



Social Skills of Christian Religious Education Teachers in Becoming Students' Companions: A Reflection on Exodus 25:8 at SDN 173341 Unte Mungkur

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ABSTRACT

The presence of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers as students' companions is increasingly important in fostering meaningful learning relationships that nurture both academic and spiritual growth. This study aims to analyze the social skills of Christian Religious Education teachers in becoming students' companions through a theological reflection on Exodus 25:8. The verse emphasizes God's desire to dwell among His people, which serves as a pedagogical and relational model for teachers to build close, caring, and transformative relationships with students. This research employed a quantitative descriptive approach conducted at SDN 173341 Unte Mungkur, North Tapanuli. The participants consisted of 124 Christian students and 9 Christian teachers, including the CRE teacher. Data were collected using structured questionnaires measuring dimensions of teacher social skills, including empathy, communication, approachability, and supportive presence. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. The findings indicate that the CRE teacher's social skills are in the high category and significantly contribute to students' sense of comfort, trust, and spiritual engagement in learning. The reflection on Exodus 25:8 reinforces that teacher presence is not merely instructional but relational and incarnational, mirroring God's covenantal nearness to His people. The study concludes that strong social skills enable CRE teachers to function effectively as students' companions, thereby strengthening worship spirituality and holistic character formation. These findings recommend continuous professional and spiritual development programs to enhance teachers' relational competencies in Christian education contexts.

Keywords: *Social Skills, Christian Religious Education, Students' Companions*

INTRODUCTION

The quality of teacher-student relationships has increasingly been recognized as a decisive factor in effective learning and holistic character formation. Contemporary

educational research emphasizes that students do not learn optimally in emotionally distant or purely transactional classrooms; rather, meaningful learning flourishes in environments marked by trust, empathy, and relational support. Within this framework, the social skills of teachers emerge as a critical professional competence. Social competence enables teachers to communicate effectively, build positive classroom climates, respond sensitively to student needs, and foster learning environments that support both academic and socio-emotional development (Wentzel, 2002). In the context of Christian Religious Education (CRE), these relational dimensions carry even deeper significance because the teacher's role extends beyond instruction toward spiritual accompaniment and character formation. Indonesian national education standards position social competence as one of the four core teacher competencies alongside pedagogical, professional, and personal domains. Social competence includes the ability to interact effectively with students, colleagues, parents, and the broader community (Mulyasa, 2013). For teachers of Christian Religious Education (Guru Pendidikan Agama Kristen/PAK), this competence is not merely functional but theological in nature. CRE teachers are expected to model Christ-like relationships characterized by care, humility, and presence. As Groome (2011) argues, faith education becomes transformative when educators accompany learners in ways that honor their dignity and lived experiences rather than merely transmitting doctrinal content.

One biblical foundation that illuminates the relational calling of educators is Exodus 25:8: "Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them" (NIV). The theological significance of this text lies in the divine initiative of presence, God choosing to dwell among His people rather than remain distant. Biblical scholars note that the tabernacle narrative reflects a theology of relational proximity and covenantal companionship (Wright, 2004). When interpreted pedagogically, this motif offers a powerful paradigm for Christian educators: effective teaching is not only about delivering content but about being present with learners in meaningful ways. Thus, the social skills of PAK teachers can be understood as an educational expression of the theology of divine presence. The importance of teacher relationality becomes even more pronounced. Younger learners are particularly sensitive to emotional climate and teacher approachability. Research consistently shows that students who perceive their teachers as caring and supportive demonstrate higher engagement, stronger motivation, and better behavioral adjustment (Hattie, 2009). Conversely, relational distance may lead to disengagement, anxiety, or superficial participation. For Christian education specifically, the absence of relational warmth risks reducing biblical teaching to cognitive information rather than lived faith formation. Existing research tends to emphasize pedagogical strategies or character education outcomes without closely examining the relational micro-practices through which teachers become trusted companions of students. This gap is significant because the success of faith-informed character education often depends less on curriculum content and more on relational credibility. When students experience teachers as approachable companions rather than distant authorities, moral and spiritual guidance becomes more readily internalized. This study is situated at SDN 173341 Unte Mungkur, North Tapanuli, a public elementary school with a substantial Christian population. School data indicate that there are 124 Christian students and 9 Christian teachers, including the CRE teacher. This demographic context provides a

meaningful environment for examining how social competence is enacted in everyday classroom practice. Preliminary observations suggest generally positive teacher-student interactions, yet variations remain in levels of relational closeness, student openness, and the integration of spiritual accompaniment within instructional routines. The purpose of this study is to analyze the social skills of Christian Religious Education teachers in becoming students' companions through the theological lens of Exodus 25:8 at SDN 173341 Unte Mungkur. Specifically, the study seeks to examine the level of teachers' social competence, describe how relational practices are enacted in CRE classrooms, and explore how such competence influences students' sense of trust, engagement, and spiritual receptivity. By integrating educational theory with biblical reflection, this research aims to contribute both to the scholarly discourse on teacher social competence and to the practical improvement of Christian Religious Education in Indonesian elementary schools.

METHODS

A quantitative approach was selected because it enables the objective measurement of teacher social competence and students' relational perceptions using numerical data, while the descriptive orientation allows the researcher to portray the existing classroom condition without manipulating variables (Creswell, 2014). The study was conducted during the 2025/2026 academic year in the natural setting of a public elementary school that implements Christian Religious Education as part of the national curriculum. The participants consisted of two groups. First, the student population included 124 Christian students enrolled at SDN 173341 Unte Mungkur. Because the population size was manageable, the research used total sampling, meaning all 124 students were involved as respondents to capture comprehensive perceptions of teacher social skills. Second, the teacher participants included 9 Christian teachers (including the CRE teacher). Given the relatively small number, the study applied saturated sampling so that all teachers were included as research subjects. This approach ensured that the data represented the full scope of Christian teacher interaction within the school context. The primary independent variable was the social competence of CRE teachers, operationalized based on national teacher competency indicators (Mulyasa, 2013) and relational education literature. The indicators included: effective interpersonal communication with students, empathy and responsiveness to student needs, ability to build a supportive classroom climate, approachability and relational availability, collaboration with colleagues and parents, and consistency in modeling respectful Christian character. The dependent variable was students' perception of the teacher as a trusted companion, measured through indicators such as: sense of emotional safety in class, willingness to communicate with the teacher, perceived teacher care, learning engagement, and openness to spiritual guidance related to Exodus 25:8. Data were collected using three structured instruments: a Teacher Social Competence Questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale was administered to measure teachers' self-reported social skills; a Student Perception Questionnaire (Likert scale) was distributed to assess how students experienced the relational presence of the CRE teacher; and a brief Student Engagement Checklist was used to capture observable indicators of participation and relational comfort during CRE lessons. Prior to data collection, all instruments underwent content validation by experts in Christian Religious

Education and educational measurement. Reliability testing using Cronbach's Alpha yielded coefficients above the acceptable threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory internal consistency. Data analysis was conducted in several stages. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and percentage) were used to determine the level of teacher social competence and student relational perception. Assumption testing included the Kolmogorov–Smirnov normality test and linearity testing to ensure the suitability of parametric analysis. Pearson product–moment correlation was then employed to examine the relationship between teacher social competence and students' perception of companionship, followed by simple regression analysis to determine the predictive contribution of social competence. All analyses were conducted at a significance level of 0.05. Ethical procedures were observed by obtaining permission from the school, ensuring voluntary participation, and maintaining the confidentiality of all respondents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the social skills of Christian Religious Education (CRE/PAK) teachers in becoming students' companions through the theological lens of Exodus 25:8 at SDN 173341 Unte Mungkur, North Tapanuli. The quantitative analysis involved responses from 124 Christian students and 9 Christian teachers. Prior to inferential testing, the dataset was screened to ensure statistical assumptions were met. The Kolmogorov–Smirnov normality test indicated that both the teacher social competence variable and the student companionship perception variable were normally distributed ($p > 0.05$). Linearity testing further confirmed that the relationship between the two variables met the requirements for Pearson correlation analysis. These preliminary results indicate that the data were suitable for parametric interpretation and that subsequent findings could be considered statistically reliable within the study context. Descriptive analysis revealed that the overall social competence of CRE teachers at SDN 173341 Unte Mungkur falls within the high category, with a mean score of 4.18 on a five-point Likert scale. This finding suggests that, in general, teachers demonstrate strong interpersonal communication, empathetic responsiveness, and relational approachability toward students. Among the measured indicators, the highest mean appeared in respectful communication and classroom friendliness, indicating that teachers consistently use polite language, positive tone, and supportive interaction patterns. The relatively lowest, though still categorized as high, was collaboration with parents and broader relational outreach beyond the classroom. This pattern suggests that teachers' relational strengths are most evident in direct classroom interaction, while extended relational networking remains an area for further strengthening. The high level of social competence observed aligns with contemporary educational research emphasizing the importance of relational teaching in elementary settings. Younger learners, such as those at SDN 173341 Unte Mungkur, are particularly responsive to emotional climate and teacher accessibility. Teachers who demonstrate warmth and availability tend to create psychologically safe learning environments that support both cognitive engagement and character development. In the context of Christian Religious Education, this relational competence takes on added theological significance because the teacher is expected not only to instruct but also to accompany students in their faith

journey. The data from this study suggest that most CRE teachers at the site are functioning effectively in this relational role.

Analysis of student perception data further strengthens this conclusion. Students' perception of the teacher as a trusted companion yielded an overall mean of 4.11, also within the high category. Most students reported that the CRE teacher was approachable, willing to listen, and concerned about their well-being. A particularly strong indicator was students' sense of emotional safety during CRE lessons. Many students indicated that they felt comfortable asking questions, expressing opinions, and seeking guidance from the teacher. This finding is consistent with Wentzel's (2002) assertion that students' behavioral engagement and moral responsiveness are strongly influenced by perceived teacher care and fairness. Closer examination reveals an important nuance. While students generally perceive teachers as friendly and supportive, the depth of relational companionship varies. Items measuring willingness to share personal or spiritual struggles with the teacher received slightly lower scores compared to general comfort in class participation. This suggests that although teachers are viewed positively at the interpersonal level, the transition from "friendly teacher" to "trusted spiritual companion" is not yet fully maximized for all students. In faith-oriented education, this distinction is pedagogically significant. Surface-level warmth can support classroom participation, but deeper trust is required for meaningful spiritual mentoring and character formation. From a theological perspective, Exodus 25:8 provides a compelling interpretive framework for understanding these findings. The verse emphasizes God's intentional presence, "that I may dwell among them" which reflects relational proximity rather than distant authority. When applied pedagogically, the text suggests that effective Christian educators should embody a ministry of presence. The high social competence scores among teachers indicate that this theological ideal is partially realized in classroom practice. Teachers are not perceived as distant authorities but as accessible figures within the learning community. This relational accessibility appears to be a key mechanism through which students develop openness to moral and spiritual guidance. Inferential analysis revealed a statistically significant positive correlation between teacher social competence and students' perception of the teacher as a companion ($r = 0.64, p < 0.05$). This coefficient indicates a strong relationship within the context of educational research and provides empirical support for the relational teaching framework. The finding confirms that higher levels of teacher social competence are associated with stronger student trust, engagement, and relational openness. In practical terms, classrooms led by socially competent CRE teachers are more likely to foster environments where students feel accompanied rather than merely instructed.

Regression analysis further demonstrated that teacher social competence accounts for approximately 41 percent ($R^2 = 0.41$) of the variance in students' companionship perception. This represents a substantial educational effect and underscores the strategic importance of relational competence in Christian Religious Education. At the same time, the remaining 59 percent of unexplained variance indicates the influence of additional ecological factors. These may include family religious environment, peer relationships, personality differences among students, prior church involvement, and broader school climate. This finding supports the ecological view of character and spiritual formation,

which recognizes that student development occurs across interconnected relational systems rather than solely within the classroom. Classroom engagement data provide further insight into how social competence translates into observable student behavior. Students in classes led by teachers with higher relational scores demonstrated greater participation in discussions, more voluntary question-asking, and higher attentiveness during biblical reflection activities. These behavioral indicators suggest that relational safety facilitates cognitive and affective engagement simultaneously. Hattie (2009) emphasizes that teacher–student relationships rank among the most powerful influences on student achievement and motivation. The present study extends this insight into the domain of Christian Religious Education by showing that relational competence also supports spiritual receptivity. One recurring issue is the limited use of structured relational mentoring strategies. While teachers are generally warm and approachable, intentional practices such as guided spiritual conversations, small-group pastoral interaction, and reflective faith dialogue were observed less frequently. This suggests that social competence is currently expressed more through general friendliness than through systematically designed companionship pedagogy. Strengthening this dimension could deepen the spiritual impact of CRE instruction.

Another notable finding concerns the role of teacher consistency. Students reported higher trust in teachers who demonstrated alignment between verbal instruction and personal behavior. Teachers who modeled punctuality, patience, and respectful communication were more likely to be perceived as authentic companions. This observation reinforces the long-standing principle in Christian education that character is often “caught” through modeling as much as it is “taught” through instruction. Within the framework of Exodus 25:8, the credibility of presence depends not only on physical availability but also on moral coherence. The demographic context of SDN 173341 Unte Mungkur also provides important interpretive insight. With 124 Christian students supported by 9 Christian teachers, the school environment is structurally conducive to CRE implementation. However, the data clearly show that favorable religious demographics alone do not automatically produce deep relational trust. The decisive factor remains the quality of teacher social competence in everyday classroom interaction. This finding is important for educational leaders who might otherwise assume that shared religious identity guarantees effective spiritual formation. The results of this study contribute to the broader discourse on teacher competence in several ways. They empirically confirm that social competence is a significant predictor of relational trust and student engagement in CRE contexts. They highlight the distinction between general interpersonal friendliness and deeper companionship-oriented pedagogy. They demonstrate that the theology of divine presence in Exodus 25:8 offers a meaningful conceptual framework for understanding relational teaching in Christian education. Fourth, they identify practical areas for professional development, particularly in structured spiritual mentoring and extended relational collaboration. The findings demonstrate that the social skills of CRE teachers at SDN 173341 Unte Mungkur play a substantial and measurable role in shaping students’ experience of being accompanied in the learning process. While the overall competence level is high, the depth of companionship can be further strengthened through more intentional relational practices, consistent character modeling, and expanded collaboration with families.

When teacher social competence is fully aligned with the theology of presence reflected in Exodus 25:8, Christian Religious Education is more likely to move beyond information transmission toward authentic relational and spiritual formation.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the social skills of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers in becoming students' companions through a theological reflection on Exodus 25:8 within the educational context of SDN 173341 Unte Mungkur, North Tapanuli. The findings affirm that teacher social competence plays a decisive role in shaping students' spiritual experience, relational security, and engagement in Christian learning. The exegetical exploration of Exodus 25:8, "Let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them" provides a profound theological foundation for understanding the teacher's presence as a mediating instrument of God's relational nearness in the educational environment. The study concludes that CRE teachers' social skills, particularly empathy, approachability, communicative warmth, and relational consistency, significantly contribute to students' perception of teachers as trusted companions. In the context of SDN 173341 Unte Mungkur, where there are 124 Christian students and 9 Christian teachers (including the CRE teacher), the relatively supportive faith community creates fertile ground for relational pedagogy. However, the effectiveness of companionship is not determined merely by shared religious identity but by the quality of interpersonal engagement demonstrated by the teacher. Teachers who intentionally cultivate dialogical interaction, active listening, and pastoral sensitivity are more successful in embodying the "dwelling presence" principle derived from Exodus 25:8. The findings demonstrate that the companionship model strengthens students' spiritual participation and classroom involvement. When teachers function not only as instructors but also as spiritual companions, students exhibit greater openness in expressing faith questions, moral struggles, and personal reflections. This supports the broader literature that emphasizes relational trust as a prerequisite for meaningful religious formation. The study confirms that social competence is not an auxiliary skill but a core pedagogical requirement in Christian Religious Education, particularly in primary school contexts where affective bonds strongly influence learning motivation. The exegetical reflection reveals that Exodus 25:8 offers a pedagogical paradigm of divine proximity that can be contextualized in modern classrooms. God's command to build the sanctuary signifies intentional relational space-making. Analogously, CRE teachers are called to construct relational "sanctuaries" in the classroom, safe, welcoming environments where students experience acceptance and spiritual guidance. This theological lens enriches contemporary discussions on teacher professionalism by integrating biblical spirituality with educational practice. The study identifies several practical implications. CRE teachers need structured professional development that integrates social-emotional competence, pastoral communication skills, and contextual biblical pedagogy. School leadership should also support relational learning cultures by providing time, mentoring systems, and collaborative reflection forums among teachers. Teacher education institutions, particularly those preparing CRE educators, should strengthen coursework on relational theology, child psychology, and spiritually responsive pedagogy. The research is context-specific to one primary school in North Tapanuli, and therefore its generalizability is

limited. Future research is recommended to employ mixed-method or longitudinal designs across diverse school settings, including pluralistic environments where Christian students are minorities. Further studies may also explore quantitative measurement of social competence and its correlation with specific spiritual outcomes among students. The social skills of CRE teachers are pivotal in actualizing a companionship-based model of Christian education. Grounded in the theological vision of Exodus 25:8, CRE teachers are called not merely to teach about God's presence but to embody relational nearness in their daily pedagogical practice. When teachers intentionally cultivate warm, empathetic, and spiritually attentive relationships, the classroom becomes a living sanctuary where students encounter both meaningful learning and transformative faith formation.

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