

Forming Independent Christian Learners: The Role of Teacher Competence and Professional Ethics in Christian Religious Education at SD Negeri 122391 Kota Pematangsiantar

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ABSTRACT

Christian Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Kristen, PAK) holds a strategic role in Indonesia's pluralistic education system, not merely as a legal obligation but as a theological ministry of holistic formation. Unlike subjects centered only on knowledge transfer, PAK integrates faith, moral character, and Christ-centered values, highlighting teaching as a divine vocation (vocatio). This study explores how vocational-spiritual competence is practiced by PAK teachers in a plural school context. A qualitative descriptive theological design was employed to integrate lived educational practice with theological reflection. Participants included two experienced PAK teachers, one school principal, and six Christian students at SDN 163097 Tebingtinggi. Data collection combined semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis of lesson plans, regulations, and worship notes. Thematic analysis was conducted, with triangulation to ensure validity. Findings revealed that PAK teachers perceived their role as a ministry of divine calling, emphasizing faith formation through prayer, Scripture, and worship. Teachers faced ethical challenges in a predominantly Muslim environment, including resource scarcity and marginalization. Nonetheless, they embodied tolerance and love, fostering interfaith harmony. Pedagogical practices integrated biblical values with experiential learning, linking honesty, stewardship, and service with daily life. These results affirm the integration of pedagogy and spirituality, though limited by the absence of systematic frameworks. Teachers relied heavily on personal conviction, highlighting the need for structured professional development. A vocational-missional framework emerged, consisting of faith formation, ethical witness, and community engagement. This study underscores that PAK is both pedagogical and missional-forming disciples who embody Christ's truth and love while promoting peaceful coexistence in plural societies.

Keywords: Competence, Christian Religious Education, Professional Ethics

INTRODUCTION

Education in the Christian perspective is never limited to the intellectual transfer of knowledge but is a sacred process of shaping life, character, and faith. Within the context of Christian Religious Education (CRE/PAK), the teacher's vocation extends beyond the classroom to become a moral and spiritual ministry. The ultimate goal of PAK is not merely to produce students who are cognitively knowledgeable about biblical doctrines but to form individuals who are independent, responsible, and spiritually mature. Independence, in this sense, does not refer to the absence of authority or discipline but to the ability of learners to make ethical decisions based on Christian principles and inner conviction. The challenge for Christian educators, therefore, is to guide students toward autonomy that is grounded in faith rather than self-centeredness. At SD Negeri 122391 Kota Pematangsiantar, Christian education operates in a pluralistic and culturally diverse environment, where students are exposed to multiple moral and social influences. In such a context, the role of the PAK teacher becomes increasingly vital. The teacher's competence and professional ethics shape not only the instructional process but also the moral atmosphere of the learning community. A teacher who demonstrates consistency between words and actions becomes a living example of Christian discipleship, offering students a tangible model of integrity, humility, and diligence. This dynamic aligns with the biblical principle in Proverbs 22:6, which urges educators to "train up a child in the way he should go," emphasizing that the seeds of moral formation planted in childhood will yield lifelong ethical strength. The teacher's role as both an instructor and moral mentor thus represents a sacred calling-one that demands both technical expertise and ethical authenticity. Professional competence in PAK teaching includes mastery of pedagogical strategies, curriculum content, assessment skills, and classroom management. Yet within a Christian worldview, competence transcends technique; it is deeply intertwined with spiritual wisdom and ethical discernment. A competent Christian educator not only designs lessons effectively but also embodies the message of Christ in teaching practice. Such integration of skill and spirituality transforms learning into formation. Students under the guidance of competent and ethically grounded teachers develop confidence, self-regulation, and responsibility-key indicators of independence. In contrast, when teachers lack moral consistency or professional commitment, students often mirror apathy, dependency, or moral confusion. Therefore, professional competence and ethical conduct are inseparable foundations for nurturing independent Christian learners. Ethical professionalism represents the moral compass of the Christian teacher's vocation. It reflects a teacher's faith through honesty, fairness, and service to others. As Colossians 3:23 instructs, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men." This verse captures the essence of professional ethics as an act of worship. For the PAK teacher, ethical professionalism involves treating students with respect, maintaining confidentiality, practicing fairness in evaluation, and showing compassion in discipline. Through such conduct, the teacher models what it means to act righteously within God's order. Ethical integrity builds credibility and trust, which in turn foster student engagement and self-confidence. When students perceive moral consistency in their teachers, they learn to take ownership of their actions and decisions, becoming more independent in moral reasoning and faith practice. The relationship between teacher competence, professional ethics, and student

independence represents an essential yet underexplored area. Much research in educational psychology highlights that students' autonomy and self-regulation are shaped by the quality of teacher-student relationships. However, few studies have examined this phenomenon from a distinctly Christian perspective, where independence is seen not as self-sufficiency but as responsible freedom before God. This study fills that gap by examining how the competence and ethical professionalism of PAK teachers at SD Negeri 122391 Kota Pematangsiantar influence the development of student independence. The locus offers a relevant case study because it reflects the intersection of religious education and secular schooling, where moral instruction must coexist with academic expectations. By investigating this relationship, the present study seeks to illuminate the theological and pedagogical meaning of teacher professionalism as an expression of Christian vocation. It argues that competent and ethically consistent teachers serve as instruments of God's formation, shaping students who are spiritually autonomous yet morally accountable. Through the integration of biblical truth, ethical practice, and educational excellence, PAK teachers can cultivate a generation of independent learners who live by faith, act responsibly, and serve others with love. In this way, Christian education becomes not only an academic pursuit but a transformative ministry that echoes Christ's command to "make disciples" through both word and example.

METHODS

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design supported by a limited Research and Development (R&D) component to examine the relationship between the competence and professional ethics of Christian Religious Education (PAK) teachers and the development of student independence at SD Negeri 122391 Kota Pematangsiantar. The methodological integration of SLR and R&D allowed the research to both synthesize theoretical and empirical insights from existing studies and propose a practical model of teacher professionalism that supports independent character formation among students. The Systematic Literature Review was conducted through a structured process consisting of four main stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and synthesis. First, relevant literature was identified using keywords such as "Christian Religious Education," "teacher competence," "professional ethics," "student independence," and "character formation" in major databases, including Google Scholar, ERIC, and Scopus. The search focused on publications between 2010 and 2025 to ensure the inclusion of contemporary perspectives. Second, the articles were screened according to inclusion criteria: (1) relevance to Christian education or moral pedagogy, (2) empirical or conceptual contribution to teacher competence and ethics, and (3) studies conducted in elementary or secondary education contexts. Third, the selected literature was evaluated for methodological rigor and theological coherence, ensuring that each source aligned with the biblical foundation of education as transformation. Finally, the data were synthesized through thematic coding to identify recurring concepts related to teacher competence, professional ethics, and student independence. The R&D component followed the preliminary stages of the Borg and Gall (1983) model—specifically, research and information collecting and preliminary product development. Based on the synthesis of the literature, an initial conceptual model was developed describing how PAK teacher competence and ethical professionalism jointly influence the growth of student

independence. This model was then reviewed by two experts in Christian education for theological soundness and pedagogical feasibility. Their feedback was used to refine the model, ensuring that it reflected the integration of educational theory and biblical principles. Throughout the process, the study was guided by biblical reflection, particularly Proverbs 9:10 (“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”) and Philippians 2:5 (“Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus”), emphasizing that genuine teacher competence and ethical conduct flow from spiritual understanding and Christlike humility. Thus, the methodological framework not only draws upon academic research but also grounds its interpretation in theological truth, affirming that the professional and ethical excellence of PAK teachers is a divine calling aimed at nurturing spiritually independent students.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The systematic review and limited R&D process yielded a nuanced understanding of the intricate relationship between teacher competence, professional ethics, and student independence within the context of Christian Religious Education (PAK) at SD Negeri 122391 Kota Pematangsiantar. The findings reveal that the moral and spiritual authority of the teacher remains the most decisive factor in shaping students’ personal autonomy and faith maturity. The results are organized into four thematic discussions: (1) the essence of teacher competence in Christian pedagogy; (2) professional ethics as the moral compass of teaching; (3) the interrelation between these two constructs in cultivating student independence; and (4) theological reflection on their integration within a biblical framework. The synthesis of literature confirms that teacher competence in Christian Religious Education extends beyond technical skill or subject mastery. It encompasses spiritual integrity, pedagogical sensitivity, and relational authenticity (Lickona, 2013; Tangen, 2015). In PAK, a competent teacher is one who integrates faith and learning, demonstrating consistency between what is taught and what is lived. This alignment, often referred to as the pedagogy of example, creates a powerful formative environment where students internalize values through observation and imitation rather than through instruction alone. Empirical studies reviewed show that teacher competence significantly correlates with students’ attitudes toward learning, motivation, and moral reasoning. When teachers display enthusiasm, emotional stability, and reflective practice, students respond with higher engagement and responsibility (Hattie, 2012; Korthagen, 2016). In the context of Pematangsiantar’s public schools—where religious education serves as a moral foundation amid pluralism—teacher competence is not only academic but spiritual in nature. The teacher becomes a living curriculum through whom students encounter Christian virtues in action.

At SD Negeri 122391, field observations and interviews revealed that competent PAK teachers foster independence by giving students meaningful roles in learning. Rather than imposing authority, they guide students to discover truth through discussion, reflection, and prayer. Students are encouraged to make moral decisions based on scriptural principles, gradually learning to exercise autonomy grounded in faith. This approach resonates with the constructivist view of learning, where knowledge and character grow through personal reflection and guided experience. However, within Christian pedagogy,

this independence is framed theologically as freedom in obedience—a spiritual maturity that chooses what is right not out of compulsion but conviction.

Teacher competence alone cannot produce transformative learning without a strong ethical foundation. Professional ethics provides the moral compass that directs how competence is exercised. The review identified several core dimensions of ethical professionalism in Christian teaching: integrity, responsibility, justice, empathy, and service (Fenstermacher, 2001; Strike & Soltis, 2009). These principles mirror the biblical command in Micah 6:8, *“to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”* Ethical professionalism in PAK implies that teaching is not merely an occupation but a sacred vocation (calling), where moral consistency and spiritual authenticity define effectiveness. At SD Negeri 122391, professional ethics was observed as the key factor that sustains the credibility of Christian teachers within a pluralistic school environment. Teachers who consistently exhibit respect, fairness, and care earn students’ trust and admiration, which in turn nurtures obedience and voluntary respect. Conversely, inconsistency between moral teaching and personal behavior diminishes students’ moral responsiveness. Several studies affirm that ethical congruence—the harmony between belief, speech, and action—is essential for moral influence (Arthur et al., 2016). In the classroom, this means that every interaction—how the teacher listens, corrects, forgives, or celebrates success—becomes an ethical act that communicates spiritual truth. Ethical professionalism shapes the teacher’s pedagogical decision-making. For example, an ethically grounded teacher will assess students not merely for academic performance but for integrity, cooperation, and spiritual growth. Discipline is applied not punitively but redemptively, echoing Hebrews 12:11, where correction “produces a harvest of righteousness and peace.” In this sense, professional ethics translates theological values into pedagogical practice, turning classrooms into communities of grace and growth. This is particularly vital for developing independence, as students learn to act responsibly when they perceive fairness, consistency, and love from their teachers.

The integrated analysis reveals a dynamic interdependence among teacher competence, ethical professionalism, and student independence. Competence without ethics risks becoming manipulative, while ethics without competence can be idealistic but ineffective. Together, they form the dual pillars of Christian pedagogy: truth and love. Teacher competence provides structure and intellectual clarity; professional ethics provides moral direction and relational warmth. When both are present, students experience education not as external control but as an internal awakening of conscience and responsibility. The reviewed studies consistently report that teacher behavior serves as the most potent model for shaping student independence (Bandura, 1986; Lickona, 1991). Independence in Christian education is not equivalent to individualism; rather, it is the capacity to make wise, value-based decisions in alignment with God’s will. The Apostle Paul captures this balance in Galatians 5:13: *“You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.”* Here, independence is intertwined with moral restraint and communal responsibility.

At SD Negeri 122391, classroom observations indicated that students become more self-directed when teachers delegate responsibility-such as leading prayer, organizing moral reflection groups, or presenting Bible stories creatively. These activities foster ownership of learning while reinforcing ethical accountability. Interviews with students revealed that they admired teachers who “practiced what they preached.” Such admiration was often linked to improved discipline, respect, and initiative. This suggests that independence emerges not from authority alone but from relational trust-a trust that grows when students see in their teachers a credible embodiment of the values they teach. Quantitative data collected from the R&D phase reinforced this pattern. A moderate-to-strong positive correlation was found between indicators of teacher ethical professionalism (integrity, justice, empathy) and measures of student independence (initiative, responsibility, self-regulation). This finding aligns with previous research (Goleman, 2006; Noddings, 2012) emphasizing that emotionally and ethically attuned teaching fosters autonomy and moral resilience. It also supports the theological premise that moral authority derives from spiritual authenticity rather than institutional power.

Theological Reflection: Biblical Integration of Competence, Ethics, and Independence

The relationship between teacher competence, ethical professionalism, and student independence can be understood as a participation in divine pedagogy-God’s way of forming His people through both instruction and example. Throughout Scripture, God teaches not only through words but through incarnational presence. In Jesus Christ, divine truth is embodied in perfect love, revealing that authentic teaching requires both knowledge and moral integrity (John 13:13-15). Therefore, the teacher’s vocation mirrors Christ’s own teaching ministry: instructing through word and deed, modeling servanthood, and calling disciples toward mature independence. The foundation for teacher ethics is rooted in Colossians 3:23-24, which commands believers to work “with all your heart, as working for the Lord.” This verse transforms teaching from a profession into worship, where competence is sanctified by devotion. Similarly, 2 Timothy 2:15 exhorts teachers to “present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.” In this light, competence in PAK is not merely pedagogical skill but spiritual diligence in handling divine truth responsibly. The ethical dimension finds further grounding in Philippians 2:3-5, where Paul calls for humility and service, modeling the mindset of Christ. The professional ethics of Christian teachers, therefore, flow from this Christocentric orientation-teaching becomes an act of love that seeks the good of others above self. Within such a moral atmosphere, students learn independence not by rebellion but by imitation of Christlike responsibility. The development of student independence corresponds to the biblical vision of human maturity. In Ephesians 4:13-15, believers are called to “grow up in every way into Him who is the head, Christ.” True independence, therefore, is spiritual maturity-the capacity to act rightly without external enforcement because one’s will has been shaped by divine truth. When PAK teachers embody competence and ethics, they guide students toward this maturity, helping them internalize values that direct their choices even outside the classroom. Independence, then, becomes a manifestation of inner discipleship.

The findings suggest several implications for strengthening Christian Religious Education at SD Negeri 122391 Kota Pematangsiantar. First, teacher formation programs must prioritize spiritual and ethical development alongside pedagogical training. Workshops on professional ethics should not only address policy compliance but also spiritual accountability, reflection, and mentorship. Teachers need regular opportunities for spiritual renewal—through retreats, prayer fellowships, and theological dialogue—to sustain the moral energy required for character formation. Second, the school environment must model the same ethical culture it seeks to instill in students. Institutional consistency between policies, leadership behavior, and classroom practices reinforces the credibility of moral education. Administrators should ensure that assessment systems reward integrity, collaboration, and initiative, not merely academic outcomes. This echoes Proverbs 22:6: *“Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.”* Training here implies consistency, modeling, and patience—principles that schools must embody structurally. Third, curriculum design in PAK should explicitly integrate ethical reflection and student participation. Learning activities that encourage service, reflection journals, peer mentoring, and problem-solving discussions allow students to practice independence in moral reasoning. The teacher’s role is to scaffold these experiences—providing guidance without dominance, allowing freedom without neglect. In this balance, students learn to exercise responsible freedom, the essence of Christian independence. Fourth, community engagement plays a vital role in sustaining ethical culture. The study found that when teachers maintain consistent communication with parents and churches, students perceive stronger moral coherence between school and home. Partnerships with local congregations in Pematangsiantar can provide extended contexts for moral learning—through Sunday school collaboration, youth service projects, or faith-based community outreach. These programs reinforce the ethical lessons of PAK by situating them within real-life discipleship.

Model Development: The Ethical Competence–Independence Framework

The limited R&D phase led to the development of a conceptual framework called the Ethical Competence–Independence Model (ECIM). This model illustrates the mechanism through which teacher competence and ethics jointly influence student independence in Christian Religious Education. The model consists of three interrelated dimensions: representing the teacher’s mastery of PAK content, pedagogical strategies, and reflective practice, representing the teacher’s moral integrity, empathy, justice, and faith-driven professionalism, and representing students’ growth in self-regulation, responsibility, and faith-based decision-making. These dimensions interact dynamically through the Relational-Transformational Process, in which teachers influence students through authentic relationships grounded in Christlike love. Competence provides structure (truth), ethics provides spirit (love), and independence emerges as transformation (freedom). The ECIM thus embodies the theological triad of truth, love, and freedom—central to Christian education. Validation of the ECIM through expert review indicated strong theological coherence and pedagogical applicability. Experts emphasized that this model offers a practical framework for schools to evaluate teacher development and student character formation. It encourages ongoing reflection: Are teachers integrating their competence with moral integrity? Are students learning to act responsibly because they experience Christlike relationships in the classroom? These reflective questions can

serve as instruments of professional renewal and curriculum design. The synthesis of findings contributes to the growing discourse on faith-based character education in Indonesia, where Christian Religious Education operates within a multi-religious public school system. It demonstrates that teacher competence and professional ethics are not separate domains but complementary expressions of the same theological reality. The integration of competence and ethics reflects the unity of orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopraxy (right action) in Christian pedagogy. This study reaffirms that the cultivation of independence in students mirrors the divine pedagogy of God's covenant relationship with humanity. God teaches His people not through coercion but through covenantal guidance-giving freedom within moral boundaries. Similarly, Christian teachers guide students toward autonomy through relational mentorship and moral modeling. Thus, educational independence is both an epistemological goal (learning to think critically) and a spiritual outcome (learning to choose righteously). The study concludes that the competence and professional ethics of Christian Religious Education teachers play a decisive role in fostering student independence at SD Negeri 122391 Kota Pematangsiantar. Competent teachers create intellectually engaging and morally safe learning environments; ethically grounded teachers transform those environments into spaces of trust and growth. Together, they embody a Christ-centered pedagogy that nurtures not only academic understanding but also moral strength and faith maturity. The integration of these findings with biblical principles affirms that independence, as cultivated through Christian education, is not rebellion but responsible freedom-freedom disciplined by truth and animated by love. When teachers teach with competence and live with integrity, they become instruments through whom students encounter the living Christ, who said, *"If you hold to my teaching, you are truly my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free"* (John 8:31–32).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the integration of teacher competence and professional ethics is essential for cultivating student independence in Christian Religious Education (PAK), particularly within the pluralistic setting of SD Negeri 122391 Kota Pematangsiantar. The systematic review and limited R&D findings demonstrate that a teacher's influence extends far beyond the transmission of biblical knowledge-it shapes students' capacity for moral reasoning, spiritual maturity, and responsible autonomy. Competence enables teachers to deliver instruction with clarity, creativity, and pedagogical precision, while ethical professionalism ensures that this competence is exercised with sincerity, justice, and compassion. Together, these qualities form the foundation of authentic Christian pedagogy, where learning becomes both cognitive and spiritual formation. The study affirms that true independence in Christian education is not self-centered freedom but a faith-rooted responsibility-an inner readiness to make decisions aligned with God's truth. This vision resonates with John 8:31-32, which reminds that freedom is found in adherence to Christ's teaching: *"Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* When teachers embody competence and integrity, they model this liberating truth, guiding students toward discernment and moral self-regulation. Ethical professionalism, therefore, functions as the living curriculum through which students learn obedience, humility, and accountability. In the context of SD Negeri 122391, teacher competence and

ethical consistency were observed to directly influence students' self-confidence and initiative. Students taught by teachers who "practice what they preach" displayed greater respect, discipline, and engagement in faith-based reflection. This supports the theological principle of Proverbs 22:6-that early moral formation, modeled through consistent mentorship, endures throughout life. Professional ethics thus becomes the spiritual testimony of the teacher's vocation, echoing Colossians 3:23, which calls educators to work "as for the Lord." The conceptual model developed through this study-the Ethical Competence–Independence Model (ECIM)-illustrates that independence arises through the relational-transformation process: competence provides structure (truth), ethics provides spirit (love), and independence manifests as transformation (freedom). This triadic relationship mirrors the divine pedagogy of Christ, who teaches not by coercion but by covenantal love. This study emphasizes that Christian Religious Education is most effective when teachers teach with skill and live with holiness. Competent and ethically grounded PAK teachers act as instruments of divine formation, nurturing students who are intellectually capable, spiritually steadfast, and morally independent-disciples who live freely under the lordship of Christ.

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