



Pedagogical Sensitivity to Learners' Needs: Learning from Matthew 9:36 at SMKN 9 Medan

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the pedagogical sensitivity of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers in responding to learners' needs at SMKN 9 Medan, interpreted through the theological lens of Matthew 9:36. The research was motivated by the growing recognition that effective Christian teaching requires not only cognitive mastery but also compassionate attentiveness to students' academic, emotional, and spiritual conditions. A quantitative descriptive design was employed to capture students' perceptions of teacher sensitivity in classroom practice. The population consisted of 347 Christian students, all of whom were included as respondents using a total sampling technique. Data were collected through a structured Likert-scale questionnaire measuring four dimensions: empathic awareness, instructional responsiveness, pastoral care orientation, and supportive classroom climate. Descriptive statistical analysis revealed that the overall level of pedagogical sensitivity was in the high category. Among the dimensions, pastoral care orientation and empathic awareness received the strongest ratings, indicating that students clearly experience relational concern and spiritual support from their teachers. Instructional responsiveness and classroom climate also scored highly, though with slightly greater variability, suggesting areas for further pedagogical refinement, particularly in differentiated instruction and dialogical engagement. Interpreted theologically, the findings reflect meaningful alignment with the compassionate ministry pattern portrayed in Matthew 9:36, where perception of human need precedes transformative action. The study concludes that pedagogical sensitivity grounded in Christ-like compassion functions as a significant professional and spiritual asset in CRE practice. Strengthening proactive empathy and adaptive teaching strategies is recommended to further enhance transformative Christian learning environments.

Keywords: Pedagogical Sensitivity, Christian Religious Education, Learners' Needs

INTRODUCTION

Pedagogical sensitivity to learners' needs has become a defining characteristic of effective teaching in contemporary educational discourse. Teachers today are expected not only to

deliver curriculum content accurately but also to recognize and respond to the diverse academic, emotional, social, and spiritual conditions of their students. In the context of Christian Religious Education (CRE), this expectation carries an even deeper theological dimension because teaching is understood as both an instructional and pastoral vocation. Scholars consistently emphasize that effective Christian teachers integrate pedagogical competence with spiritual discernment in order to nurture holistic student development (Pazmiño, 2008). Therefore, pedagogical sensitivity is not merely a technical skill but a reflective disposition grounded in empathy, attentiveness, and contextual awareness. The biblical narrative offers a strong theological foundation for this concept. Matthew 9:36 describes Jesus as seeing the crowds and being moved with compassion because they were “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” This passage reveals a model of ministry characterized by perceptive observation and compassionate response. Jesus’ reaction was not impulsive but rooted in deep awareness of human need. Contemporary Christian education scholars interpret this moment as demonstrating that authentic teaching begins with seeing learners rightly before instructing them (Groome, 2011). Pedagogical sensitivity in CRE should reflect Christ’s pattern of compassionate attentiveness. In Indonesian secondary schools, including vocational institutions such as SMKN 9 Medan, the need for pedagogical sensitivity is particularly urgent. Vocational students often come from varied socio-economic backgrounds and face complex developmental pressures related to identity formation, career anxiety, and peer dynamics. Research in educational psychology indicates that students’ sense of being understood by teachers significantly influences motivation, engagement, and learning persistence (Wentzel, 2012). When teachers demonstrate sensitivity to learners’ needs, classroom climate becomes more supportive and conducive to meaningful learning. Conversely, low teacher sensitivity may contribute to disengagement and reduced learning interest. The stakes are even higher because the subject matter involves values, beliefs, and spiritual formation. Yount (2010) argues that Christian teachers function not only as transmitters of knowledge but also as facilitators of faith development, requiring heightened relational awareness. In practice, however, many CRE teachers still emphasize cognitive transmission of biblical content while giving less attention to differentiated student needs. This gap suggests the importance of empirical investigation into how pedagogical sensitivity is perceived and enacted in specific school contexts.

SMKN 9 Medan provides an important locus for such investigation. The school serves a substantial Christian student population of 347 learners supported by 42 Christian teachers, including CRE educators. This demographic composition creates both opportunity and responsibility for CRE teachers to model Christ-like pedagogical care. Yet, institutional size and vocational orientation may also pose challenges for individualized attention. Preliminary observations in similar Indonesian settings suggest that large class sizes and administrative demands can reduce teachers’ responsiveness to learner diversity (Creswell, 2014). Examining pedagogical sensitivity in this context is both timely and necessary. This study seeks to analyze the level and characteristics of pedagogical sensitivity demonstrated by CRE teachers at SMKN 9 Medan through the theological lens of Matthew 9:36. Specifically, the research aims to: measure students’ perceptions of teachers’ responsiveness to academic and emotional needs, identify dominant and weaker dimensions of pedagogical sensitivity, and interpret the findings in light of Christ-

centered educational principles. By integrating biblical reflection with empirical data, this study intends to contribute to the ongoing discourse on professional competence in Christian education. The significance of this research lies in its potential to strengthen teacher formation and classroom practice. If pedagogical sensitivity truly reflects the compassionate ministry of Christ, then CRE teachers must intentionally cultivate this competence alongside doctrinal knowledge and instructional skill. The findings are expected to provide evidence-based insights for improving CRE pedagogy in Indonesian vocational schools and for encouraging educators to embody the compassionate attentiveness modeled in Matthew 9:36.

METHODS

A quantitative descriptive research design was used to examine the level of pedagogical sensitivity of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers toward learners' needs at SMKN 9 Medan. The quantitative approach was selected because the research aimed to measure students' perceptions systematically and to produce generalizable numerical descriptions of the observed phenomena (Creswell, 2014). The design enabled the researcher to capture patterns of teacher sensitivity as experienced directly by students within the CRE learning environment. The study used a cross-sectional survey model. Data were collected at one point in time using a structured questionnaire distributed to students. This design is appropriate for educational perception studies because it allows efficient measurement of attitudes and experiences across a relatively large population (Borg & Gall, 2003). The theological framework of Matthew 9:36 informed the conceptual indicators but did not alter the quantitative nature of the analysis. The population consisted of all Christian students enrolled at SMKN 9 Medan, totaling 347 learners. Because the population size was manageable and to increase statistical representativeness, the study employed total sampling (census technique), meaning all 347 Christian students were invited to participate as respondents. This approach minimizes sampling bias and strengthens the descriptive power of the findings. The presence of 42 Christian teachers (including CRE teachers) provided important institutional context; however, students served as the sole respondents because the research focus was on learner-perceived pedagogical sensitivity. Data were collected using a closed-ended questionnaire developed based on literature in Christian education and teacher responsiveness. The instrument used a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire measured four major dimensions of pedagogical sensitivity: Empathic Awareness (the teacher's ability to recognize students' emotional and learning conditions), Instructional Responsiveness (the teacher's adjustment of teaching strategies to student needs), Pastoral Care Orientation (the teacher's concern for students' personal and spiritual well-being), and Supportive Classroom Climate (the teacher's creation of a safe and encouraging learning environment). The items were constructed to reflect the compassionate model of Matthew 9:36 while remaining educationally measurable. Content validity was established through expert judgment involving two scholars in Christian education and one educational measurement specialist. Item validity was tested using Pearson product-moment correlation. Items with correlation coefficients above the critical value ($r > 0.30$) were retained. Instrument reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. A coefficient

of ≥ 0.70 was considered acceptable for internal consistency (DeVellis, 2017). The pilot test indicated that the overall instrument met reliability standards, confirming its suitability for full deployment. After obtaining institutional permission from SMKN 9 Medan, questionnaires were administered to students during scheduled CRE learning periods. Respondents were informed about the voluntary nature of participation and assured of confidentiality. Completed questionnaires were checked for completeness before data entry. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including mean scores, standard deviations, and percentage distributions. To interpret the level of pedagogical sensitivity, mean scores were categorized into five levels: very low, low, moderate, high, and very high. This categorization followed common educational research practice (Borg & Gall, 2003). In addition to overall scoring, dimension-level analysis was conducted to identify dominant strengths and areas requiring improvement. The findings were then interpreted in dialogue with the theological perspective of Matthew 9:36 and contemporary Christian education theory.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The quantitative analysis of pedagogical sensitivity at SMKN 9 Medan reveals a generally strong profile of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers in responding to learners' needs. Based on responses from 347 Christian students, the overall mean score for pedagogical sensitivity falls within the high category, indicating that students largely perceive their teachers as attentive, responsive, and pastorally aware. This finding affirms the central premise of Matthew 9:36 that authentic ministry, whether ecclesial or educational, begins with compassionate perception of human need. The statistical patterns observed in this study suggest that many CRE teachers at SMKN 9 Medan have begun to embody this Christ-like attentiveness within classroom practice. Descriptive statistics show that the composite mean score of pedagogical sensitivity is high, with relatively low standard deviation, indicating consistency in student perceptions across classes. Most respondents selected "agree" or "strongly agree" on items related to teacher empathy, responsiveness, and classroom support. This consistency is important because it suggests that pedagogical sensitivity is not isolated to one or two teachers but reflects a broader professional culture among CRE educators in the school. From an educational psychology perspective, this finding aligns with research showing that students' perception of teacher care strongly predicts engagement and motivation (Wentzel, 2012). In Christian education, such sensitivity also reflects what Pazmiño (2008) describes as incarnational teaching, where teachers embody the values they seek to communicate. Thus, the quantitative results support both pedagogical theory and theological expectation. While the overall category is high, the dimension-level analysis reveals meaningful variation. These variations provide important insight into where pedagogical practice is strongest and where further professional development is needed.

The first dimension, empathic awareness, received one of the highest mean scores among the four indicators. Students generally perceive CRE teachers as attentive to their emotional states, respectful of their struggles, and willing to listen when problems arise. Items such as "the teacher notices when students have learning difficulties" and "the teacher shows concern when students feel discouraged" received particularly strong

agreement. This result is significant in light of Matthew 9:36, where Jesus first saw the crowds before responding to them. Empathic awareness represents the perceptual foundation of pedagogical sensitivity. Without accurate perception, instructional adaptation becomes superficial. The high score suggests that CRE teachers at SMKN 9 Medan have developed relational attentiveness that students genuinely experience. Several contextual factors may contribute to this strength. The presence of 42 Christian teachers in the school likely creates a supportive faith-informed professional environment that reinforces relational values. Vocational school contexts often require closer teacher-student interaction due to practical learning activities, which may naturally cultivate awareness of student conditions. Item-level analysis indicates a slight dip in scores related to proactive emotional check-ins. While teachers respond well when problems become visible, fewer students strongly agreed that teachers regularly initiate personal conversations about well-being. This suggests that empathy is present but still somewhat reactive rather than fully anticipatory. From a Christological standpoint, Matthew 9:36 portrays Jesus as perceiving need even before it was verbally expressed. Therefore, professional development could encourage CRE teachers to move from responsive empathy toward more proactive pastoral attentiveness.

Instructional responsiveness, the ability to adapt teaching strategies to diverse learner needs, also falls within the high category but with a slightly lower mean than empathic awareness. Students generally agree that teachers explain material clearly, provide additional help when concepts are difficult, and vary instructional approaches. This finding is encouraging because pedagogical sensitivity must move beyond emotional warmth into concrete instructional action. As Yount (2010) emphasizes, effective Christian teaching integrates heart and method. The data suggest that CRE teachers at SMKN 9 Medan are reasonably successful in making such adjustments. Deeper analysis reveals important nuance. Items related to remedial support and clarification of difficult biblical concepts scored very high, indicating strong teacher commitment to helping struggling learners. In contrast, items related to differentiated learning strategies, such as varied learning activities for different ability levels, received comparatively moderate-high scores. This pattern suggests that teachers are strong in responsive assistance but less developed in systematic differentiation. In practical terms, many teachers help students who fall behind but may rely on relatively uniform instructional approaches during initial teaching. This is a common pattern in Indonesian classrooms, where differentiation practices are still emerging (Creswell, 2014). From the perspective of Matthew 9:36, Jesus' ministry demonstrated not only compassion but also contextual adaptation, teaching crowds differently from disciples and responding uniquely to individuals. Therefore, strengthening differentiated pedagogy would further align CRE practice with the biblical model of need-sensitive ministry.

The pastoral care orientation dimension received the highest overall mean score in the study. Students overwhelmingly perceive CRE teachers as caring about their spiritual growth, moral development, and personal well-being. Items such as "the teacher encourages students to live according to Christian values" and "the teacher is approachable when students face personal problems" showed very strong agreement. This finding is particularly significant for Christian education. It indicates that CRE teachers

at SMKN 9 Medan are not viewed merely as academic instructors but as spiritual mentors. Such perception reflects what Groome (2011) calls “shared Christian praxis,” where teaching becomes a relational and formative process rather than simple content delivery. The strong pastoral profile may be influenced by the relatively large Christian student population (347 students), which likely creates an environment where spiritual conversation is normalized. Moreover, Indonesian Christian education traditions often emphasize teacher moral example, which may reinforce pastoral orientation. Some students indicated that follow-up mentoring outside class occurs less frequently than in-class encouragement. A minority of respondents were uncertain whether teachers consistently integrate pastoral concern with academic assessment practices. These findings suggest that while the pastoral heart of CRE teachers is clearly recognized, the structural integration of pastoral care into systematic mentoring processes could be strengthened. In light of Matthew 9:36, compassion led Jesus not only to feel but to organize further ministry (sending workers into the harvest). Similarly, CRE teachers may benefit from more structured pastoral follow-up mechanisms.

The supportive classroom climate dimension also falls in the high category, though it shows the widest variability among the four indicators. Most students report that CRE classes feel safe, respectful, and encouraging. Items related to mutual respect and freedom to ask questions received strong agreement. A supportive climate is crucial because pedagogical sensitivity becomes visible in the collective emotional tone of the classroom. According to Wentzel (2012), students are more likely to engage deeply when they perceive the classroom as psychologically safe. The data suggest that CRE teachers at SMKN 9 Medan have largely succeeded in cultivating such environments. Variability appears in items related to peer inclusion and student voice in discussion. While many classes are highly supportive, some students reported only moderate agreement regarding opportunities to express differing views or participate actively in dialogue. This variation may reflect differences in individual teacher style rather than systemic weakness. Some CRE teachers appear highly dialogical, while others maintain more traditional teacher-centered approaches. From a Matthew 9:36 perspective, compassion should create spaces where the “harassed and helpless” feel heard and valued. Therefore, increasing dialogical pedagogy could further strengthen classroom climate consistency. When interpreted through Matthew 9:36, the quantitative findings present a largely encouraging picture. The verse portrays three sequential movements in Jesus’ ministry: seeing, feeling compassion, and responding missionally. The four measured dimensions in this study map meaningfully onto this pattern: empathic awareness corresponds to Christ-like perception, pastoral care reflects compassionate concern, instructional responsiveness represents adaptive action, and supportive climate embodies communal restoration. The high overall scores suggest that CRE teachers at SMKN 9 Medan are functioning in ways that broadly reflect this biblical paradigm. Students do not experience CRE instruction as cold or purely cognitive; rather, they perceive relational warmth and spiritual concern. Yet the data also reveal that the Christ-like model is still in process of maturation. The main developmental edges include: moving from reactive to proactive empathy, expanding differentiated instructional strategies, systematizing pastoral follow-up, increasing dialogical classroom participation. These areas do not indicate failure but rather represent the next stage of professional growth.

Several important implications emerge from the findings. Teacher formation programs should continue emphasizing relational competence alongside pedagogical technique. The high empathy and pastoral scores demonstrate that such formation is bearing fruit. Professional development should increasingly focus on advanced pedagogical differentiation. As vocational classrooms become more diverse, sensitivity must include instructional flexibility, not only emotional care. School leadership at SMKN 9 Medan may consider structured mentoring systems that extend pastoral care beyond classroom interaction. Given the strong teacher-student trust already present, such systems could significantly deepen spiritual formation impact. Ongoing reflective engagement with biblical models of teaching, such as Matthew 9:36, should remain central in CRE professional identity. The integration of theology and pedagogy appears to be a distinctive strength in this context and should be intentionally preserved. The quantitative evidence indicates that pedagogical sensitivity among CRE teachers at SMKN 9 Medan is robust and meaningfully aligned with the compassionate model of Christ in Matthew 9:36. Students largely experience their teachers as attentive, caring, and supportive spiritual educators. At the same time, the nuanced variations across dimensions highlight important opportunities for refinement, particularly in proactive empathy, differentiated instruction, and dialogical classroom practice. These findings reinforce a central insight: in Christian education, effective pedagogy is inseparable from compassionate perception. Where teachers truly “see” their students, as Jesus saw the crowds, instruction becomes not merely informative but transformative.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the pedagogical sensitivity of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers at SMKN 9 Medan through the interpretive lens of Matthew 9:36. Based on quantitative data collected from 347 Christian students, the findings demonstrate that the overall level of pedagogical sensitivity among CRE teachers falls within the high category. Students generally perceive their teachers as empathetic, pastorally attentive, instructionally responsive, and capable of creating supportive classroom environments. These results indicate that CRE teachers in this context are not merely transmitting religious knowledge but are embodying relational and spiritual attentiveness that aligns with the compassionate ministry model of Christ. At the dimensional level, empathic awareness and pastoral care orientation emerged as particular strengths. Students widely recognize that their teachers notice learning and emotional difficulties, show concern for student well-being, and provide spiritual encouragement. This suggests that the teachers’ relational posture is well developed and meaningfully experienced by learners. The supportive classroom climate also reflects positive conditions in which students feel respected and safe to participate. Instructional responsiveness, while still in the high category, shows relatively more room for enhancement, especially in the area of systematic differentiated instruction to address diverse learner needs. The findings resonate strongly with Matthew 9:36, which portrays Jesus as seeing the crowds, being moved with compassion, and responding to their condition. CRE teachers at SMKN 9 Medan appear to reflect this Christ-like pattern in observable classroom practice. Their pedagogical sensitivity functions not only as a professional competence but also as a form of lived theology that students can perceive directly. This confirms that in Christian

education, teacher spirituality and pedagogical effectiveness are deeply interconnected. Several areas for professional growth remain important. Teachers are encouraged to strengthen proactive empathy, moving beyond responding to visible student difficulties toward more intentional and anticipatory pastoral attentiveness. The development of differentiated instructional strategies would further enhance sensitivity to diverse academic abilities. Greater emphasis on dialogical classroom practices could increase student voice and participation, thereby deepening the supportive learning climate already present. From an institutional perspective, the presence of 347 Christian students and 42 Christian teachers provides a strong foundation for cultivating a school-wide culture of compassionate pedagogy. School leaders should consider sustaining this strength through continuous professional development, mentoring systems, and theological-pedagogical reflection forums for CRE teachers. The study affirms that pedagogical sensitivity grounded in Christ-like compassion is both observable and impactful in the context of SMKN 9 Medan. When CRE teachers truly perceive and respond to learners' needs, religious education becomes relationally meaningful and spiritually formative. Future research may build on these findings through longitudinal designs or mixed-method approaches to explore how sustained exposure to compassion-centered pedagogy influences students' faith development, character formation, and academic engagement over time.

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