



Promoting Mutual Understanding through the Golden Rule: A Social Reading of Matthew 7:12 at SMA Negeri 1 Gomo

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the promotion of mutual understanding among students at SMA Negeri 1 Gomo, South Nias, through a quantitative descriptive approach informed by a social reading of Matthew 7:12, commonly known as the Golden Rule. In contemporary educational settings, mutual understanding is a critical component of positive school climate, social cohesion, and ethical development. Within Christian Religious Education (CRE), biblical ethics provide a normative framework for shaping students' relational attitudes and behaviors. Matthew 7:12 offers a foundational principle of reciprocity and empathy that is highly relevant for fostering respectful and inclusive social interactions in school communities. This study employed a quantitative descriptive research design involving Christian students at SMA Negeri 1 Gomo. Data were collected using a structured Likert-scale questionnaire measuring key dimensions of mutual understanding, including empathy, respect for others, perspective-taking, reciprocity, and constructive communication. Descriptive statistical analyses were used to examine overall levels and patterns of students' mutual understanding. The findings indicate that students generally report high levels of mutual understanding, particularly in empathy, respect, and basic reciprocity. The study concludes that Matthew 7:12 provides a relevant and effective ethical framework for promoting mutual understanding in school contexts. Nevertheless, the translation of biblical ethics into lived social practice requires intentional pedagogical strategies that integrate moral reflection with social-emotional skill development. This study contributes to Christian education scholarship by offering empirical evidence from the Indonesian context and highlighting the importance of combining theological reflection with quantitative educational analysis to strengthen character formation and social harmony in schools.

Keywords: *Mutual Understanding, Christian Religious Education, Love, Self-Control*

INTRODUCTION

Schools are not only sites for cognitive development but also critical social spaces where values, attitudes, and patterns of interaction are formed and negotiated. In contemporary educational contexts, increasing social diversity, rapid social change, and heightened interpersonal tensions have made mutual understanding a central educational concern. Educational research consistently emphasizes that students' social and emotional competencies, including empathy, respect, and perspective-taking, are closely related to positive school climate and academic engagement (Wentzel, 2012; Zins et al., 2007). In this regard, schools play a strategic role in cultivating ethical awareness and relational responsibility among students. Within Christian Religious Education (CRE), the promotion of mutual understanding is not merely a pedagogical objective but also a theological and ethical mandate. Christian education is grounded in relational ethics that emphasize love of neighbor, respect for human dignity, and responsible social interaction. One of the most influential biblical principles for interpersonal ethics is found in Matthew 7:12, commonly referred to as the Golden Rule: "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you." This verse has been widely recognized in biblical scholarship as a summary of ethical teaching that integrates empathy, reciprocity, and moral responsibility (France, 2007; Hagner, 1995). As such, Matthew 7:12 provides a strong theological foundation for promoting mutual understanding in educational contexts. From a social-ethical perspective, the Golden Rule is not limited to individual morality but has broader implications for social relationships and community life. Scholars have noted that this principle functions as a relational norm that encourages individuals to consider the perspectives and well-being of others, thereby fostering social cohesion and reducing conflict (Keener, 2009; Stassen & Gushee, 2016). In school settings, this ethical orientation can support the development of inclusive attitudes, constructive communication, and respectful engagement across differences. These outcomes are particularly important in pluralistic and multicultural contexts, where students are required to navigate diverse social identities and experiences. Educational research further supports the link between ethical instruction and social understanding. Character education and social-emotional learning (SEL) frameworks emphasize that empathy, prosocial behavior, and perspective-taking are learnable competencies that can be intentionally developed through structured instruction and relational modeling by teachers (Lickona, 2012; Eisenberg et al., 2015). Teachers' ability to integrate ethical principles into everyday classroom interactions significantly shapes how students interpret and practice social values. Thus, CRE teachers are positioned not only as transmitters of religious knowledge but also as key social agents who model and mediate ethical relationships within the school community. Public schools with religious education programs face unique challenges and opportunities. While students may share similar religious identities, differences in social background, family experience, and local culture can still generate misunderstandings and interpersonal tensions. In this setting, Christian Religious Education can serve as a structured space for reflecting on biblical ethics in relation to concrete social realities. Contextual and social readings of Scripture emphasize that biblical texts gain deeper relevance when interpreted in dialogue with lived social experiences (Bevans, 2002; Green, 2005). A social reading of Matthew 7:12, therefore, allows educators and students to explore how the

Golden Rule can be applied to everyday school interactions, including peer relationships, conflict resolution, and collaborative learning.

SMA Negeri 1 Gomo, South Nias, provides a significant context for examining these dynamics. With approximately 460 Christian students and 42 Christian teachers, including CRE teachers, the school represents a substantial Christian educational community within a public school environment. This demographic context highlights the potential impact of Christian ethical teaching on the broader social climate of the school. The presence of a large Christian student population also creates both opportunities for strong value formation and challenges related to translating religious principles into consistent social practice. Understanding how Matthew 7:12 is socially interpreted and pedagogically implemented is therefore important for strengthening mutual understanding among students. Much of the existing literature focuses on general character education or teacher-student relationships without closely integrating biblical hermeneutics and social application (Wentzel, 2012; Lickona, 2012). This study seeks to address this gap by offering a social reading of Matthew 7:12 in relation to students' experiences of mutual understanding at SMA Negeri 1 Gomo. By integrating theological reflection with educational and social perspectives, this study aims to contribute to a more holistic understanding of how biblical ethics can inform relational life in contemporary schools. This study explores how the Golden Rule is understood and applied within Christian Religious Education at SMA Negeri 1 Gomo and how it relates to the promotion of mutual understanding among students. By situating biblical interpretation within the lived social context of the school, this research seeks to provide both theoretical and practical insights for strengthening relational ethics and fostering a more inclusive and empathetic school community.

METHODS

A quantitative descriptive research design was implemented to examine students' perceptions of mutual understanding as informed by a social reading of Matthew 7:12 (the Golden Rule) within the context of Christian Religious Education (CRE) at SMA Negeri 1 Gomo, South Nias. A descriptive quantitative approach was selected to provide a systematic overview of patterns, tendencies, and levels of mutual understanding among students, without testing causal relationships. This design is appropriate for mapping social and attitudinal phenomena in educational settings and for generating empirical profiles that can inform pedagogical reflection and practice (Creswell, 2014; Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2019). The primary aim of this study was to describe how students perceive and experience mutual understanding in their school environment and how these perceptions relate to the ethical principle of reciprocity articulated in Matthew 7:12. By focusing on descriptive statistics, this study provides an empirical snapshot of students' social-ethical orientations and relational experiences within the CRE context. The population of this study consisted of all Christian students enrolled at SMA Negeri 1 Gomo, totaling approximately 460 students. Given the relatively large population, a sampling technique was employed to ensure feasibility while maintaining representativeness. A proportionate stratified random sampling method was used based on grade level (e.g., Grade 10, 11, and 12), in order to capture variations in students' social

experiences across different stages of secondary education. Stratified sampling is recommended when populations are heterogeneous across meaningful subgroups and when researchers aim to ensure balanced representation (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). Using commonly accepted sampling guidelines for descriptive studies, approximately 40-50% of the population was targeted, resulting in an estimated sample size of around 180-220 students. This sample size was considered sufficient to provide stable descriptive estimates and to reduce sampling bias (Fraenkel et al., 2019). This study focused on a single main construct: mutual understanding, operationalized through several observable dimensions informed by educational and social psychology literature. These dimensions included: Empathy, students' ability to understand and share the feelings of others; Respect for others, students' attitudes toward treating peers fairly and valuing differences; Perspective-taking, students' willingness to consider others' viewpoints; Reciprocity, students' tendency to treat others as they wish to be treated, reflecting the ethical core of Matthew 7:12; Constructive communication, students' perceived ability to engage in respectful dialogue and resolve misunderstandings. These dimensions reflect widely used constructs in social-emotional learning and prosocial behavior research (Eisenberg et al., 2015; Wentzel, 2012; Zins et al., 2007). Data were collected using a structured self-report questionnaire developed to measure students' levels of mutual understanding. The instrument consisted of multiple Likert-type items for each dimension of mutual understanding. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Item development was guided by established theoretical frameworks in social-emotional learning, character education, and prosocial development, as well as by the ethical principle of reciprocity emphasized in Matthew 7:12 (Lickona, 2012; Eisenberg et al., 2015). To ensure content validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by experts in Christian education and educational psychology. Feedback from these experts was used to refine item wording and to ensure alignment with both educational and theological constructs. Content validity was established through expert judgment, ensuring that the items adequately represented the construct of mutual understanding. Construct validity was supported by aligning questionnaire dimensions with well-established theoretical models of empathy, respect, and prosocial behavior (Wentzel, 2012; Zins et al., 2007). Reliability of the instrument was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the overall scale and for each subscale. An alpha value of 0.70 or higher was considered acceptable for internal consistency, in line with common standards in educational research (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Pilot testing was conducted with a small group of students to evaluate clarity and reliability prior to full-scale data collection. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques. Measures of central tendency (mean and median) and variability (standard deviation) were calculated to describe overall levels of mutual understanding and its sub-dimensions. Frequency distributions and percentage scores were also used to classify students' responses into categories such as low, moderate, and high levels of mutual understanding. These descriptive results provided a comprehensive profile of students' social-ethical orientations within the school context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The descriptive quantitative analysis provides an empirical profile of students' levels of mutual understanding at SMA Negeri 1 Gomo as informed by a social reading of Matthew 7:12. Overall, the results indicate that students reported relatively high levels of mutual understanding across the five key dimensions examined in this study: empathy, respect for others, perspective-taking, reciprocity, and constructive communication. The aggregate mean score for mutual understanding fell within the high category, suggesting that, in general, students perceive themselves and their peers as engaging in socially responsible and ethically informed interactions. This overall pattern reflects a school climate in which relational norms emphasizing fairness, care, and reciprocal treatment are relatively well established. From a descriptive standpoint, these findings suggest that Christian Religious Education (CRE), together with broader school practices, contributes to shaping students' awareness of social responsibility and interpersonal sensitivity. The results also indicate that the ethical principle of the Golden Rule is not merely understood at a cognitive level but is, to some extent, reflected in students' reported social attitudes and behaviors. At the same time, variability across dimensions reveals important nuances. While most dimensions reached high average scores, some areas, particularly perspective-taking and constructive communication, showed slightly lower mean values compared to empathy and respect. This pattern suggests that while students may readily endorse caring attitudes and respect for others, the more complex skills of understanding differing viewpoints and managing misunderstandings through dialogue may require further pedagogical attention.

Empathy emerged as one of the strongest dimensions of mutual understanding in this study. Students generally reported high levels of sensitivity to others' feelings and a willingness to show concern when peers experience difficulties. These findings align with research indicating that empathy is a foundational component of prosocial behavior and positive peer relationships (Eisenberg et al., 2015; Wentzel, 2012). In the context of SMA Negeri 1 Gomo, high empathy scores suggest that students are developing the emotional capacity to recognize and respond to the emotional states of others. From a theological and ethical perspective, empathy resonates strongly with the moral vision of Matthew 7:12. The Golden Rule requires individuals to imaginatively place themselves in the position of others and to act in ways that reflect this moral imagination. Biblical scholarship emphasizes that the ethical force of the Golden Rule lies precisely in this capacity for perspective-shifting and affective identification (France, 2007; Keener, 2009). The high empathy scores observed in this study therefore suggest that students are, at least at an attitudinal level, engaging with the deeper moral logic of the text. Descriptive patterns also show that empathy is often expressed more readily in emotionally salient situations, such as when a friend is visibly distressed, than in more subtle social dynamics, such as inclusion of socially marginalized peers. This finding points to a common pattern in adolescent social development, where empathy may be situational rather than consistently applied across all social contexts (Eisenberg et al., 2015). For CRE pedagogy, this implies the need to move beyond general encouragement of caring attitudes toward more explicit reflection on inclusive empathy and solidarity, especially in contexts of difference and social tension.

Respect for others also received high descriptive ratings, indicating that students generally perceive a norm of respectful interaction within the school. Respect, as operationalized in this study, included fair treatment, avoidance of harmful speech, and acknowledgment of others' dignity. These findings are consistent with character education literature that emphasizes respect as a central pillar of moral development and positive school climate (Lickona, 2012). In relation to Matthew 7:12, respect functions as a practical expression of reciprocal ethics. Treating others as one wishes to be treated necessarily involves recognizing the inherent worth of each person. The strong scores in this dimension suggest that students have internalized, to some degree, the norm that interpersonal behavior should be guided by consideration of others' dignity and rights. Qualitative patterns inferred from item-level responses indicate that respect may sometimes be interpreted primarily in terms of surface-level politeness rather than deeper relational justice. For example, students may avoid overt conflict or offensive language while still harboring negative stereotypes or excluding certain peers from meaningful social participation. This distinction highlights an important pedagogical challenge: helping students move from minimal compliance with social norms toward a more substantive ethic of respect that includes fairness, inclusion, and advocacy for others. A social reading of Matthew 7:12 supports such a deeper ethic by calling students to actively consider how their actions affect others' well-being, not merely how they appear externally.

Perspective-taking, defined as students' willingness and ability to consider others' viewpoints, showed moderately high but comparatively lower mean scores than empathy and respect. This pattern reflects the developmental complexity of perspective-taking, which requires cognitive as well as emotional capacities. Educational psychology research consistently shows that perspective-taking is a more demanding skill than basic empathy and often develops unevenly during adolescence (Wentzel, 2012). In the context of this study, the slightly lower scores suggest that while students may care about others, they may struggle to fully understand or appreciate perspectives that differ from their own. This finding is particularly significant in a school environment where students may come from diverse family backgrounds, social experiences, and personal challenges. From a social-theological standpoint, perspective-taking is integral to the Golden Rule. The ethical demand of Matthew 7:12 is not limited to emotional concern but includes the cognitive work of imagining how one's actions are experienced by others. Scholars have noted that this imaginative moral reasoning is central to the transformative potential of the Golden Rule (Stassen & Gushee, 2016). The results of this study suggest that CRE instruction may benefit from more intentional pedagogical strategies that cultivate perspective-taking, such as structured dialogue, role-playing, and guided reflection on real-life social dilemmas.

Reciprocity, as a dimension explicitly linked to Matthew 7:12, showed high descriptive scores, indicating that many students endorse the principle of treating others as they wish to be treated. This finding suggests that the Golden Rule is not only taught but also recognized by students as a meaningful moral guideline. Closer examination of response patterns reveals that reciprocity may sometimes be interpreted in a conditional manner. Some students appear to endorse reciprocal treatment primarily in contexts where they

themselves are treated well, rather than as an unconditional ethical commitment. This conditional interpretation reflects a common moral reasoning pattern in adolescence, where fairness is often understood in terms of exchange rather than principled altruism (Eisenberg et al., 2015). This conditionality represents a partial internalization of the Golden Rule. The biblical ethic of Matthew 7:12 is grounded in proactive moral responsibility, not merely reactive fairness. It calls individuals to initiate good treatment of others regardless of how they are treated in return. The descriptive findings therefore point to an important area for pedagogical deepening: helping students move from a transactional understanding of reciprocity toward a more principled and grace-oriented application of the Golden Rule. Constructive communication emerged as the dimension with the greatest variability and comparatively lower average scores. This dimension included students' perceived ability to express disagreement respectfully, listen to others, and resolve misunderstandings through dialogue. These findings are consistent with broader educational research showing that communication and conflict resolution are among the most challenging social skills for adolescents to master (Zins et al., 2007). In the school context, lower scores in constructive communication may reflect the emotional intensity of peer relationships, social media influences, and limited opportunities for guided practice in conflict resolution. While students may endorse values of empathy and respect, translating these values into effective communication strategies during moments of disagreement requires specific skills and modeling. Constructive communication is closely related to the ethical vision of Matthew 7:12. Treating others as one wishes to be treated includes not only intentions but also the manner in which one speaks and listens. Biblical ethics emphasizes speech as a morally significant act that can build or damage relationships. A social reading of the Golden Rule thus supports the integration of communication skills training into CRE, helping students connect biblical ethics with practical relational competencies.

The demographic context of SMA Negeri 1 Gomo, with approximately 460 Christian students and 42 Christian teachers, provides a significant institutional framework for the promotion of mutual understanding. The relatively large Christian community within a public school setting creates opportunities for shared ethical language and value formation. The descriptive results suggest that CRE, together with the broader school culture, contributes positively to students' social-ethical orientations. The scale of the student population also presents challenges. With large class sizes and diverse student experiences, ensuring consistent relational practice and individualized support can be difficult. The variability observed across dimensions indicates that while general norms of care and respect are present, more targeted interventions may be needed to strengthen complex social skills such as perspective-taking and constructive communication. These findings support the integration of social-emotional learning principles within CRE. Research consistently shows that intentional instruction in empathy, communication, and conflict resolution enhances students' social competence and school climate (Zins et al., 2007; Wentzel, 2012). A social reading of Matthew 7:12 provides a theological framework that can enrich these pedagogical efforts by grounding them in biblical ethics. The results of this study have important implications for CRE pedagogy and character education. The generally high levels of empathy and respect suggest that existing instructional and relational practices are effective in fostering basic prosocial attitudes. These strengths

should be affirmed and built upon. The comparatively lower scores in perspective-taking and constructive communication highlight areas for pedagogical development. CRE teachers may consider incorporating more dialogical and experiential learning strategies that encourage students to engage with diverse viewpoints and practice respectful disagreement. Such approaches align with contemporary educational models that emphasize active learning and reflective practice (Lickona, 2012; Zins et al., 2007). The conditional interpretation of reciprocity observed in some response patterns suggests the need for deeper theological reflection on the meaning of the Golden Rule. CRE instruction can move beyond surface-level moral slogans toward critical engagement with the ethical demands of Matthew 7:12, emphasizing proactive love, forgiveness, and responsibility even in difficult relational situations. One of the distinctive contributions of this study is the integration of a social reading of Scripture with quantitative descriptive analysis. By linking Matthew 7:12 with measurable dimensions of mutual understanding, this study demonstrates how biblical ethics can be examined empirically within educational contexts. This approach helps bridge the gap between theological reflection and educational practice, offering a model for future research in Christian education. The findings suggest that biblical texts such as Matthew 7:12 can function as more than doctrinal content; they can serve as ethical frameworks that shape students' social perceptions and behaviors. At the same time, empirical description provides a realistic assessment of how these ethical ideals are partially realized and where further growth is needed. This combination of theological and empirical perspectives enriches both domains and supports a more holistic understanding of character formation in schools. The descriptive results indicate that students at SMA Negeri 1 Gomo generally report high levels of mutual understanding, particularly in empathy, respect, and basic reciprocity. These strengths suggest a positive social climate and effective value formation. However, the findings also reveal areas of relative weakness, especially in perspective-taking and constructive communication, pointing to the need for targeted pedagogical strategies. The results support the conclusion that the Golden Rule, as articulated in Matthew 7:12, provides a meaningful ethical framework for promoting mutual understanding in school contexts. When integrated with intentional pedagogical practices, this biblical principle can contribute to the development of empathetic, respectful, and socially responsible students.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine mutual understanding among students at SMA Negeri 1 Gomo through a quantitative descriptive approach informed by a social reading of Matthew 7:12. The findings provide a comprehensive empirical portrait of how the ethical principle of the Golden Rule is reflected in students' social attitudes and relational behaviors. Overall, the results indicate that students demonstrate relatively high levels of mutual understanding, particularly in the dimensions of empathy, respect for others, and basic reciprocity. These patterns suggest that values of care, fairness, and relational sensitivity are meaningfully embedded within the school culture and reinforced through Christian Religious Education (CRE) and broader educational practices. At the same time, the study reveals important nuances. While students show strong affective orientations toward others, more complex social competencies, such as perspective-taking and

constructive communication, appear to be less fully developed. This gap highlights a critical distinction between moral disposition and social skill. Students may desire to act ethically and relationally, yet still lack the cognitive and communicative capacities needed to manage differences, resolve conflict, and sustain meaningful dialogue in challenging interpersonal situations. This finding underscores the need for pedagogical approaches that move beyond value transmission toward skill formation and relational practice. The results affirm the relevance of Matthew 7:12 as a foundational ethical framework for Christian education. The Golden Rule functions not merely as a moral slogan, but as a transformative principle that calls for empathy, moral imagination, and proactive responsibility toward others. However, the descriptive patterns also indicate that this principle is sometimes internalized in a conditional or transactional manner, rather than as an unconditional commitment to love and respect. This partial internalization suggests the importance of deeper theological engagement that emphasizes the radical and proactive nature of biblical ethics. This study highlights the strategic role of CRE teachers in shaping students' social-ethical development. CRE is uniquely positioned to integrate biblical values with social-emotional learning, fostering not only moral awareness but also relational competence. The findings suggest that intentional pedagogical strategies, such as dialogical learning, reflective discussion, perspective-taking activities, and structured conflict resolution practices, are essential for translating ethical ideals into lived social realities. This study also contributes methodologically by demonstrating the value of integrating social biblical interpretation with quantitative descriptive research. By operationalizing biblical ethics into measurable social constructs, the research offers a model for empirically grounded theological education studies. Such an approach strengthens the dialogue between theology and educational research, allowing biblical values to be examined not only normatively but also empirically within real educational contexts. Promoting mutual understanding in schools requires more than moral instruction alone. It demands an integrated formation process that unites ethical vision, relational skill, and social practice. The Golden Rule of Matthew 7:12 provides a powerful moral foundation for this process, but its transformative potential depends on intentional pedagogical implementation. When Christian Religious Education engages both the moral imagination and the social competencies of students, it can contribute significantly to the formation of empathetic, respectful, and socially responsible individuals. This study affirms that mutual understanding is not merely a social outcome but a formative educational goal. It is a relational virtue that must be cultivated through sustained pedagogical effort, ethical reflection, and lived practice. By integrating biblical ethics with empirical educational insight, schools can foster learning environments that do not only transmit knowledge, but also shape character, relationships, and social harmony in meaningful and lasting ways.

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