



Christian Religious Education Teachers and the Spirituality of Faith Struggle: Insights from Genesis 32:24-26 at SMP Negeri 1 Payung-Karo

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the spirituality of faith struggle among Christian Religious Education teachers at SMP Negeri 1 Payung-Karo, drawing insights from Genesis 32:24-26, where Jacob wrestles with God until daybreak. The research investigates how this biblical narrative informs the personal competence, pedagogical practice, and relational engagement of teachers in a faith-based educational context. Employing a qualitative approach, data were collected through a systematic literature review (SLR) and semi-structured interviews with CRE teachers, allowing a comprehensive understanding of how spiritual reflection shapes professional and interpersonal competence. Findings reveal that teachers internalize the motif of struggle, interpreting Jacob's wrestling as a model for resilience, persistence, and ethical discernment in navigating challenges in educational practice. Teachers report that reflecting on this passage enhances patience, humility, and relational sensitivity, enabling them to handle classroom complexities, student behavioral issues, and diverse parental expectations effectively. Moreover, the spirituality of struggle informs pedagogical strategies, as teachers integrate discussions of perseverance, faith-informed decision-making, and moral reflection into their lessons, thereby modeling authentic engagement with ethical and spiritual challenges for students. The study further highlights that personal spiritual disciplines, including prayer, meditation, and biblical study, strengthen emotional regulation, reflective practice, and ethical awareness, reinforcing the interconnection between teacher spirituality and professional competence. Challenges such as limited time, diverse student needs, and varying parental involvement require adaptive strategies, yet the essence of faith struggle remains central to relational and instructional practices. The spirituality of faith struggle enhances CRE teachers' personal and professional competence, fostering a reflective, ethically grounded, and relationally sensitive approach to teaching. These insights underscore the transformative potential of biblical narratives in shaping holistic, faith-informed educational communities.

Keywords: Spirituality, Christian Religious Education, Faith Struggle

INTRODUCTION

Faith struggle is an integral dimension of personal and spiritual development, particularly within the context of Christian Religious Education (*Pendidikan Agama Kristen/PAK*). For teachers of *PAK* (*Pendidikan Agama Kristen*), navigating one's own spiritual challenges while guiding students in matters of faith requires both personal integrity and pedagogical competence. The concept of faith struggle is deeply rooted in biblical narratives, which portray encounters with God as moments of tension, endurance, and transformation. Genesis 32:24-26 offers a vivid illustration of such a struggle: Jacob wrestles with a mysterious figure through the night, refusing to release his hold until he receives a blessing, ultimately demonstrating perseverance, dependence on God, and the pursuit of divine affirmation. This narrative provides a rich theological framework for understanding the spirituality of faith struggle, emphasizing persistence in prayer, ethical decision-making under pressure, and relational trust in God's providence (Sarna, 1989). Within Indonesian secondary school contexts, CRE teachers at SMP Negeri 1 Payung-Karo face the dual responsibility of modeling spiritual resilience while fostering faith formation among adolescents. Adolescence is marked by cognitive, emotional, and moral development, making students particularly receptive to examples of authentic faith. Teachers' personal competence, encompassing emotional regulation, spiritual maturity, and ethical consistency, significantly impacts the internalization of faith values in students (Lickona, 1991). The ability to integrate one's own experience of struggle with pedagogical practice is thus a critical marker of professional and spiritual effectiveness in CRE.

Exegetically, Genesis 32:24–26 provides multiple layers of insight. Jacob's nocturnal wrestling is not merely physical but symbolic of a profound existential and spiritual confrontation. The text emphasizes endurance (*"Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak"*) and relational persistence (*"He said, 'I will not let you go unless you bless me'"*) as key components of faith struggle. Jacob's insistence to receive a blessing reflects a theological principle: spiritual growth is inseparable from active engagement, perseverance in prayer, and personal accountability before God (Hamilton, 1995). For teachers, this exegetical perspective highlights the importance of embodying a model of faith that is neither passive nor complacent but actively grappling with doubt, uncertainty, and moral challenges. The narrative emphasizes divine-human interaction as the locus of transformation. Jacob's encounter results in both a personal renaming and a relational reconciliation, demonstrating that faith struggle culminates in identity formation and relational restoration. For CRE teachers, this provides an instructive paradigm: personal spiritual experiences, including struggles and doubts, can inform pedagogical strategies that are empathetic, authentic, and transformative (Estep, 2012). Such a paradigm encourages teachers to integrate their reflections on personal faith struggles into classroom discourse, enabling students to see faith as lived, dynamic, and relational rather than abstract. In practice, teachers who consciously engage with their own spiritual struggles cultivate an atmosphere of authenticity and trust in their classrooms. Observations in educational research indicate that students respond positively when educators transparently share the reality of moral and spiritual challenges, illustrating resilience, prayerfulness, and reliance on God (Groome, 1998). This modeling fosters both cognitive understanding and affective engagement, strengthening

students' capacity to navigate their own spiritual questions. This study focuses on exploring how CRE teachers at SMP Negeri 1 Payung-Karo reflect upon and integrate the spirituality of faith struggle, as depicted in Genesis 32:24-26, into their professional practice. By combining exegetical analysis with qualitative insights, the research aims to illuminate the interplay between personal spiritual competence and pedagogical effectiveness. Specifically, it investigates how teachers interpret biblical models of struggle, how these interpretations shape classroom interactions, and how personal spiritual experiences enhance students' moral and spiritual formation. In doing so, the study contributes to a nuanced understanding of faith-based teaching, highlighting the essential role of teachers' own spirituality in nurturing resilient, reflective, and ethically grounded students.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design combining a systematic literature review (SLR) and semi-structured interviews to explore how Christian Religious Education (CRE/PAK) teachers at SMP Negeri 1 Payung-Karo integrate the spirituality of faith struggle, as depicted in Genesis 32:24-26, into their professional practice. The SLR served to provide a comprehensive theoretical and theological framework, identifying existing studies on teacher spirituality, faith struggle, and pedagogical competence within Christian education contexts. Inclusion criteria focused on peer-reviewed articles, books, and book chapters published between 2000 and 2025, with a particular emphasis on works that examined the integration of personal faith experiences into pedagogical practice. The SLR enabled the researchers to construct a conceptual map of how biblical narratives of faith struggle inform teachers' personal and professional development, highlighting both theoretical models and practical applications in classroom settings. Complementing the literature review, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three CRE teachers at SMP Negeri 1 Payung-Karo who have demonstrated sustained engagement in faith-based pedagogy. The interview protocol was designed to explore teachers' reflections on their personal experiences of spiritual struggle, their interpretations of Genesis 32:24-26, and the ways in which these reflections influence classroom interactions and student formation. Questions were open-ended to encourage rich narratives and deep reflection, allowing participants to share both successes and challenges in modeling spiritual resilience. Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, lasted approximately 45–60 minutes each. Observational notes taken during informal interactions and teaching sessions supplemented the interviews, providing contextual evidence of how faith struggle is embodied in practice. Data from the SLR and interviews were analyzed. For the literature review, key themes related to spiritual competence, persistence in faith, relational modeling, and pedagogical integration were identified and synthesized. Interview transcripts were coded inductively to capture emergent patterns, including teachers' personal strategies for coping with doubt, their use of biblical narratives to inspire students, and the perceived impact of modeling faith struggle on classroom dynamics. Through this dual-method approach, the study provides both theoretical and empirical insights into the personal competence and spirituality of CRE teachers as they navigate faith struggles while fostering holistic student development.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal a rich and multifaceted integration of the spirituality of faith struggle, as exemplified in Genesis 32:24-26, into the personal and professional competence of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers at SMP Negeri 1 Payung-Karo. The verse, which narrates Jacob wrestling with God until daybreak, provides a profound biblical metaphor for persistence, transformation, and relational engagement with the divine, offering a foundational framework for understanding teacher spirituality in the educational context (Hamilton, 1995). Through the systematic literature review, it became evident that teacher spirituality is not merely a private, introspective phenomenon but a relational and pedagogical competence that influences classroom dynamics, student engagement, and moral formation (Tisdell, 2003). Studies highlighted that teachers who actively reflect on their faith experiences, including moments of doubt, struggle, and perseverance, demonstrate heightened emotional intelligence, resilience, and ethical awareness in their professional practice (Fry, 2003). This aligns with the CRE teachers' own narratives, revealing that faith struggle is not an abstract theological concept but a lived reality shaping their attitudes, decision-making, and interaction with students and colleagues. The semi-structured interviews provided a nuanced understanding of how teachers interpret Genesis 32:24-26 and translate its spiritual lessons into daily pedagogical practice. All participants acknowledged experiencing personal and professional challenges that evoke spiritual struggle, ranging from student behavioral issues to navigating institutional expectations and socio-cultural diversity within the school environment. One teacher noted, *"When I wrestle with God in my own uncertainties, I learn patience and humility, which helps me approach students with empathy rather than frustration"*. This statement reflects the relational and ethical dimensions of teacher competence emphasized in contemporary educational theory (Bandura, 1977). The wrestling motif, characterized by persistent engagement with doubt and tension, was recurrent in teachers' reflections, revealing that faith struggle is closely linked to self-awareness, moral responsibility, and the capacity to model resilience for students. Teachers described how their internal wrestling fosters reflective practice, prompting them to assess whether their actions embody Christian virtues such as integrity, compassion, and perseverance (Knight, 2016). In essence, the personal experience of spiritual struggle becomes a lens through which teachers interpret classroom challenges, guiding them to respond with a combination of professionalism and faith-informed insight.

Observational data and interview narratives further indicate that teachers' spirituality of struggle directly informs pedagogical strategies and student engagement. Teachers intentionally incorporate discussions about perseverance, ethical decision-making, and relational integrity into CRE lessons, often drawing explicit parallels to Jacob's wrestling experience. One participant explained that using Genesis 32:24-26 as a teaching anchor allows students to understand that spiritual challenges are normative and transformative: *"I want my students to know that struggling with doubt or difficulty does not separate them from God; it is part of growing in faith"*. This pedagogical integration demonstrates that the spirituality of struggle extends beyond personal reflection and becomes a conduit for student moral and spiritual development, consistent with the ecological model of

education which emphasizes the interconnectedness of teacher, student, and community contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Teachers' reflective practice, informed by their personal faith experiences, allows them to frame challenges as opportunities for learning and moral growth, fostering resilience and critical thinking among students. A significant theme that emerged is the role of relational modeling in the spirituality of faith struggle. Teachers articulated that their competence is not merely cognitive or technical but deeply relational, rooted in the ability to demonstrate perseverance, empathy, and faith-informed decision-making in the presence of students and colleagues. For instance, teachers described instances where their visible struggle with uncertainty or decision-making prompted students to engage in dialogue about ethical dilemmas and personal challenges, creating an environment where vulnerability and authenticity were valued. This relational dimension resonates with the exegesis of Genesis 32:24-26, wherein Jacob's wrestling is simultaneously a private struggle and a relational encounter with God that produces blessing and transformation (Ryken, 2015). By embodying a model of wrestling with challenges faithfully, teachers cultivate a classroom climate that normalizes struggle as a pathway to growth, thereby strengthening the affective and moral dimensions of student learning. The study also highlights the influence of contextual and institutional factors on the enactment of faith-based competence. SMP Negeri 1 Payung-Karo, while a public school, fosters a supportive environment for faith-informed pedagogy, allowing teachers to embody Christian virtues without imposing doctrinal instruction. Teachers leverage institutional support to create spaces for reflective discussion, spiritual mentorship, and collaborative problem-solving, which amplifies the positive impact of their personal spirituality on student outcomes. However, teachers also reported challenges, including time constraints, curriculum demands, and varying levels of parental engagement, which occasionally hinder the depth of spiritual integration in classroom interactions. Teachers employ adaptive strategies, such as brief reflective exercises, personal journaling, and targeted discussions that connect curricular content to faith principles, maintaining the essence of the spirituality of struggle in pedagogical practice. Another critical finding concerns the interplay between teacher spirituality and emotional regulation. Teachers consistently reported that reflecting on Genesis 32:24-26 equips them with tools for managing stress, maintaining patience, and responding to challenging behaviors with equanimity. One participant explained that envisioning herself wrestling with God helps her "hold tension constructively," enabling her to engage students empathetically even under pressure. This finding corroborates research indicating that teacher spirituality enhances social-emotional competence, resilience, and reflective decision-making in complex educational contexts (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009)⁸. By internalizing biblical narratives of struggle, teachers develop a spiritual lens for interpreting classroom challenges, resulting in more consistent, ethical, and compassionate pedagogical practice. The SLR findings and interview data further reveals that faith struggle serves as both a personal and communal resource. Teachers' engagement with their own struggles enhances self-awareness, moral discernment, and relational competence, while simultaneously providing students with a model of resilience, humility, and trust in God. The practice of reflecting on Jacob's encounter enables teachers to frame setbacks, conflicts, and uncertainties within a theological and ethical paradigm, promoting transformative learning experiences. Moreover, students reported perceiving teachers' authenticity, noting that teachers who openly navigate

challenges are “more relatable” and “inspiring in handling difficulties”. This demonstrates that the spirituality of struggle not only enhances teacher competence but also strengthens student engagement, trust, and moral development, reinforcing the relational ecology emphasized in Christian pedagogical theory (Groome, 1998). The study identifies a feedback loop between personal competence, spirituality, and pedagogical efficacy. Teachers’ reflective engagement with faith struggle strengthens emotional regulation, relational awareness, and ethical responsiveness, which in turn enhances their classroom interactions and student formation. Conversely, observing positive student responses and moral growth reinforces teachers’ spiritual motivation and professional satisfaction. This cyclical process suggests that spirituality and personal competence are mutually reinforcing in the CRE context, echoing theoretical claims that teacher identity, ethical grounding, and spiritual maturity are intertwined dimensions of professional competence (Cunningham, 2015). The findings underscore that the spirituality of faith struggle, as illuminated in Genesis 32:24-26, constitutes a vital dimension of personal and professional competence among CRE teachers at SMP Negeri 1 Payung-Karo. Teachers embody the wrestling motif through reflective practice, relational modeling, ethical engagement, and pedagogical innovation, translating biblical insights into practical strategies that enhance student moral, spiritual, and academic development. The integration of personal faith experience with professional competence demonstrates that spirituality is both a personal resource and a pedagogical asset, shaping teachers’ responses to challenges, interactions with students, and contributions to the broader educational environment. The study affirms that CRE teachers’ engagement with faith struggle fosters resilience, authenticity, and relational depth, producing transformative effects that extend beyond individual classrooms to the school community and, ultimately, to students’ holistic formation.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the spirituality of faith struggle, as exemplified in Genesis 32:24-26, plays a central role in shaping the personal and professional competence of Christian Religious Education teachers at SMP Negeri 1 Payung-Karo. The biblical narrative of Jacob wrestling with God until daybreak offers profound insights into persistence, self-reflection, and relational engagement with the divine, which teachers interpret as a model for navigating challenges in their educational practice. Findings indicate that teachers do not merely treat this passage as theological content; rather, they internalize its principles, allowing the motif of struggle to inform their attitudes, pedagogical strategies, and relational conduct with students, colleagues, and the broader school community. Teachers reported that reflecting on Jacob’s wrestling fosters resilience, patience, humility, and ethical awareness, enhancing their capacity to respond to complex classroom and institutional challenges with composure and wisdom. The study further reveals that teacher spirituality is not isolated from pedagogy but actively shapes classroom interactions and student engagement. By modeling how to wrestle with doubt, uncertainty, and moral dilemmas faithfully, teachers provide students with a relational and ethical framework for approaching their own challenges. CRE teachers integrate discussions on perseverance, integrity, and faith-informed decision-making into lessons, demonstrating that spiritual struggle is normative and transformative. Observations and

interviews show that students recognize and respond positively to these authentic models, which increase trust, engagement, and moral formation. This reinforces the notion that teacher spirituality contributes directly to the holistic development of learners, aligning with ecological and relational theories of education that emphasize the interconnectedness of teacher, student, and community contexts. Challenges such as time constraints, diverse student backgrounds, and varying levels of parental engagement require teachers to adapt their practice while maintaining the integrity of faith-based values. Strategies such as reflective journaling, brief meditative exercises, and flexible communication with students and parents enable teachers to sustain the essence of the spirituality of struggle even in practical limitations. Furthermore, the study emphasizes that personal spiritual discipline—including prayer, meditation, and Bible study—strengthens emotional regulation, relational competence, and ethical discernment, highlighting the interplay between personal faith and professional effectiveness. Teachers' spirituality becomes both a resource and a lens for interpreting challenges, fostering consistency, authenticity, and relational depth. The study concludes that the spirituality of faith struggle enriches the personal competence of CRE teachers, equipping them to act with reflective wisdom, ethical clarity, and relational sensitivity. It demonstrates that faith-informed reflection and internalization of biblical narratives transform not only the teacher's professional identity but also the educational experiences of students. By embodying persistence, humility, and ethical engagement, CRE teachers at SMP Negeri 1 Payung-Karo exemplify how spiritual struggle can be translated into practical competence, creating a positive ripple effect that enhances classroom culture, student formation, and the broader school environment. Future research could explore how teacher training programs might systematically incorporate spiritual resilience and reflective engagement with faith narratives, ensuring that the transformative potential of faith struggle continues to shape vibrant, compassionate, and ethically grounded educational communities.

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