

The Importance of Christian Religious Education Teachers' Spiritual Competence in Nurturing Pupils' Spirituality at SDN 173426 Simanullang Toba

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ABSTRACT

*This study examines the influence of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers' spiritual competence on the spiritual growth of pupils at SDN 173426 Simanullang Toba, North Sumatra. Grounded in the theological principle of 1 Timothy 4:12—"set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity"—the research explores how authentic teacher spirituality nurtures students' faith, prayer habits, and moral awareness. Using a quantitative correlational design, data were collected from 30 pupils and one CRE teacher through the Teacher Spiritual Competence Scale (TSCS) and the Pupil Spiritual Growth Questionnaire (PSGQ). Statistical analysis using Pearson's correlation revealed a strong positive relationship ($r = 0.802$, $p < 0.01$) between the teacher's spiritual competence and pupils' spirituality, explaining 64% of the variance in students' spiritual development. The results demonstrate that pupils' spiritual maturity—expressed through prayer, gratitude, forgiveness, and respect—s profoundly shaped by the teacher's example of faith, integrity, and compassion. These findings affirm Bandura's social learning theory (1986), emphasizing that children internalize spiritual and moral behaviors through credible role models. Theologically, the study situates teaching as a divine vocation (*vocatio Dei*), where the educator acts as a shepherd and "living letter of Christ" (2 Corinthians 3:3), guiding pupils toward genuine encounters with God. Thus, spiritual competence is not an optional attribute but the soul of Christian pedagogy—integrating faith, character, and practice. The study concludes that when teachers embody Christlike character, classrooms become sacred spaces of transformation where faith is not only taught but lived.*

Keywords: *Christian Religious Education, Professional Competence*

INTRODUCTION

In the landscape of twenty-first-century education, moral and spiritual formation among elementary school pupils has become increasingly vital, particularly in contexts where globalization, digitalization, and moral relativism are reshaping the values of young

learners. In Indonesia, Christian Religious Education (locally known as *Pendidikan Agama Kristen* or PAK) carries the distinctive mission of nurturing not only intellectual understanding of faith but also the spiritual life of students through the teacher's example, guidance, and prayerful presence. Within this mission, the teacher's spiritual competence—the ability to integrate one's faith, character, and pedagogical calling—emerges as the central determinant of authentic Christian formation in schools. At SDN 173426 Simanullang Toba, a public elementary school located in a predominantly Christian community in North Sumatra, the role of the Christian Religious Education (CRE) teacher is not merely instructional but profoundly pastoral. The teacher functions as a mentor, intercessor, and role model of Christ-like living. Students at this developmental stage are highly impressionable; thus, the teacher's daily actions, speech, and moral consistency powerfully shape their spiritual perception of God, faith, and human relationships. As Lickona (2012) asserts, moral and spiritual education becomes effective when students see virtue lived out through credible adults rather than merely hearing about it. The concept of spiritual competence in the context of Christian education encompasses a teacher's personal relationship with God, theological understanding, and the practical embodiment of faith in professional conduct (Manurung, 2020). It involves self-awareness before God, commitment to prayer, compassion toward students, moral integrity, and the ability to guide learners into meaningful encounters with Scripture and spiritual reflection. Theologically, this aligns with the Pauline exhortation in 1 Timothy 4:12, which calls educators to “set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity.” Spiritual competence, therefore, is not an additional professional skill—it is the foundation upon which all other competencies rest.

A significant challenge in many educational settings today is the tendency to reduce religion lessons to doctrinal instruction or moral regulation. This tendency results in what Siahhaan (2021) calls pedagogical formalism—a teaching practice that transmits biblical information without fostering inner transformation. When Christian education becomes cognitive rather than spiritual, pupils may learn about God but fail to encounter Him personally. The presence of a spiritually mature teacher can bridge this gap by translating theological truths into lived faith experiences, thereby creating what Groome (2011) terms “shared praxis”—a dialogical process where faith is taught and caught through participation in a living Christian community. The role of the teacher in elementary school is crucial because children at this stage learn primarily through imitation and relationship. Bandura's (1986) social learning theory emphasizes that behavior and attitudes are learned through observing significant models. In Christian pedagogy, the teacher serves as a “living curriculum” (Knight, 2006), embodying the values of compassion, patience, forgiveness, and humility. The CRE teacher's daily interactions—how they respond to mistakes, discipline with love, or show empathy—become spiritual lessons that shape the moral imagination of the child. This resonates with the biblical wisdom of Colossians 3:16, “*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly... teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom,*” highlighting the interconnection between spiritual depth and effective teaching.

This research focuses on the question: How does the spiritual competence of Christian Religious Education teachers influence the spiritual growth of pupils at SDN 173426 Simanullang Toba? The study assumes that a teacher's spiritual life directly affects the

religious climate of the classroom, the students' disposition toward faith, and their daily moral behavior. This investigation is essential not only for understanding teacher influence but also for contributing to the broader theology of Christian education that views teaching as a divine vocation (*vocatio Dei*). This introduction, therefore, sets the stage for a theological-educational inquiry grounded in both empirical observation and scriptural reflection. The study underscores that the CRE teacher's spiritual competence is not a secondary professional attribute but a sacred calling to embody the living Christ in the educational sphere. As Jesus declared in John 15:5, "Apart from me you can do nothing." In this light, the teacher's spiritual maturity becomes the vital conduit through which God nurtures the faith and character of young learners in the Christian community of SDN 173426 Simanullang Toba.

METHODS

The research was conducted at SDN 173426 Simanullang Toba, a public elementary school situated in a predominantly Christian community in North Toba Regency, employed a quantitative correlational design to examine the relationship between the spiritual competence of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers and the spiritual growth of pupils at SDN 173426 Simanullang Toba. The quantitative approach was selected to provide measurable evidence of the influence of teacher spirituality on student religious development, while the correlational design aimed to reveal the degree and direction of this relationship without manipulating the variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The school was chosen purposively due to its strong religious environment and the consistent implementation of Christian Religious Education as part of character formation. The sample consisted of 30 pupils from Grades 4 to 6, along with one CRE teacher as the central educational influencer. Pupils were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that participants had received consistent instruction from the same CRE teacher for at least one academic year. Teacher Spiritual Competence Scale (TSCS) - developed based on biblical and pedagogical indicators, including personal prayer life, integrity, faith consistency, empathy, and modeling Christlike character (Galatians 5:22-23). Pupil Spiritual Growth Questionnaire (PSGQ) - designed to measure pupils' spiritual awareness, prayer habits, moral sensitivity, and respect toward teachers as expressions of faith (Ephesians 6:1-3). Both instruments employed a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). Prior to administration, items were validated through expert judgment by two senior lecturers in Christian Education and tested for internal reliability using Cronbach's Alpha ($\alpha = 0.87$), indicating high reliability. Data were collected through structured questionnaires administered in classroom settings, ensuring confidentiality and voluntary participation. Short reflective interviews were conducted with the CRE teacher to provide contextual insights into pedagogical and spiritual practices that shaped the classroom's faith atmosphere. Data were analyzed using Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation to determine the relationship between teacher spiritual competence and pupils' spirituality levels. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic information and mean scores for both variables. Participants were assured of anonymity and the right to withdraw at any point. The research adhered to Christian ethical principles of honesty, respect, and care, grounded in Colossians 3:17, "Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus."

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The descriptive results revealed that the spiritual competence of the Christian Religious Education (CRE) teacher at SDN 173426 Simanullang Toba was perceived as very high, with an average mean score of 4.42 on a 5-point Likert scale. Among the dimensions measured, spiritual integrity (mean = 4.55) and consistency in faith practice (mean = 4.50) ranked highest. These findings indicate that pupils viewed their teacher as a person who consistently lived out the Christian faith, not merely as an instructor of religious concepts but as a living embodiment of Christlike character. Indicators such as prayerfulness, compassion, and humility were also highly rated (means between 4.30-4.45), suggesting that the teacher demonstrated a genuine spiritual life visible to the students through daily interactions. Pupils frequently noted that their teacher began and ended classes with prayer, encouraged gratitude before meals, and integrated moral reflections into academic subjects. These findings align with 1 Timothy 4:12, which exhorts: *“Set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity.”* In the context of primary education, the CRE teacher’s spiritual competence functions as a visible testimony—a “living gospel” through which children witness authentic Christian life. This descriptive pattern supports previous research by Smith and Wilhoit (2019), who found that teacher authenticity and faith coherence are stronger predictors of student spiritual formation than doctrinal instruction alone. In the context of SDN 173426 Simanullang Toba, where pupils are in the formative stage of moral identity, the teacher’s example becomes the most powerful means of shaping spirituality.

The level of pupil spirituality was also found to be high, with an overall mean score of 4.36. The indicators receiving the highest scores were prayer habits (mean = 4.47), gratitude (mean = 4.40), and respect toward teachers and parents (mean = 4.38). These dimensions indicate that pupils regularly practice personal and communal prayer, display thankfulness, and express reverence toward authority figures—core traits of Christian discipleship. Pupils also demonstrated awareness of moral reflection and forgiveness (mean = 4.32), reflecting the teacher’s emphasis on reconciliation and empathy during classroom moral discussions. Such spiritual behaviors are not products of cognitive memorization of Bible verses alone but are cultivated through repeated exposure to Christlike attitudes modeled by the teacher. This process resonates with Bandura’s Social Learning Theory (1986), which emphasizes that children internalize behaviors by observing and imitating significant role models. Spiritually, this mechanism aligns with Luke 6:40: *“The student is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher.”* Pupils’ spirituality, therefore, mirrors the lived faith they witness daily—a reflection of the teacher’s authentic relationship with God. Using Pearson’s Product-Moment Correlation, the analysis revealed a strong and statistically significant positive relationship between the spiritual competence of the CRE teacher and pupils’ spirituality ($r = 0.802$, $p < 0.01$). This result indicates that the higher the teacher’s level of spiritual competence, the more spiritually mature the pupils tend to be. The coefficient of determination ($r^2 = 0.64$) implies that approximately 64% of the variance in pupils’ spirituality can be explained by the teacher’s spiritual competence. This correlation highlights a substantial influence, confirming that the spiritual dimension of teaching is not peripheral but central to moral and faith development in children. While other factors such as family upbringing and peer influence contribute to spiritual growth, the teacher’s

daily modeling of prayer, love, and humility stands out as a primary determinant within the school context. The findings resonate with 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 teacher's role in this passage is understood as mentoring by example, not coercion. The data affirm that pupils' spirituality grows through relational influence—a process where spiritual authority is exercised through consistency, empathy, and integrity rather than hierarchical control.

These findings emphasize that spiritual competence is an essential core of professional teaching in CRE, not an optional trait. The Indonesian Teacher Competency Framework (Law No. 14 of 2005) identifies spiritual and personality competence as foundational to professional teaching. However, this study's empirical evidence deepens that framework by revealing that spiritual competence has a transformative effect on students' inner life. At SDN 173426 Simanullang Toba, the teacher's methods often integrated devotional reflection, biblical storytelling, and life testimony, which allowed pupils to connect learning with faith experience. For instance, moral lessons were often followed by prayer reflections where students were encouraged to express gratitude, seek forgiveness, or pray for others. Such practices not only enhanced students' moral reasoning but cultivated their spiritual sensitivity. This finding corresponds with Lickona (2012), who asserts that "character education without spiritual modeling becomes moral formalism." In contrast, when teachers embody virtues through faith, moral learning becomes transformative rather than performative. The CRE teacher's spiritual competence thus functions as a pedagogical bridge—connecting knowledge about God (theology taught) with experience of God (theology lived).

From a psychological perspective, the strong correlation ($r = 0.802$) can be interpreted through the lens of emotional trust and relational attachment. Pupils at the elementary level (aged 10-12) are particularly sensitive to emotional consistency and authenticity in adults. When teachers exhibit stable emotions, compassion, and sincerity, students experience psychological safety—an essential foundation for moral and spiritual receptivity. According to Noddings (2003), the ethics of care in education asserts that moral and spiritual influence arises from genuine relational concern. In the present study, the teacher's consistent care for students, including personal prayers for their families and empathetic listening to their struggles, created a nurturing faith environment. Such experiences foster spiritual trust—a condition where children open their hearts to divine truths because they first feel loved by their teacher. This reflects 1 Thessalonians 2:8, where Paul writes, "We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well." The CRE teacher's relational ministry mirrors this apostolic model, transforming the classroom into a small ecclesial community where learning becomes an act of love. The results affirm the shepherding role of teachers in Christian education. Just as pastors guide congregations toward spiritual maturity, teachers guide children toward faith formation through word and example. The teacher at SDN 173426 Simanullang Toba serves as a spiritual shepherd—a person entrusted with nurturing young souls in truth and grace. This shepherding function aligns with John 10:11, where Jesus declares, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." While teachers cannot replicate Christ's redemptive sacrifice, they embody His pastoral love through patience, humility, and sacrificial service. The study's

high correlation result reflects this truth: pupils respond with spiritual growth when they perceive genuine pastoral love in their teacher. This relationship embodies Ephesians 6:1-3, where the command to honor parental authority extends to all forms of divinely instituted guidance. When pupils respect and follow their teacher's example, they participate in a spiritual order of obedience that brings blessing—"that it may go well with you." Respect becomes a theological act of worship, and the teacher's spiritual competence becomes the channel of divine instruction.

The fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—serves as a biblical framework for interpreting the teacher's spiritual competence. Pupils reported observing these virtues in their teacher's conduct, particularly kindness, patience, and faithfulness. These attributes inspired imitation among pupils, manifesting in increased empathy and cooperation during group work. This spiritual contagion echoes Paul's theology of imitation (*mimesis*), as expressed in 1 Corinthians 11:1: "*Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.*" When teachers embody the fruit of the Spirit, they invite pupils into a relational discipleship—a pedagogical process that mirrors sanctification. The data affirm that authentic faith cannot be taught abstractly; it must be embodied through relationships that transmit grace. The context of Toba Batak Christian culture adds another layer of meaning to these findings. The Batak ethos highly values *hasangapon* (honor) and *marsiadapari* (mutual cooperation), values deeply compatible with biblical respect and communal love. Within this cultural setting, the teacher's spiritual competence not only fosters individual faith but strengthens the collective moral fabric of the classroom community. The study also noted subtle challenges. Some pupils showed fluctuating prayer habits and occasional distractions from digital entertainment, indicating the influence of modern secularism. The CRE teacher responded by contextualizing biblical lessons within students' lived realities, using everyday experiences—such as gratitude for nature or kindness among peers—to make spirituality concrete. This contextual adaptation illustrates Paul's incarnational principle in 1 Corinthians 9:22: "*I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.*" Thus, spiritual competence involves cultural sensitivity—translating eternal truths into forms children can understand and practice. The results carry profound implications for the formation of future Christian teachers. Spiritual competence should be intentionally developed through integrative teacher education programs that unite theology, pedagogy, and personal spiritual formation. The findings affirm that professional mastery without spiritual maturity produces technical educators but not moral shepherds. Synthesizing the empirical and theological dimensions, this study reveals that teacher spiritual competence is both a pedagogical catalyst and a theological vocation. The statistical evidence ($r = 0.802$) empirically confirms what Scripture has long affirmed—that faith is transmitted through lived example, not merely through instruction. Theologically, this relationship reflects the incarnational nature of divine truth—*the Word became flesh and dwelt among us* (John 1:14). The classroom, in this sense, becomes a sacred space where Christ is made visible through the teacher's humility and integrity. Pupils' spirituality flourishes when they encounter not abstract moral ideals but tangible expressions of God's love through their teacher's life. The CRE teacher thus fulfills a priestly role—mediating grace through daily faithfulness and guiding children to encounter God personally. The findings at SDN 173426 Simanullang

Toba affirm that spiritual competence is the soul of Christian teaching. When teachers cultivate intimacy with God, embody the fruit of the Spirit, and express faith through compassion and prayer, they awaken in children a desire to walk with God. The high correlation between teacher spirituality and pupils' faith maturity testifies that spiritual influence flows from being before doing-from the teacher's heart before their methods. Ultimately, as 2 Corinthians 3:3 declares, "*You show that you are a letter from Christ... written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God.*" The CRE teacher becomes that living letter, through whom pupils read and experience the reality of Christ. Such is the profound educational and theological truth this study reveals: spiritual competence is not only an academic standard-it is the incarnate expression of the Gospel in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

This study affirms that the spiritual competence of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers holds a transformative and indispensable role in nurturing pupils' spiritual growth within the context of SDN 173426 Simanullang Toba. The empirical findings revealed a strong and statistically significant positive correlation ($r = 0.802$, $p < 0.01$) between teacher spiritual competence and students' spiritual maturity, indicating that pupils' faith development, prayer habits, and moral awareness are profoundly shaped by the authenticity of their teacher's spiritual life. Theologically and pedagogically, this confirms that spiritual influence in education flows not from doctrine alone but from the lived faith of the teacher-an embodiment of Christ's character that becomes visible, credible, and imitable to young learners. The teacher's spiritual integrity, consistent prayer life, and Christlike disposition emerged as the most influential indicators in shaping pupils' spiritual awareness. This finding resonates with 1 Timothy 4:12, which calls believers to exemplify faith through speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity. In practice, pupils mirrored the teacher's devotion through habitual prayer, gratitude, and moral sensitivity, demonstrating that authentic spirituality is "caught" more than it is "taught." The classroom thereby becomes a sacred environment-a domestic church-where children encounter God through relational trust, love, and daily spiritual rhythms. The data also substantiates Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1986), affirming that imitation of spiritually credible models accelerates moral and spiritual internalization. From a theological perspective, the findings affirm that teaching in Christian education is a divine vocation (*vocatio Dei*)-a priestly act of mediating God's presence through faithfulness, humility, and love. The CRE teacher at SDN 173426 Simanullang Toba functions not merely as an instructor but as a shepherd and spiritual guide, mirroring the image of the Good Shepherd in John 10:11. This vocation aligns with Ephesians 6:1-3, where respect for authority is interpreted as an act of obedience to God. When pupils honor their teacher's spiritual authority, they participate in a divine order of reverence that strengthens their faith. The study concludes that spiritual competence is the soul of Christian pedagogy. It integrates theology and practice, intellect and devotion, method and mission. The CRE teacher becomes a "living letter" of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:3), through whom students read and experience divine truth. Therefore, fostering teacher spiritual competence must be prioritized in Christian teacher education, for it is through the spiritually mature educator that children learn not only about God but to walk intimately with Him.

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