remain spiritually alert, the passage has broader implications for understanding spiritual endurance in vocational callings, including teaching. From an educational perspective, Matthew 26:40-41 provides a conceptual framework for interpreting teachers' experiences of testing, not merely as external challenges, but as moments that reveal the depth of their spiritual preparedness. Teaching, especially in public schools where religious identity may function within a pluralistic environment, often demands patience, moral consistency, and emotional stability. Teachers who lack spiritual grounding may struggle to maintain integrity and perseverance when faced with systemic limitations, workload pressures, or relational conflicts (Noddings, 2013; Palmer, 2017). This study is situated at SDN 26 Pangkatan, a public elementary school in Labuhan Batu, Indonesia, where teachers encounter both professional demands and contextual challenges characteristic of public education settings. In such environments, spiritual competence does not operate as overt religiosity but as an inner resource that shapes attitudes, decision-making, and ethical conduct. For Christian teachers in particular, spiritual competence functions as an integrative force that aligns personal faith with professional responsibility (Holmes, 2010). Existing literature in Christian education emphasizes that effective teaching is deeply connected to the teacher's inner life. Palmer (2017) argues that good teaching flows from the integrity of the teacher's identity, while Wolterstorff (2004) highlights education as a moral and spiritual practice oriented toward justice, faithfulness, and hope. However, relatively few studies explicitly connect biblical texts, especially narrative passages such as Matthew 26:40-41, with contemporary discussions of teacher spiritual competence. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by exploring how Matthew 26:40-41 can be interpreted educationally to illuminate the concept of teachers' spiritual competence in times of testing. By integrating biblical reflection with educational theory, this research

aims to contribute to a more holistic understanding of teacher competence, one that acknowledges spiritual vigilance and inner strength as essential resources for sustaining faithful and ethical teaching practice in challenging contexts.

METHODS

A qualitative research design with a descriptive-interpretative approach was used in this research. Qualitative research was considered appropriate because the study aimed to explore and interpret the meaning of teachers' spiritual competence as experienced and understood in real educational contexts, rather than to measure variables statistically. The research focused on understanding perceptions, lived experiences, and reflective practices of teachers in relation to spiritual vigilance and endurance, as illuminated by Matthew 26:40-41. The study was conducted at SDN 26 Pangkatan, Labuhan Batu, a public elementary school operating within a pluralistic educational environment. The participants consisted of four Christian teachers, including one Christian Religious Education (PAK) teacher, and 15 Christian students. Teachers were selected using purposive sampling, based on the criteria that they actively teach at the school, identify as Christian, and are directly involved in students' spiritual or moral formation. Students were included to provide complementary perspectives regarding how teachers' spiritual attitudes are perceived and experienced in classroom interactions. Data were collected through three primary qualitative techniques. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all four Christian teachers. The interviews explored teachers' understanding of spiritual competence, experiences of professional and personal testing, spiritual practices (such as prayer, vigilance, and self-discipline), and their interpretation of Matthew 26:40-41 in relation to their teaching vocation. Semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility while maintaining focus on key research themes. Classroom and school-context observations were carried out to capture manifestations of spiritual competence in daily teaching practices. Observations focused on indicators such as patience, emotional control, ethical decision-making, consistency between words and actions, and responses to challenging situations. Field notes were documented systematically to support interpretative analysis. Document analysis was conducted on relevant materials, helped triangulate interview and observation data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that teachers at SDN 26 Pangkatan predominantly understand spiritual competence as an inner disposition rather than a set of observable religious activities. From the interviews, teachers consistently emphasized vigilance, self-awareness, and moral alertness as core elements of their spiritual life. This understanding resonates strongly with Matthew 26:40-41, where Jesus exhorts His disciples to "watch and pray" in order to withstand temptation. The emphasis on vigilance (*gregoreō* in the Greek text) underscores spiritual alertness amid human weakness (France, 2007). Teachers described moments of testing as situations involving emotional fatigue, classroom discipline challenges, administrative pressure, and feelings of isolation as Christian educators in a public school context. In these moments, spiritual competence was expressed not through overt religious expression, but through restraint, patience, and ethical consistency. This finding aligns with Palmer's (2017) assertion that the

integrity of a teacher's inner life directly shapes professional conduct. This result confirms that spiritual competence functions as an internal regulatory system, enabling teachers to respond wisely under pressure. Rather than reacting impulsively, spiritually vigilant teachers demonstrated reflective pauses, emotional control, and value-driven decision-making. Thus, Matthew 26:40-41 offers a biblical framework that validates teachers' lived experiences of vulnerability while emphasizing the necessity of spiritual alertness.

Prayerfulness as a Source of Resilience in Times of Testing

The next dominant theme emerging from the data is prayerfulness as a personal coping strategy during times of testing. All participating teachers reported prayer as a primary means of maintaining emotional balance and spiritual focus. Importantly, prayer was described not merely as a ritual practice but as an internal orientation of dependence on God, particularly during moments of stress or discouragement. This finding closely reflects Jesus' instruction in Matthew 26:41, where prayer is presented as the antidote to human weakness: "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." Exegetically, this statement acknowledges human limitation while affirming spiritual intention (Keener, 2009). Teachers interpreted this tension as deeply relevant to their professional lives, where good intentions are often strained by practical constraints. In classroom observations, prayerfulness manifested indirectly through calm communication, thoughtful responses to student misbehavior, and a consistent commitment to fairness. These behaviors illustrate how spiritual practices translate into pedagogical virtues. Noddings (2013) emphasizes that caring and attentiveness in education are grounded in the teacher's capacity for inner reflection, an insight reinforced by the findings of this study. The discussion suggests that prayer functions as a mechanism of spiritual resilience, enabling teachers to sustain commitment without emotional exhaustion. This challenges reductionist views of competence that exclude spiritual practices from professional development discourse.

The theme of testing emerged prominently in teachers' narratives. Testing was not interpreted primarily as moral failure but as moments of exhaustion, discouragement, and internal struggle. Teachers described experiences such as managing limited resources, handling diverse student needs, and balancing personal responsibilities with professional expectations. Matthew 26:40-41 provides a theological language for understanding these experiences without moral condemnation. Jesus' acknowledgment of the disciples' weakness reframes failure as a human condition rather than a moral defect. This theological insight was echoed by teachers, who expressed relief in recognizing that spiritual competence does not eliminate struggle but provides strength to endure it. From an educational standpoint, this finding underscores the importance of compassionate frameworks for evaluating teacher performance. Hattie (2009) argues that teacher effectiveness must be understood within contextual realities. Integrating biblical perspectives such as Matthew 26:40-41 enriches this understanding by legitimizing vulnerability while encouraging spiritual growth. Thus, spiritual competence emerges not as perfection but as faithful perseverance amid weakness, a concept with profound implications for teacher formation and support systems.

Moral Consistency and Ethical Decision-Making

Another significant result concerns moral consistency as an expression of spiritual competence. Teachers consistently emphasized the importance of aligning actions with values, especially when under pressure. Observations revealed that teachers avoided harsh disciplinary measures, chose restorative approaches, and demonstrated fairness even in challenging situations. This consistency reflects the spiritual vigilance advocated in Matthew 26:40-41. Watching and praying, in this context, extend beyond personal devotion to ethical attentiveness in daily interactions. Wolterstorff (2004) highlights that education is inherently moral, and teachers serve as agents of justice and responsibility. Students' perspectives further reinforced this finding. Several students noted that teachers' calmness, patience, and fairness made them feel respected and safe. This suggests that spiritual competence has a tangible impact on the learning environment, fostering trust and emotional security. The discussion highlights that moral consistency strengthens teachers' credibility. When students perceive congruence between teachers' words and actions, learning becomes relationally grounded and morally meaningful. This supports Groome's (2011) view that Christian education is fundamentally incarnational, values are taught through embodied practice.

The findings also demonstrate that spiritual competence significantly shapes teacher-student relationships. Teachers who exhibited vigilance and prayerfulness were more attentive to students' emotional states and individual needs. Observations indicated that such teachers listened patiently, avoided humiliating students, and maintained respectful communication even during conflict. This relational dimension aligns with Jesus' pastoral concern for His disciples in Matthew 26:40-41. Rather than rebuking them harshly, Jesus addresses their weakness with empathy and instruction. Teachers implicitly modeled this posture, reflecting Christlike attitudes in pedagogical contexts. Educational literature emphasizes that relational trust is central to effective teaching (Noddings, 2013). The findings suggest that spiritual competence deepens relational quality by fostering empathy and patience. In a public school context, where overt religious instruction may be limited, such relational expressions become primary channels of spiritual influence. Thus, spiritual competence operates as a relational catalyst, enhancing the affective climate of the classroom and supporting holistic student development.

A critical discussion point emerging from the study concerns the role of spiritual competence in pluralistic public school settings. Teachers emphasized that spiritual competence does not require explicit religious expression to be effective. Instead, it manifests through virtues such as self-control, humility, and perseverance, qualities that are universally valued yet spiritually grounded. This insight is particularly relevant to SDN 26 Pangkatan, where Christian teachers function within a diverse educational environment. Holmes (2010) argues that Christian vocation is lived faithfully within secular structures through integrity and service. The findings affirm this perspective, demonstrating that spiritual competence enables teachers to integrate faith and professionalism without conflict. Matthew 26:40-41 thus serves as a theological anchor for navigating public educational spaces with faithfulness and wisdom. Watching and

praying become inward disciplines that shape outward conduct, allowing teachers to remain spiritually rooted while professionally inclusive.

The final discussion theme concerns the integration of biblical reflection and educational practice. This study demonstrates that Matthew 26:40-41 can function as a pedagogical text, offering insight into teacher resilience, ethical vigilance, and spiritual endurance. Rather than applying the text prescriptively, teachers engaged it reflectively, allowing its themes to inform self-understanding and professional identity. This approach supports interdisciplinary dialogue between theology and education. Knight (2006) emphasizes that Christian education must integrate faith and learning coherently. The findings illustrate how biblical narratives can enrich educational discourse without compromising academic rigor. By interpreting Matthew 26:40-41 through lived experience, this study contributes to a contextual theology of education, one that honors Scripture while engaging contemporary educational realities. The results demonstrate that teachers' spiritual competence in times of testing is characterized by vigilance, prayerfulness, moral consistency, relational sensitivity, and resilient perseverance. Matthew 26:40-41 provides a robust biblical framework for understanding these qualities, affirming both human weakness and spiritual strength. The discussion confirms that spiritual competence is not an optional or peripheral dimension of teaching but a foundational resource that sustains educators ethically, emotionally, and relationally. In contexts such as SDN 26 Pangkatan, where challenges are real and resources limited, spiritual competence emerges as a vital source of inner strength that shapes faithful and effective teaching.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined teachers' spiritual competence as an inner source of strength during times of testing, using Matthew 26:40-41 as a biblical and educational lens. Through a qualitative approach conducted at SDN 26 Pangkatan, involving four Christian teachers and fifteen Christian students, the research has shown that spiritual competence plays a vital role in sustaining teachers' professional integrity, emotional resilience, and ethical consistency in challenging educational contexts. The findings reveal that spiritual competence is primarily expressed through inner vigilance, prayerfulness, and self-control rather than overt religious practices. The exhortation of Jesus to "watch and pray" in Matthew 26:40-41 provides a meaningful theological framework for understanding how teachers navigate moments of fatigue, discouragement, and pressure. The acknowledgment that "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" affirms human vulnerability while simultaneously calling for spiritual alertness and dependence on God. In the educational context, this tension reflects teachers' lived experiences as they strive to uphold professional and moral standards amid personal and institutional limitations. The study demonstrates that spiritual competence contributes significantly to moral consistency and relational quality in teaching practice. Teachers who cultivate spiritual vigilance are better equipped to respond patiently to students, make fair and reflective decisions, and maintain integrity under pressure. These qualities foster trust, emotional safety, and respect within the classroom, which are essential for effective learning and character formation. For students, teachers' spiritually grounded attitudes serve as implicit moral instruction, reinforcing values such as patience, responsibility, and self-

discipline. In the context of a public school such as SDN 26 Pangkatan, where religious diversity and institutional constraints shape daily practice, spiritual competence functions as an internal resource rather than a visible identity marker. This allows Christian teachers to integrate faith and professionalism in a manner that is inclusive, respectful, and ethically consistent. The study thus affirms that spiritual competence enables teachers to live out their faith authentically within pluralistic educational environments without compromising professional responsibilities. In conclusion, teachers' spiritual competence, as illuminated by Matthew 26:40-41, is a foundational dimension of holistic teacher competence. It sustains educators during times of testing, strengthens ethical practice, and enhances relational engagement with students. This study recommends that teacher education and professional development programs, particularly within Christian education, intentionally incorporate spiritual reflection, biblical literacy, and character formation as integral components of teacher preparation. Future research may expand this inquiry by exploring spiritual competence across diverse educational contexts or through longitudinal studies that examine its long-term impact on teacher resilience and student formation.

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