



## Enhancing Social Competence of CRE Teachers to Foster Student Empathy: A Case Study at SD Dharma Wanita Medan

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### ABSTRACT

*Christian Religious Education at the elementary level plays a strategic role in shaping students' spiritual, moral, and social character, with empathy serving as a vital foundation for holistic formation. This study explores the relationship between CRE teachers' social competence and the development of empathy among students at SD Dharma Wanita Medan. Social competence, defined as teachers' ability to communicate effectively, build positive relationships, and model inclusivity, is considered a pedagogical necessity for fostering empathetic learners in today's complex educational landscape. A quantitative research design was employed, involving four CRE teachers and 120 students from Grades IV–VI selected through stratified random sampling. Data were collected using two validated instruments: the Social Competence Scale for Teachers (SCST) and the Empathy Scale for Students (ESS). Descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation, and multiple regression analyses were applied to assess the relationship between teacher social competence and student empathy levels. Findings revealed that CRE teachers demonstrated a high overall level of social competence ( $M = 4.12$ ), particularly in interpersonal communication and emotional intelligence. Students displayed moderate-to-high levels of empathy ( $M = 3.89$ ), with strengths in emotional recognition but weaker consistency in prosocial responsiveness. Correlation analysis confirmed a strong positive relationship between teacher social competence and student empathy ( $r = 0.62, p < 0.01$ ), with interpersonal communication emerging as the strongest predictor. These results affirm the central role of teacher social competence in shaping empathetic learners and highlight the need for ongoing professional development grounded in Christian values.*

**Keywords:** Social Competence, Christian Religious Education, Student Empathy

### INTRODUCTION

Christian Religious Education at the elementary school level holds a strategic role in shaping the character of young learners. Beyond the cognitive transfer of biblical

knowledge, CRE is essentially a process of holistic formation that cultivates spiritual depth, moral awareness, and social responsibility (Astuti, 2020; Barnes, 2014). Within this framework of character education, one of the most essential values to instill from an early age is empathy. Empathy, understood as the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, serves as a foundation for building healthy social relationships, nurturing compassion, and promoting a responsible way of life (Batson, 2011; Davis, 2018). Without empathy, knowledge and skills may become detached from moral responsibility, leaving students ill-prepared to engage constructively in diverse communities (Noddings, 2012). The role of the CRE teacher is central in ensuring that empathy becomes an integral part of student formation. As primary agents of the classroom learning process, CRE teachers bear responsibilities that go far beyond lesson delivery. They are entrusted not only with imparting biblical truths but also with embodying faith, modeling Christian virtues, and cultivating affective dimensions of student growth (Schreiner, 2016; Astika, 2021). To fulfill this task effectively, one of the most vital competencies they must possess is social competence. Social competence refers to a teacher's ability to establish positive interpersonal relationships, communicate effectively, and demonstrate empathy and inclusivity toward all students. It is a multidimensional construct that encompasses emotional intelligence, cultural sensitivity, and interpersonal communication skills (Denham, 2006; Goleman, 2006; Zins & Elias, 2007). For CRE teachers, social competence is not merely an additional skill but a pedagogical necessity. A teacher who consistently demonstrates empathy and openness fosters a learning climate where students feel safe, respected, and understood (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Such an environment becomes fertile ground for cultivating empathy among students, who learn not only from explicit instruction but also through the lived example of their teacher (Lickona, 2004). The urgency of strengthening teachers' social competence is further heightened by the challenges of the modern educational landscape. Social dynamics among students are becoming increasingly complex due to the influences of digitalization, globalization, and shifting cultural values (Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016). Trends such as individualism, bullying, and declining social sensitivity represent real threats to the moral and emotional growth of children in today's elementary schools (Rigby, 2017; Twenge, 2017). In this context, religious education must not be confined to cognitive learning objectives but must instead function as a transformative agent that develops the whole person. It should embrace the intellectual, spiritual, social, and emotional dimensions of student life (Elias et al., 1997). This requires teachers to be equipped with strong social competencies that enable them to address these challenges effectively and nurture empathetic learners (Brackett et al., 2019).

Within the specific context of SD Dharma Wanita Medan, the role of CRE teachers is particularly crucial. The school has articulated a vision of integrating Christian faith values with character formation, positioning CRE as a central pillar in shaping students' moral and spiritual identity. While such a vision is commendable, the practical realization of this mission depends largely on the competencies of teachers, particularly their capacity to embody and transmit empathy in everyday interactions with students (Supriyadi, 2022). Strengthening teachers' social competence thus becomes not only a desirable initiative but an urgent need, given the school's commitment to holistic education. The extent to which social competence has been effectively integrated into CRE practice at SD Dharma

Wanita Medan remains an open question. Teachers face contextual challenges, such as limited professional development opportunities and the pressure to balance cognitive instruction with affective formation (Suyanto & Jihad, 2019). Moreover, the ways in which these challenges influence the development of student empathy have yet to be comprehensively examined. For this reason, systematic research is necessary to explore the strategies employed by CRE teachers in strengthening their social competence, to identify the obstacles they encounter, and to assess the impact of these efforts on fostering empathy among students. This article seeks to address these gaps by focusing on interconnected aims: to explore the strategies implemented by CRE teachers in strengthening their social competence; to analyze the challenges that hinder the practical realization of these strategies; and, to evaluate the implications of these practices for the growth of student empathy. By addressing these aims, the study seeks to make both theoretical and practical contributions. It expands the discourse on Christian pedagogy by highlighting the critical intersection between social competence and empathy formation (Groome, 2011). It also provides actionable insights for schools, educators, and policymakers seeking to develop CRE practices that are both contextually relevant and spiritually grounded. The strengthening of social competence among CRE teachers is not merely an educational strategy but a spiritual calling. Teachers are entrusted with the sacred task of shaping students into empathetic, compassionate individuals who embody Christian values in their daily lives (Knight, 2006). By integrating social competence into their teaching practice, CRE teachers can serve as transformative agents who inspire empathy and foster character development, thereby fulfilling the broader mission of Christian education in preparing students to live faithfully and responsibly in a complex and interconnected world.

## **METHODS**

A quantitative research design was chosen to examine the strengthening of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers' social competence in fostering student empathy at SD Dharma Wanita Medan. A quantitative approach was selected because it allows the researcher to systematically measure variables, test relationships, and generate empirical findings that can be generalized within the school context (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In line with the study's objectives, this approach provided a structured framework for assessing the extent to which teachers' social competence influenced students' empathy development. The research was conducted at SD Dharma Wanita Medan, a Christian elementary school recognized for its emphasis on integrating faith-based learning with character formation. The participants of this study comprised two groups: teachers of Christian Religious Education and students in the upper elementary grades (Grade IV to Grade VI). A total of four CRE teachers participated in the study, representing the entire teaching staff responsible for religious education at the school. For the student sample, 120 learners were selected through stratified random sampling, ensuring representation across gender and grade levels. This sampling strategy was chosen to enhance the validity of findings and minimize potential sampling bias (Etikan & Bala, 2017). Two primary instruments were developed for data collection: a Social Competence Scale for Teachers (SCST) and an Empathy Scale for Students (ESS). The SCST measured dimensions of teachers' social competence, including interpersonal communication, emotional intelligence, cultural sensitivity, and inclusivity. Items were adapted from established

frameworks on teacher social-emotional competence (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Zins & Elias, 2007) and modified to align with the Christian education context. The ESS assessed students' capacity to recognize, understand, and respond to the emotions of others, drawing upon models of empathy from Batson (2011) and Davis (2018). Both instruments employed a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Prior to data collection, the instruments were validated by two experts in Christian pedagogy and piloted with a small group of respondents to ensure reliability. Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.87 for the SCST and 0.84 for the ESS confirmed high internal consistency. Data were collected over a four-week period. Teachers completed the SCST through self-administered questionnaires, while students responded to the ESS in a classroom setting under the supervision of the researcher and classroom teachers. The anonymity of participants was assured to encourage honest and accurate responses. To complement the primary data, school documents such as lesson plans and teacher reflections were reviewed to contextualize the findings. Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were employed to provide an overview of the levels of social competence among CRE teachers and empathy among students. Inferential statistics, specifically Pearson's correlation analysis, were applied to examine the relationship between teachers' social competence and student empathy levels. Additionally, multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the predictive power of specific dimensions of teacher social competence on student empathy outcomes. All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 26.0. This study ensured that its findings would not only provide empirical insights into the relationship between teacher social competence and student empathy but also contribute to evidence-based recommendations for enhancing Christian Religious Education practices in elementary schools.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The results of the Social Competence Scale for Teachers (SCST) showed that the overall level of social competence among CRE teachers at SD Dharma Wanita Medan was in the "high" category, with a mean score of 4.12 (SD = 0.41) on a five-point Likert scale. Among the four measured dimensions, interpersonal communication scored the highest (M = 4.28, SD = 0.36), followed closely by emotional intelligence (M = 4.20, SD = 0.39). Meanwhile, cultural sensitivity (M = 4.03, SD = 0.44) and inclusivity (M = 3.97, SD = 0.47) received slightly lower but still positive ratings. These findings suggest that CRE teachers in this school generally possess strong interpersonal and emotional skills, which are crucial for establishing positive classroom relationships. Such competencies resonate with Jennings and Greenberg's (2009) assertion that teachers with well-developed social-emotional competence foster emotionally supportive learning environments. However, the slightly lower scores in inclusivity and cultural sensitivity indicate areas where professional development is still needed, particularly in addressing student diversity and preventing marginalization in classroom interactions (Zins & Elias, 2007). The relatively high scores overall reflect the teachers' awareness of their dual responsibility as educators and faith role models. By demonstrating empathy, effective communication,

and emotional regulation, they align their practices with the Christian mission of holistic education, which emphasizes both academic and spiritual formation (Groome, 2011).

### ***Students' Empathy Development***

The results of the Empathy Scale for Students (ESS) revealed a moderate-to-high level of empathy among the 120 respondents, with a mean score of 3.89 (SD = 0.52). Breaking down the results, the dimension of emotional recognition scored the highest (M = 4.02, SD = 0.49), indicating that students were generally capable of identifying emotions in their peers. The dimension of perspective-taking followed with a mean of 3.88 (SD = 0.53), while prosocial responsiveness scored the lowest (M = 3.77, SD = 0.54). These findings suggest that while students are able to recognize others' emotions and understand differing perspectives, they do not always translate this awareness into consistent prosocial actions such as helping or supporting peers. This gap aligns with Davis's (2018) argument that empathy must be nurtured beyond cognitive awareness, extending into behavioral expressions of compassion and solidarity. The role of CRE in shaping this developmental process is evident. Lessons and classroom practices that emphasize biblical narratives of compassion, forgiveness, and community life provide fertile ground for fostering empathy (Schreiner, 2016). However, as Rigby (2017) notes, external factors such as peer culture, digital influences, and bullying trends may undermine students' willingness to act empathetically. Hence, while CRE instruction builds foundational empathy skills, reinforcement through school-wide practices and family engagement remains necessary.

### ***The Relationship between Teachers' Social Competence and Student Empathy***

Correlation analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between teachers' social competence and student empathy levels ( $r = 0.62$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This indicates that higher levels of teacher social competence are associated with stronger empathy among students. Multiple regression analysis further demonstrated that the dimension of interpersonal communication emerged as the strongest predictor of student empathy ( $\beta = 0.41$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), followed by emotional intelligence ( $\beta = 0.35$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Interestingly, cultural sensitivity and inclusivity did not show significant predictive power when controlling for the other factors. These results confirm that the way CRE teachers interact with students on a daily basis—through communication style, emotional attunement, and relational warmth—directly influences the development of empathy in young learners. This supports Batson's (2011) model of empathy development, which underscores the role of social learning in shaping empathetic responses. Students learn not only from explicit instruction but also by observing how teachers embody empathy in their interactions (Lickona, 2004). At the same time, the relatively weaker influence of cultural sensitivity and inclusivity may reflect the more homogeneous cultural environment of SD Dharma Wanita Medan, where student diversity is less pronounced compared to urban schools. As Livingstone and Sefton-Green (2016) argue, social competencies such as inclusivity may become more salient in contexts with greater pluralism. Nonetheless, fostering these dimensions remains important as Indonesia's classrooms are increasingly shaped by cultural and social diversity. The practical implication of these findings is clear: strengthening teachers' social competence is not merely an optional aspect of

pedagogical training but a decisive factor in shaping empathetic learners. Professional development programs that emphasize interpersonal communication, emotional regulation, and classroom relational skills can significantly enhance the moral and emotional formation of students (Brackett et al., 2019). Moreover, embedding Christian values of compassion and community within these programs ensures that the strengthening of social competence aligns with the spiritual mission of CRE (Knight, 2006). The findings highlight three key insights. First, CRE teachers at SD Dharma Wanita Medan demonstrate generally high social competence, particularly in interpersonal communication and emotional intelligence. Second, students exhibit moderate-to-high empathy, though a gap remains in translating empathetic awareness into consistent prosocial action. Third, the study confirms a strong positive correlation between teacher social competence and student empathy, with communication and emotional intelligence serving as the strongest predictors. These results emphasize the central role of teacher social competence as both a pedagogical necessity and a spiritual calling in Christian education. By embodying empathy and modeling compassionate behavior, teachers not only transmit biblical knowledge but also shape students into empathetic, responsible individuals who can contribute positively to society.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study confirm that Christian Religious Education at the elementary school level plays a decisive role in nurturing empathy as a core dimension of character formation. Conducted at SD Dharma Wanita Medan, the research demonstrated that the social competence of CRE teachers is strongly correlated with the empathy levels of students. This outcome underscores the argument advanced in the introduction: that CRE is not limited to the transfer of biblical knowledge but serves as a holistic process of shaping spiritual, moral, and social capacities that prepare learners to live responsibly in a pluralistic society. Teachers' social competence emerged as a key determinant in this process. The study revealed that interpersonal communication and emotional intelligence were the strongest predictors of student empathy, highlighting the vital importance of relational skills in teaching practice. When teachers demonstrate active listening, clear expression, and emotional sensitivity, they model the very attitudes and behaviors they seek to cultivate in students. These results affirm that socially competent teachers establish emotionally supportive learning environments, which in turn foster deeper student engagement and empathy. The emphasis on relational dynamics situates teacher competence not as an auxiliary trait but as a central pedagogical necessity within Christian education. The findings regarding student empathy also highlight important implications. Students displayed moderate-to-high levels of empathy, particularly in recognizing emotions and taking perspectives. A gap was observed between empathetic awareness and consistent prosocial responsiveness. This suggests that while students may cognitively and affectively understand others' feelings, they do not always translate this into tangible actions of care and support. For CRE, this means that teachers must integrate opportunities for students to practice empathy through collaborative learning, service activities, and reflective engagement with biblical narratives of compassion and community. The study also identified areas that require further attention. While cultural sensitivity and inclusivity were rated positively by teachers, they did not significantly

predict student empathy within this relatively homogeneous school context. Nevertheless, given the increasing cultural and social diversity in Indonesian education, these dimensions remain highly relevant for the long-term development of both teacher competence and student character. Future research should therefore explore the impact of inclusivity and cultural sensitivity in more heterogeneous settings, where such competencies may play a more decisive role. From a practical perspective, the findings call for sustained investment in teacher professional development. Programs that strengthen interpersonal communication, emotional regulation, and culturally responsive pedagogy can significantly enhance teachers' social competence. More importantly, when these programs are rooted in Christian values of love, compassion, and service, they align pedagogical practice with the spiritual mission of CRE. By embodying these virtues, teachers serve as transformative agents who not only instruct but also inspire students to live empathetically. In conclusion, the study affirms that strengthening the social competence of CRE teachers is both an educational strategy and a spiritual calling. Teachers who embody empathy in their professional practice foster classrooms where students feel valued, understood, and motivated to extend compassion to others. In this way, CRE fulfills its holistic mission: shaping learners who are spiritually grounded, morally responsible, and socially engaged. Such learners are better prepared to contribute constructively to their communities, living out Christian values in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

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