



The Influence of Early Childhood Teachers' Exemplary Behavior on Students' Learning Motivation at PAUD Haleluya Pematang Siantar

Jafar Malau^{1*}, Melsa Yohana Purba², Ronaldo Manurung³, Melda Novasari Purba⁴,
Mezda Enjelita Br. Ambarita⁵

^{1,2,3}Lecturer, Institut Agama Kristen Renatus

^{4,5}Student, Institut Agama Kristen Renatus

*correspondence: jafar.malau@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Early childhood education forms the foundation for cognitive, social, emotional, and moral development, with the teacher's exemplary behavior emerging as a critical factor influencing students' learning motivation. This study examines how early childhood teachers' conduct at PAUD Haleluya Pematang Siantar, a Christian-based institution, affects preschoolers' enthusiasm, engagement, and persistence in learning activities. Employing a quantitative descriptive design, data were collected from five teachers and fifty students using observation checklists, motivation rating scales, and semi-structured interviews. Teacher behavior indicators included moral consistency, empathy, patience, enthusiasm, and fairness, while student motivation was assessed in terms of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, following Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory. Quantitative analysis revealed a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.74$, $p < .05$) between teachers' exemplary behavior and students' motivation, with teacher behavior explaining 54% of the variance in motivation. Observational and interview data further demonstrated that teachers' modeling of patience, persistence, and compassionate interactions not only increased engagement but also influenced peer behavior, creating a cooperative and empathetic classroom climate. Within the Christian educational framework, teacher exemplarity integrates spiritual practices such as prayer, gratitude, and reflection, reinforcing moral formation alongside intellectual growth. The findings underscore the dual pedagogical and spiritual role of teachers: serving as both instructors and living examples of Christ-like character. The study concludes that fostering exemplary teacher behavior is essential for promoting intrinsic motivation, moral development, and holistic learning in early childhood Christian education, positioning the teacher's life as the most enduring "textbook" for shaping young minds and hearts.

Keywords: Early Childhood, Exemplary Behavior, Learning Motivation

INTRODUCTION

Received Jan 30, 2025; Revised Feb 17, 2025; Accepted Feb 28, 2025

Education in early childhood is the foundation for all subsequent learning and personal development. During this critical period, children begin to form not only cognitive and motor skills but also social, emotional, and moral values that shape their lifelong character. Among the many factors influencing children's motivation to learn, the teacher's exemplary behavior stands out as one of the most powerful. Teachers in early childhood education are not merely instructors—they are models of behavior, emotion, and values whose attitudes and actions profoundly affect how children perceive learning, authority, and themselves. As Bandura's (1977) social learning theory emphasizes, young children learn most effectively through observation and imitation. Thus, the teacher's character and behavior serve as living lessons that foster motivation, curiosity, and moral understanding.

At PAUD Haleluya Pematang Siantar, a Christian-based early childhood education center, learning is designed not only to nurture intellectual growth but also to cultivate spiritual and moral foundations. Within this context, the teacher's exemplary conduct holds theological and pedagogical significance. The teacher embodies both educational excellence and moral integrity, serving as a living representation of the values being taught—patience, honesty, responsibility, and kindness. When children observe their teachers demonstrating enthusiasm, fairness, and compassion, they are inspired to participate actively in classroom activities and to develop intrinsic motivation to learn. Conversely, when teachers display inconsistency, indifference, or harshness, children's motivation tends to decline, as their sense of emotional safety and trust diminishes. Motivation in early childhood is inherently fragile yet highly malleable. According to Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory, motivation grows when learners experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness. For preschoolers, these elements are not achieved through abstract concepts but through relational interactions. The teacher's example becomes a crucial bridge—modeling self-discipline encourages autonomy, celebrating small achievements fosters competence, and showing warmth cultivates relatedness. A teacher who demonstrates enthusiasm for learning, perseverance in problem-solving, and respect in communication invites children to emulate these same behaviors, creating a positive cycle of motivation and engagement. In Christian education, teacher exemplarity is also viewed as a moral calling rooted in spiritual values. The Apostle Paul's exhortation, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1), encapsulates the spiritual dimension of modeling in education. Teachers are called to embody Christ-like character—gentleness, humility, and love—which children absorb not through verbal instruction alone but through daily interaction. At PAUD Haleluya Pematang Siantar, this biblical principle guides teaching philosophy, integrating faith-based virtues into classroom practices. Teachers are encouraged to reflect God's character in every aspect of their work, making their lives a visible curriculum for young learners. Empirical studies reinforce the impact of teacher behavior on children's learning motivation. Research by Wentzel (2002) and Hamre & Pianta (2006) demonstrates that positive teacher-student relationships significantly increase children's academic engagement and emotional well-being. In the context of early childhood, where learning is largely experiential and play-based, the teacher's example determines the tone and emotional climate of the classroom. When teachers express joy in learning, model problem-solving strategies, and display patience during

challenges, children mirror these attitudes—developing resilience and persistence in their own learning journey. Moreover, exemplary teachers use their own behavior as an implicit teaching tool, showing rather than merely telling how to act, think, and feel in constructive ways. Maintaining exemplary behavior demands self-awareness and consistency. Teachers often face emotional fatigue, administrative pressures, and diverse behavioral challenges among students. These factors can affect how they express patience and empathy in daily interactions. Therefore, teacher exemplarity requires continuous professional and spiritual formation. Reflective practices, mentoring, and faith-based community support can help educators sustain their commitment to modeling positive values. In Christian early childhood institutions, such as PAUD Haleluya, this formation process is both pedagogical and spiritual—rooted in prayer, reflection, and service. This study examines the influence of early childhood teachers' exemplary behavior on students' learning motivation at PAUD Haleluya Pematang Siantar. It explores how teachers' attitudes, moral consistency, and emotional expression affect children's enthusiasm, participation, and persistence in learning activities. The study aims to provide both theoretical insight and practical implications for improving teaching practices in early childhood Christian education. It seeks to identify how modeling integrity, empathy, and discipline can enhance students' internal motivation and create a classroom environment conducive to holistic growth. By analyzing this relationship, the research aspires to contribute to the broader understanding of character-based pedagogy in early childhood education—affirming that teaching excellence is not only about delivering content but also about embodying the values that nurture young minds and hearts. In a world increasingly driven by technology and information, early childhood educators must reassert the irreplaceable power of human example. The teacher's character remains the most enduring textbook in a child's life—a living witness that motivates not only the mind to learn but also the heart to grow.

METHODS

This study employed a quantitative descriptive design to analyze the influence of early childhood teachers' exemplary behavior on students' learning motivation at PAUD Haleluya Pematang Siantar. The purpose of this design was to determine the degree of relationship between the teacher's model of behavior (independent variable) and students' learning motivation (dependent variable) within the natural classroom setting. Quantitative methods were selected because they enable systematic measurement of behavioral indicators and motivational responses, allowing for statistical validation of the hypothesis that exemplary teacher behavior positively affects children's enthusiasm and engagement in learning activities (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study population consisted of all teachers and students at PAUD Haleluya Pematang Siantar. A purposive sampling technique was used to select five teachers and fifty students, representing a balanced distribution across different age groups (4–6 years old). The inclusion criteria required that selected teachers had served for at least one academic year, ensuring familiarity between teacher and student—an essential condition for observing the influence of modeling behaviors (Bandura, 1977). The data collection period spanned one month, covering daily classroom routines, play sessions, and structured learning activities.

Data were gathered through three primary instruments: a teacher behavior observation checklist, a student motivation rating scale, and semi-structured interviews with teachers. The observation checklist measured dimensions of exemplary behavior, including moral consistency, empathy, patience, enthusiasm, and fairness. Each behavioral indicator was rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from “never demonstrated” (1) to “always demonstrated” (5). The student motivation rating scale assessed children’s observable learning behaviors such as attention, curiosity, persistence, and willingness to participate. These observable aspects of motivation were coded by classroom observers using criteria adapted from Deci and Ryan’s (2000) Self-Determination Theory framework, which highlights autonomy, competence, and relatedness as indicators of intrinsic motivation. The semi-structured interviews with teachers provided qualitative reinforcement, exploring teachers’ self-perception of their role as moral models and the challenges they face in maintaining exemplary conduct. The triangulation of observation, survey, and interview data ensured validity through multiple perspectives (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). To maintain reliability, two independent observers conducted classroom observations simultaneously, and inter-rater agreement was calculated to ensure consistency of ratings. Descriptive analysis summarized the mean and standard deviation of both teacher behavior and student motivation scores, providing a general overview of behavioral tendencies. Inferential analysis employed the Pearson product-moment correlation test to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between teachers’ exemplary behavior and students’ learning motivation. The threshold for statistical significance was set at $p < .05$. Teachers and students were informed of the research objectives and assured that participation would not affect their academic or professional evaluation. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of respect, beneficence, and justice, as outlined by the American Educational Research Association (AERA, 2011). In sum, this methodological framework integrates both quantitative rigor and contextual sensitivity to early childhood Christian education. It acknowledges that while statistical tools measure observable patterns, the lived spiritual and moral context of PAUD Haleluya Pematang Siantar provides the interpretive depth needed to understand how exemplary behavior inspires motivation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study reveal that early childhood teachers’ exemplary behavior exerts a significant and positive influence on students’ learning motivation at PAUD Haleluya Pematang Siantar. Statistical analysis using the Pearson product-moment correlation showed a strong positive relationship ($r = 0.74$, $p < .05$) between the level of teachers’ exemplary behavior and the degree of students’ observed learning motivation. This finding confirms the hypothesis that the more consistently teachers demonstrate positive, moral, and enthusiastic behavior, the higher the motivation of early childhood learners to engage in classroom and play-based learning activities. This section discusses the meaning of these results through the lenses of educational psychology, moral pedagogy, and Christian education theory. At the core of early childhood education is the principle that learning occurs through imitation and modeling (Bandura, 1977). Children aged four to six learn not primarily through abstract reasoning but by observing and internalizing the attitudes and actions of adults in their environment. The teachers at

PAUD Haleluya Pematang Siantar demonstrated behaviors characterized by warmth, patience, honesty, and diligence. Observational data indicated that when teachers approached their duties with enthusiasm and kindness—greeting students by name, maintaining gentle tones of voice, and showing consistent attentiveness—students responded with increased participation, smiling more frequently, volunteering for activities, and displaying longer attention spans. This behavioral alignment reflects what Albert Bandura termed vicarious learning: when children observe adults' reactions to success and failure, they learn how to regulate their own emotions and behavior (Bandura, 1986). In this context, exemplary behavior functions as a form of "living curriculum." Rather than teaching moral values through verbal instruction alone, the teacher embodies virtues that children can perceive, imitate, and practice. For instance, when a teacher calmly resolved conflict between two children over toys, the other students observed the behavior and began to mimic verbal apologies and cooperative sharing without external prompting. The study found that such moments of moral modeling had a stronger motivational impact than explicit directives, aligning with the principle that example precedes exhortation in moral education (Knight, 2006).

The Relationship between Teacher Behavior and Intrinsic Motivation

Quantitative and qualitative findings converge on one major theme: the teacher's character catalyzes intrinsic motivation. According to Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory, intrinsic motivation flourishes when learners experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The exemplary teacher fosters all three through subtle yet powerful behaviors. Autonomy was observed when teachers encouraged students to make choices in learning activities—for example, selecting materials during art time or deciding who would lead prayer. Instead of imposing control, exemplary teachers guided with gentle scaffolding, affirming each decision as valuable. This atmosphere of trust and respect nurtured students' sense of agency, leading to heightened engagement. Competence was cultivated when teachers modeled persistence. During a block-building activity, for example, a teacher intentionally rebuilt a fallen tower while saying, "It's okay, we can try again." This act of visible perseverance communicated to students that mistakes are part of growth, reducing fear of failure. Consequently, students mirrored the teacher's persistence, re-engaging in challenging tasks with renewed confidence. Relatedness—the emotional bond between teacher and child—emerged as the most decisive factor in sustaining motivation. Students whose teachers consistently demonstrated compassion and fairness showed greater attentiveness during learning sessions and were more willing to share during group reflections. Observers noted that affectionate gestures such as smiles, verbal praise, and affirmations ("I'm proud of you," "You did your best") increased children's participation and reduced off-task behavior. This confirms previous research that affective warmth enhances motivation by fulfilling a child's basic psychological need for belonging (Wentzel, 2002). Beyond psychological mechanisms, the results highlight the moral and spiritual essence of teacher exemplarity in a Christian educational setting. Teachers at PAUD Haleluya viewed their professional role as a ministry, often referring to their students as "children entrusted by God." This spiritual perception translated into daily practices that embodied Christian virtues such as love (agape), patience, humility, and gratitude. In interviews, teachers described prayer as central to their preparation: before

classes, they prayed for patience and wisdom. This spiritual discipline directly influenced classroom atmosphere. Observers reported that students were calmer and more cooperative during sessions led by teachers who began the day with reflective prayer. Such moments of serenity seemed to anchor both teacher and students, embodying what Palmer (2007) calls teaching from the heart: the integration of inner peace with pedagogical purpose. The study's findings resonate with Nouwen's (1975) concept of the "wounded healer." Teachers, like spiritual caregivers, guide children not through authority alone but through empathetic presence. One teacher shared, "Children can sense if you are angry or restless. If I come with peace, they will follow." This insight affirms the biblical principle found in Proverbs 22:6—"Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it." The training here is not limited to verbal instruction but involves living demonstration.

Statistical Insights: Measuring Behavioral Impact

The quantitative findings reinforce these qualitative insights. The Pearson correlation coefficient ($r = 0.74$) indicates a strong positive association between the teacher's exemplary behavior score and the student motivation index. Regression analysis further showed that teacher exemplarity accounted for 54% of the variance in student motivation ($R^2 = 0.54$). This suggests that more than half of children's learning motivation can be predicted by the degree to which teachers exhibit consistent, moral, and enthusiastic behavior. These results align with previous studies (Rahmayanti, 2016; Tabi'in, 2017) demonstrating that teacher personality and conduct significantly affect student engagement and achievement, particularly in value-based education. Moreover, the data support Karwono and Mularsih (2018), who define pedagogical competence as the integration of skill, attitude, and moral consistency. The teachers at PAUD Haleluya exemplify this integration; their competence is visible not only in effective teaching strategies but in moral coherence between word and deed. Interestingly, the analysis revealed that teachers' emotional stability—measured by their ability to respond calmly under pressure—had the highest correlation with student motivation ($r = 0.79$). This finding emphasizes that emotional self-regulation, an often-overlooked aspect of teacher exemplarity, plays a critical role in shaping young learners' motivation. Children mirror their teachers' affective states; thus, a calm, joyful teacher fosters a calm, joyful classroom. Observation data also demonstrated that play-based learning amplified the effects of exemplary modeling. During outdoor activities, teachers' participation—not supervision alone—enhanced children's motivation. When teachers joined in singing, jumping, or storytelling, students displayed higher enthusiasm and cooperation. This corroborates Vygotsky's (1978) theory that social interaction is the vehicle of cognitive and emotional development. Through shared play, the teacher's moral modeling becomes tangible: kindness appears in turn-taking, fairness in sharing, and empathy in comforting a crying peer. One observed example involved a teacher who noticed a child struggling to tie her shoelaces. Instead of completing the task, the teacher knelt beside her, demonstrating the steps patiently while saying, "You can do it; I'll help you once more." The act of kneeling—a gesture of humility—communicated respect and encouragement. The child smiled and persevered until successful, after which she proudly helped another peer. This sequence exemplifies how exemplary behavior initiates

contagious motivation; one teacher's act of care produces a ripple effect of mutual support among students. Within the Christian framework of PAUD Haleluya, learning is not merely academic acquisition but a holistic process of worship and formation. Teachers often framed classroom activities as opportunities to thank God for His creation, fostering an environment where learning was perceived as sacred joy. For instance, during a science activity about plants, the teacher began with a prayer of gratitude: "Thank You, God, for giving us seeds that grow." Students responded enthusiastically, linking curiosity with reverence. This integrative approach aligns with Knight's (2006) theology of education, which views knowledge as participation in divine wisdom. When teachers model gratitude, diligence, and reverence, students internalize these values as part of learning motivation. Thus, exemplary behavior is not limited to moral ethics but extends to spiritual disposition—a "pedagogy of reverence" (Palmer, 1998). The influence of the teacher extends beyond observable motivation; it shapes the child's understanding of goodness, truth, and purpose. The results confirm Bandura's (1977) assertion that modeling is the most powerful mode of learning because it engages both affective and cognitive domains simultaneously. In the context of early childhood Christian education, the teacher functions as a living curriculum—a visible embodiment of the values children are expected to acquire. This is consistent with Smith's (2016) notion of "liturgical education," where repetition of moral acts forms spiritual habits. Each smile, gesture of patience, and prayerful word contributes to shaping children's moral imagination. The study also acknowledges challenges. Maintaining exemplary behavior demands emotional resilience and spiritual vitality. Teachers reported fatigue, limited institutional support, and competing administrative tasks. Yet, those who grounded their work in faith and community prayer displayed greater perseverance. This finding echoes Nouwen's (1975) insight that spiritual authenticity is sustained not by perfection but by continual renewal through grace. Teacher formation programs must prioritize character and spiritual development alongside pedagogical training. The data show that exemplary behavior contributes directly to learning motivation; thus, teacher preparation should include reflective practices, mentoring, and moral-spiritual retreats. Schools should institutionalize reflective communities where teachers share challenges and renew their sense of calling. Regular devotions, peer observation, and moral dialogue strengthen the moral climate of the institution, reinforcing consistent modeling. Curriculum design should integrate moral exemplarity into daily routines. Practices such as shared prayer, gratitude reflections, and cooperative learning create environments where children experience values as lived realities.

From a biblical-theological perspective, the teacher's exemplary behavior mirrors the incarnational nature of God's teaching—truth embodied in relationship. Just as Jesus taught by living among His disciples, showing humility, compassion, and faithfulness, so the teacher becomes a living parable. The influence of such modeling at PAUD Haleluya demonstrates that holiness can be taught not through words alone but through the consistent rhythm of love expressed in small deeds. This study demonstrates that teachers' exemplary behavior is both pedagogically effective and spiritually formative. Through consistent modeling of patience, integrity, and enthusiasm, teachers ignite intrinsic motivation in children, transforming learning into a joyful act of worship. The results affirm that, especially in early childhood Christian education, the teacher's life is

the most powerful textbook—the one written daily in acts of love and grace that children read with their hearts.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study confirm that early childhood teachers' exemplary behavior exerts a profound and positive influence on students' learning motivation at PAUD Haleluya Pematang Siantar. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses demonstrate that children respond not merely to instructional content but to the lived example of their teachers. A strong positive correlation ($r = 0.74$, $p < .05$) indicates that teachers who consistently exhibit moral integrity, empathy, patience, enthusiasm, and fairness inspire higher levels of engagement, curiosity, and persistence in learning activities. This evidence underscores the essential role of modeling as a central pedagogical strategy, that social learning theory that children learn most effectively through observation and imitation of adult behavior. The study highlights that teacher exemplarity operates through multiple interconnected mechanisms. First, it fosters intrinsic motivation by promoting autonomy, competence, and relatedness, aligning Self-Determination Theory. Children observe teachers making deliberate choices, demonstrating perseverance, and expressing genuine care, which cultivates a sense of agency, confidence, and belonging. Second, the moral dimension of teacher behavior shapes students' ethical development and relational skills. By witnessing acts of kindness, fairness, and humility, children internalize values in a manner that verbal instruction alone cannot achieve. The observational data reveal that these modeled behaviors initiate a ripple effect, influencing peer interactions and creating a classroom climate characterized by cooperation, empathy, and mutual support. Within the Christian educational framework of PAUD Haleluya, teacher exemplarity carries additional spiritual significance. Teachers perceive their work as a form of ministry, integrating faith-based practices such as prayer, gratitude, and reflection into daily routines. The incorporation of Christian virtues—love (agape), patience, humility, and reverence—transforms learning into a holistic process that nurtures both intellect and spirit. Observers noted that classrooms led by spiritually grounded teachers displayed greater calmness, attentiveness, and cooperative engagement, indicating that spiritual formation enhances pedagogical effectiveness. This integration of moral and spiritual modeling affirms the theological principle articulated in 1 Corinthians 11:1 and Proverbs 22:6: children learn to emulate Christ-like character through consistent observation of adult behavior. The study underscores the importance of teacher self-regulation and professional formation. Emotional stability and reflective practices emerged as critical factors enabling teachers to sustain exemplary behavior despite challenges such as fatigue, administrative demands, and behavioral diversity among students. This suggests that effective teacher preparation programs should prioritize character development, moral reflection, and spiritual renewal alongside instructional training to maximize both educational and formative outcomes. The research demonstrates that early childhood teachers' exemplary behavior is a vital determinant of learning motivation, encompassing cognitive, emotional, and moral domains. At PAUD Haleluya, teachers' consistent modeling of patience, integrity, enthusiasm, and faith transforms the classroom into a dynamic environment where learning is both a joyful pursuit and a lived expression of Christian values. The findings affirm that the teacher's life functions as the most enduring

“textbook” for young children, illustrating that the cultivation of intrinsic motivation and moral character begins through the observable, everyday actions of those entrusted with guiding early development. Therefore, fostering exemplary teacher behavior is not only an educational strategy but also a spiritual and ethical imperative in early childhood Christian education.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- American Educational Research Association. (2011). *Code of ethics*. AERA.
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Prentice Hall.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Prentice Hall.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry* 11(4), 227–268. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1104_01
- Hamre, B. K., & Pianta, R. C. (2006). Student-teacher relationships. In G. G. Bear & K. M. Minke (Eds.), *Children’s needs III: Development, prevention, and intervention* (pp. 59–71). National Association of School Psychologists.
- Knight, G. R. (2006). *The philosophy of education: An introduction* (2nd ed.). Andrews University Press.
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Palmer, P. J. (2007). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher’s life*. Jossey-Bass.
- Wentzel, K. R. (2002). Are effective teachers like good parents? Teaching styles and student adjustment in early adolescence. *Child Development* 73(1), 287–301. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8624.00397>