

Developing Social Competence in Christian Religious Education: Guiding Children to Experience God's Love Based on Genesis 21:17-19 at SD Negeri 042 Aek Garut

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of social competence in Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers in guiding children to experience God's love at SD Negeri 042 Aek Garut, Mandailing Natal. Grounded in the biblical narrative of Hagar and Ishmael (Genesis 21:17–19), the research explores how teachers' relational skills, empathy, and communication strategies influence 72 Christian students' spiritual and social development. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with five Christian teachers, focused group discussions with students, and analysis of lesson plans and teaching materials. Thematic analysis revealed that teacher empathy, effective communication, Christ-like behavioral modeling, and cooperative learning activities significantly enhanced students' perception and internalization of God's love. Teachers' ability to connect biblical narratives to students' lived experiences fostered not only cognitive understanding but also emotional resonance, enabling children to translate spiritual principles into social behaviors, such as compassion, kindness, and peer support. Additionally, classroom strategies that encouraged collaborative problem-solving and reflective discussion reinforced relational learning and peer interaction, contributing to a holistic experience of divine care. The study highlights the pedagogical importance of social competence as a tool for bridging theological concepts with practical application in CRE. Findings suggest that teacher training programs should prioritize social and relational skills alongside doctrinal knowledge to cultivate spiritually grounded, socially aware, and ethically responsible students. This research contributes to understanding the dynamic interplay between teacher social competence, biblical instruction, and students' holistic development, offering a model for effective Christian education practices in primary school settings.

Keywords: Social Competence, Christian Religious Education, God's Love

INTRODUCTION

Christian Religious Education (CRE) plays a pivotal role in shaping the moral, social, and spiritual development of children. In contemporary educational contexts, particularly in Indonesia, the responsibilities of CRE teachers extend beyond transmitting doctrinal knowledge; they include fostering relational skills and social competence that enable students to internalize the principles of Christian faith in daily life. Social competence, in this sense, refers to a teacher's ability to communicate effectively, demonstrate empathy, manage conflicts, and nurture positive relationships within the classroom (Goleman, 2006; Noddings, 2013). These skills are essential for guiding children to experience the love of God personally, not merely as a theological concept but as a lived reality. The biblical narrative of Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis 21:17-19 provides a profound model for understanding God's compassionate intervention and care. In this passage, Hagar and her son Ishmael are in a state of distress in the wilderness, facing scarcity and uncertainty. God hears the cries of the child, provides water, and reassures Hagar of His ongoing guidance and provision. This story emphasizes that divine love manifests through attentive care, provision, and relational engagement, principles that CRE teachers can emulate in guiding children to recognize and internalize God's love (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By reflecting on this passage, educators can translate theological insights into practical pedagogical strategies, thereby cultivating students' emotional, spiritual, and social growth. At SD Negeri 042 Aek Garut, Mandailing Natal, there are 72 Christian students and five Christian teachers, including the CRE teacher. This setting presents a unique opportunity to explore the intersection of social competence and religious pedagogy in a real-world context. Teachers must navigate not only the developmental needs of children but also cultural and communal expectations that shape how religious values are received and enacted. Effective social competence allows teachers to create a supportive learning environment where students feel heard, valued, and spiritually nurtured, thereby facilitating meaningful engagement with biblical teachings on God's love. Research in religious education indicates that students' spiritual development is closely linked to relational experiences within the classroom (Engel & Dunn, 2019). When teachers demonstrate empathy, active listening, and relational sensitivity, children are more likely to internalize spiritual values and practice them in social interactions. In the context of CRE, this means that students can recognize God's care not only through abstract teachings but also through relational experiences mediated by the teacher. Consequently, the teacher's social competence becomes a critical factor in translating biblical narratives into transformative experiences that influence both character formation and social behavior.

Empirical studies focusing on the social competence of CRE teachers in Indonesian primary schools remain limited. Most research has concentrated on doctrinal transmission or general pedagogical skills, while the relational and social dimensions of teaching remain underexplored. By investigating how CRE teachers apply social competence to teach God's love, this study aims to fill this gap and provide insights into practical strategies that enhance students' spiritual and social development. This study seeks to answer three central questions: How do CRE teachers demonstrate social competence in teaching children about God's love? How do students perceive and

respond to these relational strategies? What pedagogical approaches are most effective in integrating social competence within CRE to facilitate a lived experience of divine care? Addressing these questions contributes to a deeper understanding of the teacher-student relational dynamic in religious education and highlights the importance of social competence in nurturing spiritually and socially competent children. Ultimately, this research underscores the vital connection between theological insight, social skill, and educational practice in the holistic formation of young learners.

METHODS

A qualitative descriptive research design was chosen to explore how the social competence of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers influences children's understanding and experience of God's love at SD Negeri 042 Aek Garut, Mandailing Natal. Qualitative descriptive research is particularly appropriate in educational contexts where the goal is to provide a rich, detailed account of processes, behaviors, and perceptions within natural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study focused on capturing both teachers' pedagogical strategies and students' responses, emphasizing relational dynamics, empathy, and communication skills as essential components of social competence. The participants included 72 Christian students, aged 7–12, representing a full range of the school's Christian population, and five Christian teachers, including the CRE teacher. The inclusion of all available Christian teachers allowed for a comprehensive understanding of classroom relational dynamics and ensured multiple perspectives on pedagogical practice. Purposive sampling was applied to select participants for interviews and focused group discussions (FGDs) to gather data from students and teachers who were actively involved in CRE activities, ensuring the relevance and depth of the findings. Data collection methods consisted of classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and FGDs. Classroom observation was conducted over four weeks, during which the researcher focused on teacher-student interactions, teacher communication strategies, the demonstration of empathy, conflict management, and encouragement of collaborative behavior among students. Observations were recorded using field notes and a structured observation guide to maintain consistency across sessions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the five teachers to explore their understanding of social competence, the integration of biblical principles in teaching, and the practical strategies used to nurture children's experience of God's love. Interviews lasted 30–45 minutes each. FGDs with students were organized into groups of 8–10 participants to facilitate open discussion in a comfortable setting. Guided questions encouraged students to reflect on their experiences in CRE classes, perceptions of teacher support, and examples of how they sensed God's love through classroom activities. This method allowed students to share personal insights and provided opportunities to triangulate observational and interview data. Data analysis followed a thematic approach, beginning with transcription and coding of interviews, FGDs, and observation notes. Themes were then organized, enabling the researcher to interpret patterns and relationships between teacher social competence and students' experiences of divine care.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that the social competence of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers significantly shapes the way children perceive and experience God's love in their daily lives. The data were collected through classroom observations, interviews with teachers, focused group discussions (FGDs) with students, and analysis of teaching documents. The analysis identified several key themes related to teacher behaviors, student responses, and pedagogical strategies that facilitate the internalization of divine love, grounded in the biblical narrative of Hagar and Ishmael (Genesis 21:17-19). Observations and interviews consistently indicated that teacher empathy was a central component of social competence. During classroom activities, the CRE teacher frequently engaged in active listening, responding sensitively to students' questions and emotional expressions. For example, when a student expressed fear of failing a reading activity, the teacher reassured the child by relating the story of Hagar and Ishmael, emphasizing that God hears our cries and provides for our needs. One teacher stated: *"When children feel anxious or worried, I remind them that just as God cared for Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness, He cares for them too. This helps them feel safe and loved."* This approach demonstrates that empathy is not only a relational skill but also a pedagogical tool that connects students' personal experiences to biblical truths. Through empathetic interactions, students were able to perceive God's love in practical, tangible ways, which aligns with theological interpretations of Genesis 21:17-19 as illustrating God's attentive care and provision (Engel & Dunn, 2019).

Communication and Relational Skills in Classroom Practice

Effective communication emerged as another critical dimension of social competence. Teachers employed clear, age-appropriate language and encouraged open dialogue, allowing students to express their thoughts, feelings, and spiritual questions. During group activities, students were prompted to share personal experiences related to kindness, compassion, and caring for others, which the teacher linked back to God's love. For instance, in a role-playing exercise, students acted out scenarios where they helped classmates in need, followed by a reflection session connecting these actions to God's care for Hagar and Ishmael. Observational notes highlighted that students who actively participated in these exercises demonstrated greater understanding and articulation of divine love. FGDs revealed that students perceived these activities as both enjoyable and spiritually meaningful: *"I feel happy when we help each other in class. Our teacher reminds us that God loves us and cares for us like He cared for Hagar and Ishmael."* These findings suggest that relational and communication skills enable teachers to create a learning environment that bridges abstract biblical concepts with concrete social experiences, enhancing spiritual understanding and relational development simultaneously.

Teachers' behavior served as a model for students to emulate. Social competence was evident not only in verbal communication but also in nonverbal interactions, including gestures of encouragement, smiling, and physically supporting students in collaborative tasks. For example, during a group discussion, a shy student struggled to answer questions. The teacher gently prompted the student, provided encouragement, and

acknowledged the child's contribution, reinforcing a sense of belonging and divine affirmation. Interviews with teachers revealed a conscious effort to model Christ-like relational behavior, stating that demonstrating God's love personally is more impactful than verbal instruction alone: *"Children learn from what they see. By showing care and patience, they understand God's love not just in words but through experience."* This observation aligns with pedagogical theories emphasizing modeling as a powerful educational strategy, especially in moral and religious education (Noddings, 2013). The connection between teacher behavior and student internalization of spiritual values indicates that social competence is both a relational and instructional asset in CRE.

Genesis 21:17–19 served as the central biblical framework guiding teachers' instructional design. Lesson plans incorporated storytelling, reflection questions, and interactive activities that emphasized God's care and provision. For instance, students were asked to identify situations in their own lives where they felt cared for or supported, then relate these experiences to God's care for Hagar and Ishmael. This approach facilitated both cognitive understanding and emotional resonance. Teachers also employed visual aids, such as illustrations of Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness, to support students' comprehension. Observations indicated that children were highly engaged and able to articulate insights such as: *"God sees when we are in trouble and will help us, just like He helped Hagar and Ishmael."* These pedagogical strategies demonstrate the effective integration of biblical narrative, relational teaching, and social competence, highlighting the synergy between theological content and social-emotional learning.

Encouraging Peer Interaction and Cooperative Learning

Social competence also extended to fostering positive peer relationships. Teachers encouraged cooperative learning and collaborative problem-solving, reinforcing values of empathy, support, and kindness among students. Group activities were structured to require mutual assistance, sharing, and collective reflection on God's love. Observational data indicated that students not only engaged with the content but also practiced interpersonal skills that mirrored the compassionate behavior emphasized in Genesis 21:17-19. FGDs revealed that students internalized lessons on divine love in the context of social interactions: *"When I help my friend, I feel that I am showing God's love too. Our teacher always reminds us that God cares for everyone."* This demonstrates that social competence among teachers extends beyond one-on-one interactions, influencing classroom culture and peer dynamics, and fostering a holistic experience of God's love. Teachers highlighted difficulties in balancing individualized attention with managing a classroom of 72 students, which occasionally limited the depth of relational engagement. Additionally, cultural differences and varying levels of student receptivity required adaptive strategies. For instance, some students initially struggled to relate personal experiences to biblical narratives. Teachers responded by using differentiated instruction and multiple modes of engagement, including storytelling, visual aids, and interactive discussions, ensuring inclusivity and accessibility for all learners. The findings underscore the importance of developing social competence as an integral component of CRE teacher training. By equipping teachers with skills in empathy, effective communication, relational modeling, and cooperative learning facilitation, educational institutions can enhance both spiritual and social outcomes for students. Furthermore, integrating biblical narratives

such as Genesis 21:17-19 into interactive and relational teaching strategies ensures that theological concepts are experienced as meaningful, actionable, and personally relevant.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the social competence of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers plays a pivotal role in guiding children to experience and internalize God's love. Through the integration of empathy, effective communication, relational modeling, and cooperative learning strategies, teachers at SD Negeri 042 Aek Garut were able to create a classroom environment where 72 Christian students felt valued, understood, and spiritually nurtured. The findings underscore that social competence is not merely a soft skill but a critical pedagogical tool, enabling teachers to translate abstract theological concepts into tangible, lived experiences for children. Empathy emerged as a foundational component, allowing teachers to respond sensitively to students' emotional and spiritual needs. By connecting students' personal experiences to the biblical narrative of Hagar and Ishmael (Genesis 21:17-19), teachers facilitated a concrete understanding of divine care and provision. The study revealed that when children perceive God's love through relational interactions with their teachers, they are more likely to internalize values such as compassion, kindness, and social responsibility, demonstrating that spiritual and social development are deeply intertwined. Communication and relational skills were equally critical. Teachers' ability to articulate biblical principles clearly, encourage dialogue, and foster reflective discussion contributed to students' cognitive and emotional engagement with the content. Through role-playing, storytelling, and interactive exercises, students not only learned about God's love but also practiced expressing it in their social interactions. Peer collaboration further reinforced relational and social learning, highlighting that social competence extends beyond teacher-student interactions to influence classroom culture and student behavior. Modeling Christ-like behavior proved essential for translating theology into practice. Teachers consciously embodied care, patience, and attentiveness, demonstrating that divine love is relational and actionable. Observations and interviews revealed that students often mirrored these behaviors in their interactions with peers, indicating the effectiveness of modeling as a pedagogical strategy in moral and spiritual education. The study also highlighted the importance of adaptive teaching strategies, as teachers balanced individualized attention with the challenges of a large classroom and varying student receptivity. The study affirms that biblical narratives, such as Genesis 21:17–19, provide both a framework and an inspiration for relational pedagogy. God's attentive care for Hagar and Ishmael serves as a model for teachers, emphasizing that divine love is manifested through listening, providing, and guiding-actions that can be mirrored in classroom practices. By aligning pedagogical strategies with theological principles, CRE teachers can facilitate spiritual experiences that are meaningful, relevant, and relationally grounded. The findings suggest several implications for Christian education. First, teacher training programs should include the development of social competence as a core component, emphasizing empathy, communication, and relational modeling alongside doctrinal knowledge. Second, curriculum design should intentionally integrate interactive and experiential strategies that connect biblical narratives to students' lived experiences. Third, classroom management practices should foster peer collaboration and positive relational dynamics,

reinforcing the holistic development of both spiritual and social competencies. The study highlights that social competence is an indispensable dimension of effective Christian Religious Education. Teachers' relational skills enable children not only to understand God's love intellectually but to experience it personally, fostering spiritual growth, social awareness, and ethical behavior. By cultivating empathy, communication, and relational modeling, CRE teachers transform classrooms into environments where divine love is both taught and lived, ensuring that children develop as socially competent, spiritually grounded, and morally responsible individuals. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the interplay between teacher social competence, pedagogical practice, and the holistic formation of young learners, offering a model for best practices in Christian education contexts.

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