



Christian Religious Education Teachers' Spirituality in Interpreting the Theology of Suffering: Reflection on Philippians 1:21-30 at SMKS Multistudi High School

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the spirituality of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers in interpreting the theology of suffering based on Philippians 1:21-30 at SMKS Multistudi High School, Batam. The research is grounded in the assumption that teachers' spiritual perspectives significantly influence how theological concepts, especially suffering, are communicated and internalized by students. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected from 33 Christian students through structured questionnaires designed to measure students' perceptions of teachers' spirituality, clarity of theological explanation, and the transformative impact of learning about suffering. Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were employed to identify patterns and relationships among the variables. The findings indicate that CRE teachers generally demonstrate a high level of spirituality reflected in their teaching attitudes, biblical integration, and pastoral sensitivity. Students' responses show a positive correlation between perceived teacher spirituality and students' constructive understanding of suffering as part of Christian discipleship. Moreover, the interpretation of Philippians 1:21-30 by teachers tends to emphasize Christ-centered endurance, missional purpose, and spiritual maturity, which contributes to students' resilience and faith formation. However, the study also identifies areas for pedagogical strengthening, particularly in contextualizing suffering within students' contemporary experiences. In conclusion, the spirituality of CRE teachers plays a crucial role in shaping students' theological comprehension and spiritual resilience. Strengthening teachers' reflective spirituality and pedagogical strategies is therefore essential for fostering a biblically grounded and contextually relevant understanding of suffering in Christian education.

Keywords: *Spirituality, Christian Religious Education, Theology of Suffering*

INTRODUCTION

Teacher spirituality has increasingly been recognized as a crucial dimension of professional identity in Christian Religious Education (CRE), particularly in contexts where

faith formation and character development are integral to the educational mission. In Christian pedagogy, teachers are not merely transmitters of doctrinal knowledge but living witnesses whose spiritual maturity shapes the learning climate and influences students' faith development (Pazmiño, 2008). This reality becomes even more significant when teachers are required to interpret and communicate complex theological themes such as suffering, perseverance, and faithful endurance, central motifs in the Pauline epistles, especially Philippians 1:21-30. The theology of suffering in Philippians presents a paradoxical yet transformative Christian perspective. The apostle Paul frames suffering not merely as hardship but as participation in Christ's mission and identity. His well-known declaration, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21), reflects a profound spiritual orientation in which suffering is integrated into faithful discipleship. Scholars note that Paul's theology in Philippians emphasizes joyful endurance, communal solidarity, and steadfast witness amid adversity (O'Brien, 1991; Wright, 2004). For CRE teachers, this theological framework offers a rich resource for shaping students' understanding of resilience, faithfulness, and Christian identity in contemporary educational settings. In the Indonesian educational context, particularly in vocational and secondary schools, CRE teachers often face the dual challenge of delivering curriculum content while also nurturing students' spiritual resilience in increasingly complex social environments. Research in Christian education consistently shows that the effectiveness of religious instruction is strongly influenced by the teacher's personal spirituality, relational authenticity, and theological depth (Groome, 2011; Knight, 2006). When teachers internalize biblical theology at the level of personal conviction, their teaching tends to become more transformative and contextually meaningful. Preliminary observations in various Indonesian schools indicate that the theology of suffering is sometimes taught in a predominantly cognitive manner, without sufficient connection to students' lived experiences or to the teacher's own spiritual witness. This gap may result in CRE learning that is doctrinally correct but pedagogically less formative. Estep, Anthony, and Allison (2008) emphasize that Christian teaching must integrate belief, experience, and practice in order to foster holistic spiritual formation. Examining how CRE teachers interpret and embody the theology of suffering becomes an important area of inquiry. SMKS Multistudi High School in Batam provides a meaningful locus for this investigation. The school includes 33 Christian students and 13 Christian teachers, including CRE teachers, creating a relatively concentrated Christian learning community within a pluralistic urban environment. Such a context offers both opportunities and challenges for the embodiment of Christian spirituality in educational practice. On the one hand, the presence of a supportive faith community can strengthen spiritual mentoring; on the other hand, vocational school dynamics and diverse student pressures may require teachers to articulate the meaning of suffering in ways that are pastorally sensitive and pedagogically relevant. There remains limited empirical research in Indonesia that specifically examines how CRE teachers interpret Pauline suffering theology and translate it into classroom praxis. Much of the existing literature focuses either on general teacher competence or on broad spiritual formation, without closely analyzing the intersection between biblical exegesis and pedagogical embodiment. This study seeks to address that gap by exploring the spirituality of CRE teachers in interpreting Philippians 1:21-30 and examining how this theological understanding informs their educational practice. This research aims to analyze how CRE teachers at SMKS Multistudi High School understand

the theology of suffering in Philippians 1:21-30, how their personal spirituality shapes their pedagogical approach, and what implications emerge for strengthening spiritually grounded CRE practice. By integrating biblical reflection with educational analysis, this study aspires to contribute both theoretically and practically to the development of spiritually authentic and pedagogically effective Christian Religious Education in Indonesian secondary schools.

METHODS

A quantitative approach was selected because it enables the researcher to measure perceptions systematically, identify patterns across respondents, and generate generalizable findings within the studied population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The design used was descriptive–correlational, aiming to describe students' perceptions and explore the extent to which teacher spirituality, as perceived by students, relates to students' internalization of the theological meaning of suffering. The study was conducted at SMKS Multistudi High School, Batam, a vocational secondary school with a Christian student community. The population of the study consisted of all 33 Christian students enrolled in the school. Because the population size was relatively small and manageable, this research applied a total sampling technique, meaning all Christian students were included as respondents. Total sampling is appropriate when the population is limited and the researcher intends to capture comprehensive data from the entire group (Sugiyono, 2017). Although the school has 13 Christian teachers (including CRE teachers), the unit of analysis in this quantitative phase focused on students' perceptions. Students were selected as respondents because they are the primary recipients of CRE instruction and are in a direct position to evaluate how teacher spirituality is manifested in classroom practice. This study involved two main variables: Independent Variable (X): CRE teachers' spirituality as perceived by students and Dependent Variable (Y): Students' understanding and appreciation of the theology of suffering based on Philippians 1:21-30. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed based on relevant theoretical frameworks in Christian education and Pauline theology. The instrument employed a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Indicators of teacher spirituality included spiritual integrity, Christ-centered attitude, perseverance modeling, and pastoral care in teaching. Indicators of students' theological understanding included comprehension of suffering in Christ, acceptance of trials, spiritual resilience, and joyful endurance. Prior to full distribution, the questionnaire underwent content validation through expert judgment involving two specialists in Christian Religious Education. A pilot test was conducted with a small comparable group to ensure clarity of items. Instrument reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, with a coefficient threshold of ≥ 0.70 considered acceptable for internal consistency (Field, 2018). Data collection was conducted during the academic semester with permission from the school administration. Questionnaires were administered directly to the 33 Christian students in a supervised classroom setting to ensure independent responses and minimize discussion among participants. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics (mean, percentage, and standard deviation) were used to describe the general profile of teacher spirituality and

students' theological understanding. To examine the relationship between variables, Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was employed. This technique is appropriate for determining the strength and direction of the relationship between two interval-scale variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The level of significance was set at $\alpha = 0.05$. Correlation coefficients were interpreted using conventional criteria: very low, low, moderate, strong, and very strong relationships. The findings were then interpreted in light of Pauline theology and Christian pedagogical theory to generate meaningful educational implications.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The quantitative analysis of this study provides an integrated picture of how students at SMKS Multistudi High School, Batam, perceive the spirituality of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers and how such perceptions relate to students' understanding of the theology of suffering based on Philippians 1:21-30. With a total of 33 Christian students participating as respondents, the data offer a meaningful representation of the Christian learning community within the school. The results indicate that teacher spirituality, as experienced by students in classroom interactions, plays a significant and positive role in shaping students' theological comprehension, emotional resilience, and spiritual attitudes toward suffering. From the descriptive statistical analysis, the overall mean score for the perceived spirituality of CRE teachers falls within the high category. Students consistently reported that CRE teachers demonstrate Christ-centered attitudes, patience in guiding learners, and consistency between teaching and personal conduct. Among the measured indicators, the highest mean emerged in the dimension of relational care, suggesting that students most strongly experience teacher spirituality through interpersonal interactions rather than through purely doctrinal explanations. This finding aligns with Christian education theory which emphasizes that spiritual formation in educational settings is often mediated through authentic relationships rather than through cognitive transmission alone (Pazmiño, 2008). In the context of SMKS Multistudi High School, the presence of 13 Christian teachers appears to contribute to a supportive spiritual climate, yet the CRE teacher remains the central figure in explicitly framing theological meaning. Students rated highly the teacher's ability to model perseverance and calmness when discussing difficult life situations. This is particularly relevant to the interpretation of Philippians 1:21-30, where suffering is reframed not as defeat but as participation in Christ's mission. Students' responses suggest that when teachers embody composure and hopeful endurance, learners are more receptive to theological explanations about suffering. Conversely, indicators related to explicit biblical exposition received slightly lower, though still positive, scores, implying that while teachers are spiritually credible, there remains room for strengthening exegetical depth in classroom delivery.

Turning to the dependent variable, the descriptive findings show that students' understanding of the theology of suffering also falls within the high category. Most respondents agreed that suffering can have spiritual meaning, that faith can remain firm in difficult circumstances, and that the Christian life involves perseverance. The highest scoring indicator was students' agreement that believers can remain joyful even in

hardship. This mirrors the dominant Pauline theme of joy in adversity and suggests that the CRE instruction at the school has successfully transmitted at least the core theological message of Philippians. However, a closer look at item-level responses reveals some nuance: while students affirm the value of perseverance, fewer demonstrate deep conceptual articulation of why suffering is theologically meaningful. This indicates that affective acceptance may be stronger than analytical theological understanding. The correlation analysis using Pearson's product-moment method reveals a statistically significant positive relationship between perceived teacher spirituality and students' understanding of the theology of suffering. The correlation coefficient falls within the strong category, indicating that as students perceive higher levels of teacher spirituality, their theological comprehension and acceptance of suffering also tend to increase. This finding reinforces the long-standing assertion in Christian education scholarship that the teacher's spiritual authenticity is not peripheral but central to effective faith formation (Groome, 2011). In other words, the messenger significantly shapes the reception of the message. This relationship can be interpreted through several pedagogical and theological lenses. From a social learning perspective, students internalize attitudes and interpretations partly through modeling. When CRE teachers demonstrate lived faith, especially in how they speak about challenges, disappointments, and perseverance, students are more likely to adopt similar interpretive frameworks. This is consistent with the idea that faith is "caught as well as taught," a principle widely recognized in Christian formation literature. In the SMKS Multistudi context, where students are in a vocational secondary environment often marked by academic pressure and future uncertainty, the teacher's embodied spirituality becomes a particularly powerful interpretive lens for understanding suffering. From a Pauline theological standpoint, Philippians 1:21-30 presents suffering as communal participation in the gospel rather than merely individual hardship. The data suggest that students who perceive their teachers as spiritually grounded are more likely to interpret suffering within this redemptive framework. This indicates that teacher spirituality may function as a hermeneutical bridge, helping students move from a purely emotional reaction to suffering toward a more theologically informed interpretation. However, the findings also suggest that this bridge is not yet fully optimized. Some students still interpret suffering primarily in psychological rather than theological terms, indicating the need for more explicit integrative teaching strategies. The results highlight the importance of relational pedagogy in CRE classrooms. The strong scores in relational care suggest that students' openness to theological ideas is significantly mediated by the quality of teacher-student relationships. This confirms broader educational research indicating that emotional safety and relational trust enhance students' receptivity to complex or challenging content (Knight, 2006). In the context of teaching about suffering, a topic that can easily become abstract or emotionally sensitive, the relational dimension becomes even more critical. The CRE teacher at SMKS Multistudi appears to have established a generally positive relational climate, which likely contributes to the overall high levels of student agreement across variables. The data also reveal several areas that warrant attention. One notable pattern is the moderate variability in students' deeper theological articulation. While many students agree with statements about perseverance and faithfulness, fewer demonstrate strong agreement with items requiring nuanced theological reasoning about suffering as participation in Christ. This suggests that the current instructional approach may emphasize motivational

encouragement more than structured theological reflection. From a pedagogical competence standpoint, this represents an opportunity for professional growth, particularly in integrating biblical exegesis with student-centered discussion methods. Another important observation relates to the relatively small number of Christian students (33) within the broader school environment. While the total sampling approach provides comprehensive internal data, the small cohort may intensify the influence of teacher presence, both positively and negatively. In small faith communities within pluralistic schools, the CRE teacher often carries amplified symbolic weight. The strong correlation found in this study may partly reflect this contextual dynamic: when student numbers are limited, teacher modeling becomes even more visible and formative. This reinforces the strategic importance of strengthening teacher spirituality in minority-faith educational settings. The findings also have implications for professional development. Although students perceive teacher spirituality positively, the slightly lower scores in explicit theological explanation suggest that CRE teachers would benefit from ongoing formation in biblical interpretation and pedagogical integration. Effective teaching of Philippians 1:21-30 requires not only personal spiritual maturity but also the pedagogical skill to translate Pauline theology into age-appropriate, contextually meaningful learning experiences. Integrating narrative pedagogy, reflective dialogue, and case-based learning could help deepen students' conceptual grasp of suffering theology. The vocational context of SMKS Multistudi High School introduces unique interpretive opportunities. Vocational students often face pragmatic concerns about work readiness, economic pressure, and future stability. Within this environment, the Pauline theology of suffering can be contextualized not only in terms of persecution or hardship but also in terms of perseverance in life struggles, professional integrity under pressure, and faithful endurance in career pathways. The current findings suggest that students are receptive to such framing but that further pedagogical intentionality could strengthen this contextual bridge.

The study affirms that spirituality and pedagogy cannot be artificially separated in CRE practice. The strong positive relationship between teacher spirituality and student theological understanding underscores the need for holistic teacher formation programs that integrate spiritual disciplines, theological literacy, and pedagogical competence. Teacher professionalism in CRE is not merely technical; it is inherently spiritual and relational. This insight is particularly relevant for Indonesian Christian education, where formal teacher certification processes sometimes emphasize administrative and methodological competencies more than spiritual formation. At the same time, the study must be interpreted within its limitations. The sample size is relatively small and confined to a single school context, which limits statistical generalization. The use of self-reported student perceptions may also introduce social desirability bias. However, the consistency of responses across multiple indicators suggests that the overall pattern is meaningful and worthy of consideration. Future research could expand the sample across multiple vocational schools in Batam or other Indonesian urban centers and could incorporate mixed-method approaches to triangulate quantitative findings with classroom observation and teacher interviews. The results of this study demonstrate that CRE teachers' spirituality at SMKS Multistudi High School is perceived positively by students and is strongly associated with students' understanding of the theology of suffering in

Philippians 1:21-30. The data confirm that spiritual authenticity, relational care, and modeled perseverance significantly enhance the effectiveness of theological instruction. At the same time, the findings point to the need for deeper exegetical integration and more structured pedagogical strategies to help students move from general agreement toward mature theological comprehension. Strengthening these areas will be essential for advancing CRE practice that is both spiritually grounded and pedagogically robust in contemporary Indonesian secondary education.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers' spirituality contributes to the interpretation and pedagogical communication of the theology of suffering in Philippians 1:21-30 within the context of SMKS Multistudi High School, Batam. Drawing on quantitative data from 33 Christian students and supported by theological reflection, the findings affirm that teacher spirituality plays a decisive role in shaping students' understanding of suffering from a Christ-centered perspective. The study demonstrates that spirituality is not merely a private devotional attribute but an observable pedagogical force that influences classroom climate, interpretive clarity, and students' spiritual resilience. The results indicate that students generally perceive CRE teachers as exhibiting a meaningful level of spiritual authenticity. Indicators such as consistency between teaching and personal example, pastoral sensitivity, and Christ-centered explanation of suffering received relatively strong responses. This confirms theoretical perspectives that teacher spirituality functions as an embodied pedagogy, where students learn not only through verbal instruction but also through the teacher's lived witness. In the context of Philippians 1:21-30, where suffering is framed within participation in Christ's mission, such authenticity becomes particularly significant. Students appear more receptive to theological interpretations of suffering when teachers demonstrate congruence between belief and practice. The study reveals that the theology of suffering in Philippians 1:21-30 can be pedagogically meaningful for secondary-level students when mediated through spiritually grounded instruction. Students showed moderate-to-high levels of agreement with statements reflecting redemptive and purpose-oriented understandings of suffering. This suggests that adolescents are capable of engaging with Pauline theology when it is contextualized existentially rather than presented purely doctrinally. However, the data also reveal areas of partial ambiguity, especially regarding the distinction between suffering as divine discipline and suffering as participation in Christ. This indicates the need for more structured exegetical scaffolding in CRE instruction. The statistical relationship between perceived teacher spirituality and students' theological understanding, although not extreme, demonstrates a meaningful positive tendency. This finding reinforces broader educational research asserting that teacher dispositions significantly affect student learning outcomes, particularly in affective and spiritual domains. In faith-based education, the teacher's spiritual maturity appears to function as a mediating variable that enhances students' theological internalization. In other words, students are more likely to interpret suffering within a Christological framework when guided by teachers who model spiritual depth, empathy, and theological coherence. Contextual factors at SMKS Multistudi High School also shape the findings. The relatively small Christian student

population (33 students) within a plural educational environment appears to heighten the importance of CRE teachers as spiritual mentors. In such minority contexts, CRE classrooms function not only as academic spaces but also as identity-forming communities. This amplifies the pedagogical responsibility of CRE teachers to communicate the theology of suffering in ways that nurture resilience, hope, and faithful endurance rather than fear or fatalism. The data suggest that where teachers successfully integrate biblical exegesis with pastoral sensitivity, students develop a more constructive theological outlook on hardship. Several limitations must be acknowledged. The study relies on a relatively small sample size and a single institutional locus, which limits broad generalization. Student perceptions, while valuable, may not fully capture the depth of teachers' actual spirituality or instructional complexity. Additionally, the quantitative design, while useful for identifying patterns, cannot fully explore the nuanced processes through which spiritual modeling influences student formation. Future research would benefit from mixed-method or longitudinal approaches, including classroom observation and teacher self-reflection, to deepen interpretive insight. The study underscores the urgent need for professional and spiritual formation programs for CRE teachers. Strengthening pedagogical competence alone is insufficient without parallel cultivation of spiritual maturity and theological depth. Teacher development initiatives, whether through church partnerships, reflective retreats, or continuing theological education, should intentionally integrate biblical theology of suffering with classroom praxis. Curriculum designers are also encouraged to frame Philippians 1:21-30 not merely as doctrinal content but as a formative text capable of shaping Christian resilience among adolescents. The spirituality of Christian Religious Education teachers significantly contributes to how students interpret and internalize the theology of suffering in Philippians 1:21-30. At SMKS Multistudi High School, Batam, spiritually grounded teaching fosters a more hopeful, Christ-centered, and resilient student outlook toward suffering. Strengthening teacher spirituality, therefore, is not peripheral but essential to effective CRE pedagogy. Future efforts in Christian education should continue to integrate theological depth, spiritual authenticity, and pedagogical excellence in order to form students who can faithfully live out the Pauline vision: to live is Christ and to suffer is participation in His redemptive mission.

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