

Professionalism of Christian Religious Education Teachers in Cultivating Love as the Highest Value: An Exegetical Reflection on Exodus 23:25 at SD Negeri 067253 Medan Deli

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the professionalism of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers in cultivating love as the highest moral and spiritual value, grounded in an exegetical reflection on Exodus 23:25 and contextualized at SD Negeri 067253 Medan Deli. In Indonesian public schools, CRE teachers serve a critical role that extends far beyond the transmission of cognitive religious knowledge. The analysis of Exodus 23:25—particularly the Hebrew verb ‘ābad (to worship/serve)—reveals that biblical worship encompasses ethical fidelity and relational commitment, implying that devotion to God is inseparable from acts of compassionate service toward others. This theological insight positions love not merely as an ethical ideal but as a core expression of faithful teaching practice. Using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR), the study synthesized 85 relevant articles on teacher professionalism, biblical ethics, character formation, and love-oriented pedagogy. The findings indicate that professional competence in CRE teaching is deeply holistic, involving spiritual maturity, pedagogical intentionality, ethical consistency, and relational warmth. Teachers who embody love create learning environments that support student well-being, intrinsic motivation, conflict resolution, and emotional healing. In the multicultural context of Medan Deli, love expressed through culturally sensitive pedagogy enhances students’ sense of belonging and moral development. The study concludes that love-centered professionalism, grounded in Exodus 23:25, transforms CRE teachers into agents of God’s blessing and restoration. By integrating biblical fidelity with educational excellence, CRE teachers shape students not only academically but as compassionate, responsible members of society.

Keywords: Professionalism, Christian Religious Education, Love

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary Indonesian educational landscape, Christian Religious Education teachers play a strategic and essential role in shaping students’ moral, emotional, and

spiritual character. The mandate they carry is not limited to delivering cognitive religious content but extends to cultivating core ethical values that influence students' everyday behaviors and interpersonal relationships. Among these values, love-understood biblically as a divine, transformative, and relational virtue-stands as the highest moral ideal. Within the context of public schools such as SD Negeri 067253 Medan Deli, where students come from diverse socio-cultural and economic backgrounds, the cultivation of love becomes a crucial pedagogical endeavor. A CRE teacher's professionalism, therefore, must be demonstrated not only through mastery of curriculum and teaching strategies but also through their ability to embody, communicate, and nurture love as a lived value. The theological foundation for this study draws from Exodus 23:25, which states: "*Worship the Lord your God, and His blessing will be on your food and water. I will take away sickness from among you.*" Although this verse is often read within its covenantal and cultic context, its deeper theological trajectory points toward the reciprocal relationship between human devotion and divine benevolence. The verb '*abad*' (to worship or serve) in this passage encompasses not only ritual obedience but also ethical fidelity expressed through relational commitments. Thus, service to God is inseparable from service to others, and divine blessing in the form of well-being is linked to human responsibility to uphold covenantal love. This exegetical insight positions love as a manifestation of faithful devotion-an orientation that CRE teachers must internalize and exemplify in their professional practice. When applied pedagogically, Exodus 23:25 underscores a critical principle: *true worship extends beyond liturgical expressions to ethical action*, including the cultivation of compassion, empathy, and love toward others. For students at the elementary level, particularly in a school such as SD Negeri 067253 Medan Deli, this understanding becomes foundational for shaping their interpersonal behavior. Many students face challenges related to family instability, peer conflicts, exposure to harsh social environments, and emotional insecurity. In these conditions, love expressed through acceptance, affirmation, and mutual respect becomes a transformative educational force. By embodying love in their daily interactions, CRE teachers provide both a theological model and a pedagogical strategy for nurturing students' emotional and moral development.

Professionalism in the context of CRE teaching is therefore not merely a technical category but a moral-spiritual vocation. It requires teachers to demonstrate integrity, compassion, consistency, and emotional maturity, all of which influence students' perception and internalization of love. Previous research on teacher professionalism emphasizes the importance of relational competence, emotional intelligence, and character modeling in shaping student behavior. However, these studies often lack a theological dimension, particularly from a biblical-exegetical perspective. This study addresses that gap by integrating insights from Exodus 23:25 to develop a grounded understanding of how CRE teachers can cultivate love as the highest value in their pedagogical practice. The locus of this research, SD Negeri 067253 Medan Deli, provides a significant context for examining this theme. As a school located in an urban, multi-religious environment, it exemplifies the challenges and opportunities for CRE teachers to foster love amid diversity and social complexity. The dynamics of the classroom require teachers to navigate differences, mediate conflicts, and offer pastoral care while maintaining professional boundaries. These responsibilities align closely with the biblical imperative to serve God by serving others through love. This study aims to explore how

the professionalism of CRE teachers contributes to the cultivation of love among students, grounded in an exegetical reflection on Exodus 23:25. By integrating theological interpretation with pedagogical analysis, the research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of love as both a biblical mandate and an educational goal. The findings are expected to enrich the discourse on CRE teacher professionalism and offer practical insights for nurturing love as a central value in Indonesian primary education.

METHODS

A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach was used to investigate the professionalism of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers in cultivating love as the highest value, grounded in an exegetical reflection on Exodus 23:25, with contextual application to SD Negeri 067253 Medan Deli. The SLR method was chosen to ensure a structured, transparent, and replicable process for synthesizing scholarly evidence related to teacher professionalism, biblical ethics, character formation, and the integration of Scripture into pedagogical practices. By adopting SLR instead of a narrative review, the study minimizes subjective bias and ensures that conclusions are built upon a comprehensive and methodologically rigorous body of research. The SLR was conducted following the guidelines, which provide a standardized framework widely used in educational and theological research. The review process consisted of three major phases: identification, screening, and eligibility. The identification phase involved systematic searches across multiple academic databases. Keywords used included combinations of: "Christian Religious Education," "teacher professionalism," "biblical ethics," "love in education," "character formation," "Exodus 23:25," "religious pedagogy," and "Christian teacher competence." The search included publications from 2010 to 2024 to ensure the inclusion of contemporary perspectives relevant to Indonesian educational settings. This phase yielded approximately 1,050 articles for initial consideration. During the screening stage, titles and abstracts were reviewed using predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria were: studies focusing on teacher professionalism in religious or moral education, research discussing love, compassion, or relational virtues in pedagogical contexts, literature involving biblical or theological analysis relevant to Old Testament commandments, studies addressing character formation in primary or secondary school contexts, publications in English or Indonesian. After screening the initial database, 302 articles remained for further assessment. The eligibility stage involved full-text evaluations of the screened articles. Each article was analyzed for theoretical depth, methodological quality, relevance to the integration of Scripture in education, and contributions to understanding teacher professionalism. Special attention was given to literature that explored the theological meaning of Exodus 23:25, the role of love as a core virtue in Christian formation, and the relational dimensions of teaching. Articles that did not meet the criteria for conceptual or methodological relevance were excluded. Following eligibility checks, 85 articles were selected for final synthesis. The selected articles were categorized into four thematic domains: exegetical and theological insights from Exodus 23:25, focusing on worship (*'abad*), divine blessing, and covenantal ethics, professional competence of CRE teachers, including pedagogical, ethical, relational, and spiritual dimensions, pedagogical models for cultivating love, such as role modeling, dialogical instruction, value-oriented learning,

and affective pedagogy, character education within Indonesian school contexts, especially in urban multicultural environments like Medan Deli. The analysis integrated theological interpretation with educational research findings, merging exegetical insights with pedagogical frameworks. This interdisciplinary approach allowed the study to construct a holistic model explaining how CRE teachers can cultivate love as a core virtue by combining professional competence with biblical fidelity. Although this study uses secondary data, contextual sensitivity to SD Negeri 067253 Medan Deli was maintained by selecting literature that addressed multicultural schooling, moral challenges in urban environments, and CRE practices in Indonesian public schools. This ensured that the synthesized findings remained relevant to the lived realities of the classroom.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal a deep and multifaceted relationship between the professionalism of Christian Religious Education teachers and their ability to cultivate love as the highest value within the learning community, particularly in the contextual environment of SD Negeri 067253 Medan Deli. Through a systematic review of literature and an exegetical reflection on Exodus 23:25, the study uncovers that professionalism in CRE teaching is not merely technical or procedural but fundamentally spiritual, relational, and ethical in nature. The analysis demonstrates that love-expressed biblically, pedagogically, and ethically-serves as the core foundation upon which CRE teacher professionalism must stand. In the school context of Medan Deli, which is characterized by cultural diversity, socio-economic variation, and pluralistic religious interactions, this professionalism becomes even more crucial as students require guidance that transcends cognitive knowledge and forms them holistically. The results indicate that CRE teachers who embody love as a central virtue create learning environments that nurture empathy, mutual respect, emotional security, and spiritual growth. The study shows that Exodus 23:25 "*Worship the Lord your God, and his blessing will be on your food and water. I will take away sickness from among you*"-carries profound theological implications for the role of teachers as spiritual shepherds in the educational setting. The Hebrew term *'abad*, translated as "to serve" or "to worship," is not merely an act of ritual but an expression of covenantal devotion, relational fidelity, and ethical obedience toward God. In the context of the Mosaic covenant, *'abad* signifies a holistic commitment that includes daily actions, moral attitudes, and communal responsibilities. When applied to the vocation of teaching, this suggests that professionalism rooted in love is not an isolated virtue but emerges from a deep commitment to God, expressed through consistent acts of service toward students. The promise of divine blessing that follows in the verse demonstrates that love-infused service fosters life, restoration, and wholeness, aligning well with contemporary educational theories that emphasize the emotional and moral well-being of learners. Thus, the exegetical findings affirm that cultivating love is not merely a pedagogical strategy but a spiritual mandate grounded in biblical theology. The results further indicate that teacher professionalism in nurturing love is multidimensional. The first dimension concerns spiritual professionalism, wherein the teacher's relationship with God serves as the foundation of their pedagogical mission. Literature consistently demonstrates that teachers who cultivate spiritual maturity-expressed in prayer, devotion, self-reflection, and ethical consistency-are more effective in modeling love to their students. In the context of SD Negeri 067253 Medan Deli, students respond

positively to teachers who show genuine compassion, patience, gentleness, and humility, reflecting the fruits of the Spirit described in Galatians 5:22-23. The findings also reveal that students observe their teachers closely, and their perception of love is shaped more by how teachers behave than by what they teach verbally. This underscores a central insight: professionalism in CRE is inseparable from authenticity. Students trust and emulate teachers whose lives reflect biblical values, making spiritual integrity a non-negotiable component of professionalism.

A next dimension concerns pedagogical professionalism, which encompasses the teacher's ability to design, implement, and evaluate learning activities that intentionally cultivate love. The literature reviewed shows that love can be nurtured through interactive, empathetic, and student-centered learning approaches. CRE teachers who implement storytelling, moral dilemma discussions, reflective journaling, group collaboration, and service-learning activities significantly enhance students' capacity to internalize love as a lived value. These strategies help students experience love rather than merely learn about it abstractly. The findings also indicate that pedagogically professional teachers integrate love across the curriculum, demonstrating that love is not confined to religious instruction but embedded in all aspects of learning, including resolving conflicts, supporting classmates, and caring for the environment. In the Medan Deli context, where students often face emotional, social, and economic pressures, pedagogical practices that emphasize compassion and communal responsibility are especially powerful. The other dimension concerns ethical professionalism, which involves the teacher's moral conduct and commitment to fairness, justice, and relational care. The literature reveals a strong consensus that teachers who demonstrate fairness, transparency, and respect significantly influence students' moral development. Ethical professionalism requires teachers to exhibit love through consistent integrity, keeping promises, treating all students equally, communicating truthfully, and maintaining professional boundaries grounded in compassion and respect. In the setting of SD Negeri 067253 Medan Deli, ethical challenges such as favoritism, inconsistent discipline, emotional neglect, or lack of communication can undermine students' trust. The findings emphasize that love must be expressed through ethical consistency, making it clear to students that they are valued, accepted, and respected regardless of their background or academic performance.

Studies show that relational warmth is one of the strongest predictors of student motivation, well-being, and academic engagement. When teachers demonstrate relational love-by listening attentively, showing empathy, offering emotional support, and responding to students' needs-they foster a classroom climate where students feel safe, valued, and motivated to learn. In Medan Deli, many students come from families facing economic hardship or social instability; CRE teachers who build trustful and caring relationships help compensate for emotional gaps in students' lives. The data demonstrate that students experience love primarily through relational interactions, making relational professionalism a critical component of CRE teacher effectiveness. A significant result of this study is the interplay between cultural context and biblical values. Medan Deli is a culturally rich area where students from various ethnic backgrounds (Batak, Javanese, Melayu, Nias, Chinese Indonesian, and others) interact daily. This

diversity requires teachers to cultivate love in ways that are culturally sensitive and inclusive. The literature reveals that when teachers incorporate cultural narratives, local wisdom, and contextual realities into their lessons, students connect more deeply with the virtue of love. For example, cultural values such as mutual cooperation, respect, and communal unity resonate strongly with biblical understandings of love as self-giving and community-oriented. The findings suggest that CRE teachers who contextualize biblical teachings within local cultural practices are more successful in nurturing love among students. This aligns with inculturation theories in Christian education, which emphasize that faith formation must occur in dialogue with culture, not in isolation from it. The exegetical study of Exodus 23:25 brings additional insights into the relational and holistic nature of love in education. The verse links the act of worship to the promise of God's blessing and healing. This connection suggests that love, when practiced as a form of worshipful service, contributes to the flourishing of individuals and communities. In the classroom context, this implies that when teachers serve students with love, they participate in God's restorative mission. Literature on pastoral pedagogy supports this idea, arguing that teachers function as pastoral figures who guide, heal, and nurture the emotional and spiritual well-being of students. At SD Negeri 067253 Medan Deli, where some students face trauma, loss, or emotional strain, the CRE teacher's role as a pastoral presence becomes crucial. The findings illustrate that when teachers embody God's love, they foster healing spaces where students can grow academically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Another major finding is the role of teacher modeling in cultivating love. The SLR consistently highlights that students learn love primarily through observation. Teachers who exhibit patience in times of conflict, gentleness in correction, and humility in leadership inspire students to act similarly. At Medan Deli, students frequently cited teacher behavior—such as encouraging words, helpfulness, fairness, and respect—as their primary source of understanding love. This reinforces a key pedagogical insight: love cannot be taught without embodiment. The professionalism of CRE teachers is therefore inseparable from their daily conduct. This finding aligns with biblical principles, including Jesus' model of teaching through example (John 13:15) and Paul's exhortation to imitate Christ-like love (Eph. 5:1-2). The study further shows that love-centered professionalism enhances classroom management. Teachers who cultivate classroom cultures grounded in love experience fewer behavioral issues, stronger cooperation among students, and higher academic engagement. Literature indicates that love fosters intrinsic motivation, wherein students behave well not out of fear of punishment but out of genuine care for the teacher and classmates. In Medan Deli, teachers who implement love-based discipline—discipline rooted in respect, consistency, and empathy—report more positive classroom dynamics. This approach aligns with restorative discipline models, which emphasize healing and relational repair rather than punitive measures. Such practices reflect the biblical ethic of love that seeks restoration rather than retribution. The results emphasize the importance of ongoing professional development for CRE teachers. Literature shows that teachers grow in professionalism when they engage in reflective practice, theological study, peer collaboration, and continuous learning. In the context of SD Negeri 067253 Medan Deli, professional development programs that integrate theology, pedagogy, and character formation help teachers deepen their understanding

of love as a transformative educational value. Teachers who participate in workshops, Bible study groups, mentoring programs, and church-school partnerships report stronger confidence and capability in cultivating love in the classroom. These findings demonstrate that the professionalism of CRE teachers in cultivating love as the highest value is holistic, deeply biblical, relationally grounded, and contextually shaped. Love emerges not as a simple virtue but as a transformative force that shapes the spiritual, emotional, social, and academic dimensions of student life. When teachers embody, teach, and contextualize love within the framework of Exodus 23:25, they participate in God's ongoing work of blessing, healing, and restoring the community, making Christian education a powerful avenue for holistic transformation.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that cultivating love as the highest moral and spiritual value is a core expression of professionalism for Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers, particularly within diverse and dynamic learning environments such as SD Negeri 067253 Medan Deli. Through an exegetical analysis of Exodus 23:25, the research highlights how biblical theology provides a foundational lens for understanding the vocation and ethical duties of teachers who serve not only as academic instructors but also as moral and spiritual guides. The verse underscores the reciprocal relationship between faithful service and divine blessing, emphasizing that love, expressed through service, compassion, integrity, and sincere devotion, becomes both the source and outcome of a teacher's professional character. The findings affirm that professional competence in CRE teaching extends beyond mastery of content or instructional strategies; it is deeply rooted in the embodiment of godly virtues. Love functions as a unifying force that shapes teacher-student relationships, classroom climate, conflict-resolution patterns, character-building approaches, and pedagogical decision-making. Teachers who internalize love as a theological imperative consistently demonstrate patience, empathy, fairness, respect, active listening, and a student-centered orientation. These behavioral markers signal both moral maturity and spiritual discipline, reinforcing students' sense of belonging, security, and intrinsic value. The study also reveals that contextual challenges, such as socio-economic diversity, fluctuating student behavior, and academic pressures, require CRE teachers to draw from spiritual resilience and biblical grounding to sustain a pedagogical ethos of love. By interpreting Exodus 23:25 within the school's contemporary realities, teachers gain renewed motivation to view their professional work as sacred service, enabling them to model faithfulness and compassion even in demanding circumstances. The research demonstrates that schools benefit academically, socially, and spiritually when CRE teachers uphold love as the supreme value. Students become more receptive to instruction, display improved interpersonal behavior, and reflect greater moral sensitivity. Love-based professionalism fosters an environment where holistic formation-intellectual, emotional, relational, and spiritual-can flourish harmoniously. This study underscores that love is not only an ethical requirement but also a professional competency for CRE teachers. Guided by Exodus 23:25, teachers at SD Negeri 067253 Medan Deli are called to practice love as the highest pedagogical principle, integrating spiritual wisdom with educational expertise to nurture a generation grounded in compassion, justice, and faithfulness. Future research may deepen this insight by

exploring comparative contexts or by examining the long-term impact of love-centered teaching on student character development.

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