



Reflection on the Pedagogical Competence of Christian Religious Education Teachers in Developing Learning Based on the Image of God (Genesis 1:27)

Tiorlin Sitorus^{1*}, Ibelala Gea²

¹Student, Pendidikan Profesi Guru, Fakultas Ilmu Pendidikan Kristen, IAKN Tarutung

²Lecturer, Fakultas Ilmu Pendidikan Kristen, IAKN Tarutung

*correspondence: tiorlinsitorus71@guru.sd.belajar.id

ABSTRACT

This study examines the pedagogical competence of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers in developing learning frameworks grounded in the theological concept of the "imago Dei" (image of God) as presented in Genesis 1:27. Through qualitative analysis and theological reflection, this research explores how Christian educators can integrate the foundational understanding of human dignity and divine image into their pedagogical practices. The study reveals that effective CRE teachers demonstrate competence not only in traditional educational methodologies but also in theological hermeneutics, contextual application, and transformative learning approaches that honor the inherent worth of every student. Key findings indicate that when teachers ground their pedagogy in the concept of imago Dei, students develop enhanced self-understanding, stronger moral foundations, and deeper appreciation for human diversity and dignity. This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on faith-based education by providing a framework for theological pedagogy that is both academically rigorous and spiritually formative.

Keywords: *Christian Religious Education, pedagogical competence, imago Dei, theological pedagogy, Genesis 1:27, transformative learning*

INTRODUCTION

The integration of theological principles into educational practice represents one of the most significant challenges facing contemporary Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers. At the heart of this challenge lies the fundamental question of how biblical truths can be effectively communicated through pedagogical approaches that honor both academic excellence and spiritual formation (Parker, 2019). The concept of *imago Dei*, derived from Genesis 1:27, which states that humans are created "in the image of God," provides a foundational framework for understanding human dignity, purpose, and educational potential. This theological perspective extends far beyond traditional secular pedagogical models, positioning education not merely as the transfer of knowledge but as a sacred activity that affirms the divine image within each learner. Modern educational

discourse increasingly acknowledges the necessity of holistic approaches to learning that address cognitive, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions of human development (Palmer, 2017). Within the context of Christian education, this holistic emphasis finds theological grounding in the doctrine of *imago Dei*, which affirms that every student is a unique bearer of God's image. This recognition confers intrinsic dignity and value on learners, regardless of their academic achievement or social background. Christian educators are called not only to cultivate intellectual growth but also to nurture moral integrity, spiritual maturity, and relational sensitivity. In this sense, pedagogy becomes a vocation shaped by theological convictions as much as by educational theory. Translating such theology into classroom practice is not without difficulty. The practical implementation of theology-informed pedagogy requires teachers to develop competencies that extend beyond conventional educational training. While professional expertise in content knowledge, instructional strategies, classroom management, and assessment remains essential, teachers of CRE must also cultivate theological literacy, spiritual discernment, and pastoral sensitivity. These qualities enable educators to recognize the divine image in students, design learning environments that affirm this identity, and encourage transformative encounters with biblical truths. As Cooling (2020) argues, effective Christian education is characterized not only by academic rigor but also by the capacity to integrate faith with learning in ways that shape character and identity. Pedagogical competence in CRE therefore operates at the intersection of two domains: the professional and the theological. On the professional side, teachers must demonstrate proficiency in lesson planning, differentiated instruction, and assessment that measures not only knowledge acquisition but also critical thinking and application. On the theological side, they must engage deeply with biblical and doctrinal resources to frame their teaching within a broader narrative of God's purposes for humanity. The *imago Dei* concept serves as a unifying principle in this integration, reminding educators that teaching is ultimately an act of stewardship, where the goal is not merely to produce skilled learners but to guide individuals toward flourishing as image-bearers of God. The implications of this theological perspective are profound for classroom practice. First, the recognition of students as bearers of God's image calls for an approach to discipline and classroom management rooted in respect and restoration rather than control and punishment. Second, instructional strategies must be designed to honor diverse learning styles and abilities, reflecting the variety within God's creation. Third, assessment practices should not reduce students to test scores but instead affirm their broader capacities for creativity, collaboration, and moral decision-making. In each of these areas, pedagogical competence informed by *imago Dei* transforms ordinary educational tasks into opportunities for affirming human dignity and cultivating spiritual growth. The role of the teacher in this process cannot be overstated. Teachers embody the values they seek to communicate, serving as living models of what it means to reflect God's image in daily life. Their attitudes, interactions, and instructional choices either reinforce or undermine the theological vision they profess. Thus, professional development for CRE teachers must include not only methodological training but also opportunities for theological reflection, spiritual formation, and ethical discernment. When teachers themselves are conscious of their identity as image-bearers of God, they are better equipped to nurture that same awareness in their students.

This study therefore seeks to explore how the theological concept of *imago Dei* can inform and enhance the pedagogical competence of Christian Religious Education teachers. Specifically, it examines how CRE educators can move beyond abstract theological affirmations to concrete pedagogical practices that shape transformative learning experiences. The research question guiding this inquiry is: How can Christian Religious Education teachers develop and demonstrate pedagogical competence that effectively integrates the theological concept of *imago Dei* into transformative learning experiences? Addressing this question requires engagement with both theoretical frameworks and practical applications. Theoretically, it involves drawing from theological anthropology, educational psychology, and pedagogical theory to articulate a coherent model of *imago Dei*-centered teaching. Practically, it involves identifying strategies, methods, and classroom practices through which teachers can embody and communicate this theological vision. The exploration of this question carries significant implications for the broader field of Christian education. If the *imago Dei* truly constitutes the foundation of human identity and purpose, then pedagogy must be reoriented to align with this vision. Education becomes not merely preparation for economic productivity but a sacred partnership in God's work of forming human beings into mature reflections of divine character. Such a vision challenges reductionist models of education that prioritize technical skills at the expense of moral and spiritual development. Instead, it affirms a holistic approach in which knowledge, virtue, and faith are integrated for the flourishing of individuals and communities. The pedagogical competence of Christian Religious Education teachers cannot be understood solely in terms of professional skill or academic mastery. Rather, it must be framed within a theological vision rooted in the doctrine of *imago Dei*. This vision affirms the dignity and potential of every student, challenges teachers to embody and communicate God's truth, and calls for pedagogical practices that are both academically rigorous and spiritually formative. By integrating theological principles with educational methods, CRE teachers are uniquely positioned to offer transformative learning experiences that honor God's image in students and equip them to live out their calling as bearers of divine likeness. The task is demanding, requiring ongoing reflection, intentional practice, and deep reliance on God's wisdom. Yet it is precisely through this integration that Christian education fulfills its mission: to cultivate learners who reflect the image of God in their knowledge, character, and service to the world.

METHODS

The study involved fifteen Christian Religious Education teachers from various denominational backgrounds, including Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox traditions. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, with criteria including: (a) minimum five years of experience teaching Christian Religious Education, (b) formal theological education at the bachelor's degree level or higher, (c) demonstrated commitment to integrating faith and learning, and (d) willingness to participate in in-depth interviews and reflection processes. Data collection involved multiple methods to ensure comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives. Primary data sources included semi-structured interviews, participant observation of classroom instruction, and analysis of curriculum materials and lesson plans developed by

participants. Secondary data sources included reflective journals maintained by participants throughout the study period and focus group discussions exploring shared themes and experiences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant, focusing on their understanding of the *imago Dei* concept, their pedagogical approaches, and their experiences integrating theological concepts into educational practice. Interview questions were designed to elicit detailed descriptions of specific practices, underlying beliefs and assumptions, and perceived outcomes of their pedagogical approaches. Data analysis followed a systematic phenomenological reduction process, involving multiple stages of interpretation and meaning-making. Initial analysis involved open coding to identify significant themes and patterns within individual participant accounts. Subsequent analysis employed axial coding to explore relationships between themes and develop more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. The analysis process was guided by van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic phenomenological method, which emphasizes the importance of both description and interpretation in understanding lived experiences. Member checking was employed throughout the analysis process to ensure accuracy and validity of interpretations.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The concept of *imago Dei* has been central to Christian anthropology since the early church fathers, though its interpretation has evolved throughout church history (Middleton, 2005). Contemporary biblical scholarship generally recognizes three primary interpretations of the image of God: the substantive view, which identifies specific attributes or capacities that humans share with God; the relational view, which emphasizes the human capacity for relationship with God and others; and the functional view, which focuses on humanity's role as God's representatives on earth (McFarland, 2018). Each of these interpretations carries significant implications for educational theory and practice. The substantive view, popularized by Augustine and later Reformed theologians, suggests that humans possess inherent rational, moral, and spiritual capacities that reflect divine attributes (Green, 2017). From an educational perspective, this understanding validates approaches that prioritize intellectual development, moral formation, and spiritual growth as interconnected dimensions of human flourishing. The relational interpretation, emphasized by contemporary theologians such as Karl Barth and more recently by feminist theologians, highlights the fundamentally social nature of human existence (Johnson, 2021). This perspective aligns with social constructivist learning theories and supports pedagogical approaches that emphasize collaborative learning, community building, and the development of empathy and interpersonal skills. The functional view, which has gained prominence in recent biblical scholarship, emphasizes humanity's vocation as stewards and representatives of divine authority in creation (Wright, 2019). This interpretation supports pedagogical approaches that emphasize practical application, service learning, and the development of leadership and responsibility skills. All participants emphasized the importance of deep theological understanding as the foundation for effective pedagogical practice. Teachers who demonstrated strong competence in developing *imago Dei*-based learning consistently exhibited sophisticated theological literacy combined with practical wisdom in applying biblical concepts to educational contexts. Participant narratives revealed that effective

integration of the *imago Dei* concept requires teachers to move beyond superficial application of theological language toward substantive engagement with biblical and theological sources. As one participant noted: "It's not enough to just mention that students are made in God's image. You have to really understand what that means theologically and then figure out how that understanding shapes everything you do in the classroom." Teachers identified several key theological competencies necessary for effective practice: exegetical skills for interpreting biblical texts, systematic theological knowledge for understanding doctrinal connections, historical awareness of different interpretations and applications, and contextual sensitivity for applying theological concepts in diverse cultural settings.

Pedagogical Competence in Religious Education

The professional competence of religious education teachers has been the subject of extensive research in recent decades, with scholars identifying multiple dimensions of effective practice (Hull, 2018). Traditional models of teacher competence typically include four primary domains: content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and knowledge of learners and learning contexts (Shulman, 1986). Within the specific context of religious education, additional competencies become relevant, including theological literacy, interfaith awareness, ethical sensitivity, and the ability to facilitate spiritual formation (Erricker, 2020). Research conducted by Thompson and Williams (2019) identified five key competencies specific to Christian Religious Education teachers: biblical and theological knowledge, spiritual maturity and authenticity, cultural sensitivity and contextual awareness, innovative pedagogical skills, and the ability to create safe spaces for exploration and questioning. The integration of faith and learning represents a particular challenge for CRE teachers, requiring them to navigate the tension between academic rigor and spiritual formation, between intellectual inquiry and faith commitment (Smith, 2018). Effective teachers in this context demonstrate what Beaman (2017) terms "pedagogical wisdom," which combines professional expertise with spiritual discernment and contextual sensitivity. The concept of human dignity emerged as a central organizing principle for pedagogical approaches grounded in *imago Dei* theology. Participants consistently described how their understanding of students as image-bearers fundamentally altered their approach to instruction, assessment, and classroom management. Teachers implementing dignity-centered pedagogy demonstrated several characteristic practices: individualized attention that recognizes unique gifts and potential in each student, collaborative learning structures that honor diverse perspectives and contributions, restorative rather than punitive approaches to discipline and conflict resolution, and assessment practices that emphasize growth and development rather than comparative ranking. One participant described this shift: "When I really began to understand that each of my students carries the image of God, it changed everything. I couldn't see them as problems to be solved or empty vessels to be filled. They became partners in learning, each with something unique to contribute."

Transformative Learning in Christian Education

The concept of transformative learning, originally developed by Jack Mezirow in the context of adult education, has found significant application within Christian educational contexts (Taylor, 2020). Transformative learning theory emphasizes the importance of

critical reflection, discourse, and action in facilitating deep personal change and growth. Within Christian education, this process is often understood in terms of spiritual formation and discipleship. Recent research by Anderson and Clark (2021) has explored how transformative learning principles can be applied within Christian Religious Education settings, identifying several key factors that promote transformational outcomes: the creation of safe learning environments, the encouragement of critical reflection on assumptions and beliefs, the provision of diverse perspectives and experiences, and the integration of learning with personal and communal spiritual practices. The theological concept of *imago Dei* provides a unique foundation for transformative learning approaches within Christian education. By affirming the inherent dignity and potential of every learner, this theological understanding creates space for growth, change, and development that honors both human agency and divine grace (Roberts, 2019). Teachers who ground their practice in this theological understanding are better positioned to facilitate learning experiences that promote not only intellectual growth but also personal and spiritual transformation. Participants who demonstrated high levels of pedagogical competence in *imago Dei*-based education consistently created learning environments that facilitated personal and spiritual transformation. These environments were characterized by psychological safety, intellectual rigor, spiritual openness, and practical application opportunities. The creation of transformative learning environments required teachers to develop specific competencies in emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, spiritual discernment, and cultural sensitivity. Teachers described the need to balance academic challenge with pastoral care, intellectual inquiry with faith formation, and individual growth with community building. Traditional assessment approaches were consistently modified by participants to align with *imago Dei* theology. Rather than focusing primarily on cognitive outcomes, these teachers developed assessment practices that addressed multiple dimensions of human development, including intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual growth. Holistic assessment practices included portfolio-based evaluation systems, peer assessment and feedback opportunities, self-reflection and goal-setting exercises, and service learning projects that demonstrate practical application of learning. These approaches required teachers to develop new competencies in authentic assessment, qualitative evaluation methods, and collaborative assessment practices. The findings of this study reveal that pedagogical competence in *imago Dei*-based Christian Religious Education extends far beyond traditional teaching skills to encompass theological, pastoral, and transformational dimensions. Teachers who effectively integrate this theological concept into their pedagogical practice demonstrate a unique synthesis of professional expertise and spiritual wisdom that enables them to create learning environments that honor both human dignity and academic excellence.

Implications for Teacher Preparation

The findings of this study suggest significant implications for the preparation and ongoing development of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers. Traditional teacher education programs, even when offered by Christian institutions, often prioritize professional competencies such as lesson planning, assessment strategies, and classroom management. While these components are necessary, they may not adequately prepare teachers for the complex task of integrating theological concepts into pedagogical

practice. In particular, the challenge of embedding theology into education—specifically the theological concept of *imago Dei*—requires competencies that extend beyond the scope of conventional training. Teacher preparation programs must therefore reconsider their curriculum design to ensure that theological and spiritual dimensions are intentionally incorporated into the formation of future educators. One of the most pressing recommendations is the inclusion of coursework in theological hermeneutics, spiritual formation, and transformative learning theory. Hermeneutics equips teachers with the skills to interpret Scripture responsibly and apply biblical principles to educational contexts. Spiritual formation fosters self-awareness and personal growth, enabling teachers to embody the values they seek to cultivate in students. Transformative learning theory provides a framework for understanding how deep shifts in perspective can occur, guiding teachers to design experiences that not only convey knowledge but also shape character and spiritual maturity. Together, these elements would prepare educators to move beyond surface-level instruction toward practices that nurture the whole person in alignment with the theological vision of *imago Dei*. In addition to formal coursework, the practical component of teacher education is equally important. Field experiences should be intentionally designed to allow prospective teachers to observe and practice *imago Dei*-based pedagogy under the mentorship of experienced practitioners. These opportunities would provide essential hands-on experience in translating theological insights into practical strategies within the classroom. Mentorship is especially crucial, as it allows novice teachers to witness how seasoned educators integrate theology with pedagogy in real-life contexts. Through observation, guided practice, and reflective dialogue, teacher candidates could develop greater confidence and competence in employing faith-informed approaches to learning. For current practitioners, the importance of professional development cannot be overstated. Teachers who are already serving in schools would benefit from structured opportunities to grow in their capacity to integrate theology and pedagogy. Professional development programs should move beyond abstract theological discussions and provide concrete strategies, case studies, and tools that teachers can implement in diverse educational settings. For example, workshops could focus on designing lesson plans that affirm the dignity of students as image-bearers of God, or on assessment practices that recognize holistic growth rather than reducing learning outcomes to test scores. Another promising approach is the establishment of professional learning communities (PLCs) focused on faith-based pedagogy. Such communities could provide ongoing support, accountability, and collaboration for teachers seeking to refine their practice. Within these communities, educators would have the opportunity to share resources, teaching strategies, and personal experiences, thereby creating a culture of mutual encouragement and professional growth. Beyond resource-sharing, PLCs could foster reflective dialogue about the challenges and successes of implementing *imago Dei*-based pedagogy, ensuring that teachers do not face these complexities in isolation. The implementation of *imago Dei*-based pedagogy is not without obstacles, particularly in pluralistic or secular educational settings. Cultural and contextual factors may limit the applicability of explicitly theological approaches, requiring teachers to exercise discernment in adapting their practices to respect the diversity of student backgrounds. For example, while affirming human dignity is universally relevant, explicitly biblical language may not be appropriate in every educational environment. Teachers must therefore learn to communicate theological

principles in ways that are sensitive and inclusive without compromising their core convictions.

Institutional constraints also pose significant challenges. Standardized curriculum requirements, high-stakes testing, and rigid assessment mandates may conflict with holistic, transformative approaches to education. Teachers committed to *imago Dei*-based pedagogy must navigate the tension between meeting institutional expectations and pursuing practices that affirm the spiritual and moral development of students. This requires creativity, resilience, and in some cases, advocacy for broader systemic changes that allow space for faith-informed educational practices. The findings of this study are also limited by the specific cultural and denominational contexts of the participants. While the insights are valuable, they may not fully capture the diversity of Christian traditions or the wide range of educational settings in which CRE teachers serve. Further research is therefore necessary to explore how *imago Dei*-based pedagogical approaches might be adapted across different cultural contexts, denominational perspectives, and educational systems. Comparative studies that examine practices in varied settings could yield richer insights and provide more nuanced guidance for teacher preparation and professional development programs. The preparation and support of Christian Religious Education teachers must evolve to address the unique challenges of integrating theology into pedagogy. Incorporating coursework in hermeneutics, spiritual formation, and transformative learning, providing field-based mentorship, offering targeted professional development, and fostering learning communities all represent promising steps toward equipping teachers for this task. At the same time, educators must remain mindful of contextual and institutional challenges, seeking creative strategies to remain faithful to theological convictions while engaging diverse educational realities. Ultimately, the integration of *imago Dei* into pedagogical practice holds the potential to transform Christian education by affirming the dignity and purpose of every student and cultivating learning environments that reflect the fullness of God's vision for humanity.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the theological concept of *imago Dei* provides a robust foundation for developing pedagogical competence in Christian Religious Education. Teachers who ground their practice in this understanding of human dignity and potential are better positioned to create transformative learning environments that promote holistic student development. The integration of *imago Dei* theology into pedagogical practice requires teachers to develop competencies that extend beyond traditional educational training to include theological literacy, spiritual discernment, and transformational leadership skills. These competencies enable teachers to create learning environments that honor the inherent dignity of students while maintaining academic rigor and promoting meaningful growth and development. Future research should explore the long-term outcomes of *imago Dei*-based pedagogical approaches on student development and achievement. Additionally, investigation of how these approaches can be effectively adapted for diverse cultural and institutional contexts would contribute to the broader understanding of faith-based education. The findings of this study contribute to the ongoing conversation about the role of faith in education by providing a specific theological framework for pedagogical development. As Christian educators continue to

seek ways of integrating faith and learning, the concept of *imago Dei* offers a foundation that is both theologically sound and educationally transformative.

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