

Social Competence of Christian Religious Education Teachers in Cultivating Compassion: An Exegetical Study of Exodus 3:12 at SMK Negeri 1 Bilah Hilir

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the social competence of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers in cultivating compassion among students through an exegetical analysis of Exodus 3:12 and a qualitative case study conducted at SMK Negeri 1 Bilah Hilir, Labuhan Batu, Indonesia. Grounded in the theological message of God's promise of presence, "I will be with you," this research investigates how the teacher's relational presence, empathetic communication, and social engagement contribute to the formation of compassionate character in vocational secondary education. Employing a qualitative design that integrates a Systematic Literature Review, biblical exegesis, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews with the CRE teacher and selected students, the study reveals that compassion is most effectively cultivated through lived example rather than through doctrinal transmission alone. The findings indicate that the CRE teacher's social competence is manifested in trust-building relationships, inclusive interactions, restorative communication, and active involvement in students' academic and personal lives. These practices significantly influence students' prosocial behavior, emotional security, and willingness to care for others. The exegetical insights from Exodus 3:12 provide a robust theological foundation for understanding the teacher's role as a representation of God's compassionate accompaniment in the educational context. Despite structural challenges such as limited instructional time and diverse socio-economic student backgrounds, the teacher's social competence remains a crucial mediating factor in character formation. This study concludes that social competence, when grounded in biblical theology, is a central dimension of CRE teacher professionalism and a vital instrument for nurturing compassion in students.

Keywords: Social Competence, Christian Religious Education, Compassion

INTRODUCTION

Education is not merely a process of transferring knowledge but a transformative effort to shape learners' intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions in an integrated manner. In the context of Christian Religious Education (CRE), this holistic formation

becomes even more essential, as education is directed not only toward cognitive mastery but also toward the cultivation of Christlike character, including compassion, empathy, and social responsibility. In vocational secondary education, where students are prepared to enter the world of work and society, the development of social sensitivity becomes a strategic aspect of character formation (Lickona, 2012). Therefore, the social competence of Christian Religious Education teachers plays a crucial role in nurturing students' compassionate attitudes in real-life contexts. Social competence refers to a teacher's ability to communicate effectively, build harmonious relationships, demonstrate empathy, collaborate with others, and become a positive social model for students (Darling-Hammond, 2017). For CRE teachers, social competence is not merely a professional attribute but also a theological and spiritual calling. Their relational attitudes, responsiveness to students' needs, and sensitivity to social realities function as living curriculum that shapes students' value systems. Studies in character education consistently show that students' social attitudes are significantly influenced by the example and interpersonal behavior of their teachers (Nucci, 2015). Thus, the credibility of CRE teaching is not only measured by doctrinal accuracy but also by how deeply the teacher embodies compassion in everyday educational practice.

Compassion itself is a central biblical virtue rooted in God's character and redemptive mission. One of the foundational texts that reflects God's compassionate presence is Exodus 3:12, where God assures Moses, *"I will be with you,"* in the midst of his fear and inadequacy when called to liberate Israel from oppression. This divine promise signifies not only God's sovereignty but also His deep solidarity with human suffering. The God who commissions is also the God who accompanies, empowering His servant to stand with the oppressed. Exegetically, this verse reveals that God's mission is inseparable from His compassionate presence, which becomes the theological basis for human participation in acts of care and concern for others (Brueggemann, 2008). In Christian pedagogy, this divine pattern-God's compassionate presence with His people-becomes a model for teachers in their vocation. CRE teachers are called not only to transmit biblical knowledge but also to embody God's nearness through empathy, accompaniment, and social care toward students. When teachers demonstrate authentic concern, especially toward students who struggle academically, economically, or emotionally, they reflect the character of the God who says, *"I will be with you"* (Exod. 3:12). Such lived theology has a powerful formative impact on students' moral and social development (Wolterstorff, 2015).

This study is situated at SMK Negeri 1 Bilah Hilir, a public vocational school located in Labuhan Batu, Indonesia. Like many vocational schools in rural and semi-urban contexts, this institution faces complex social challenges, including economic vulnerability, family instability, and varying levels of student motivation. Within this environment, the presence of Christian students and the role of the CRE teacher become particularly significant in shaping values of empathy, cooperation, and social responsibility amid diversity. The school context provides a realistic setting to explore how the social competence of a CRE teacher contributes to students' compassion in daily school life. Although numerous studies have discussed pedagogical, professional, and personality competencies of teachers, research focusing specifically on the social competence of CRE teachers in relation to the cultivation of compassion remains limited, especially when

integrated with biblical exegesis. Most existing studies either emphasize educational psychology or theological reflection in isolation (Tilaar, 2014). This study seeks to bridge that gap by integrating an exegetical analysis of Exodus 3:12 with empirical insights from the school context. By doing so, the research aims to demonstrate that biblical theology and educational practice are not separate domains but mutually enriching frameworks for character formation. Accordingly, this study explores the social competence of the Christian Religious Education teacher in cultivating students' compassion at SMK Negeri 1 Bilah Hilir through the lens of Exodus 3:12. The central research focus is directed at how the teacher's relational skills, empathy, communication patterns, and social engagement reflect the biblical principle of God's compassionate presence. The findings of this study are expected to contribute both theoretically to the discourse on Christian pedagogy and practically to the improvement of CRE teacher formation in vocational education.

METHODS

A qualitative research design with a combination of Systematic Literature Review (SLR) and a simple field-based case study was used to explore the social competence of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers in cultivating compassion among students as reflected in the theological message of Exodus 3:12. The research was conducted at SMK Negeri 1 Bilah Hilir, a public vocational secondary school located in Labuhan Batu Regency, Indonesia. The participants consisted of Christian students enrolled at the school and one CRE teacher who was directly responsible for implementing Christian Religious Education. The qualitative approach was selected because it allows for an in-depth understanding of social interactions, lived experiences, and meaning-making processes related to compassion and social care within the natural school setting. The SLR component was carried out by systematically reviewing scholarly books and peer-reviewed journal articles published within the last ten years that address teacher social competence, Christian pedagogy, compassion in education, and biblical foundations of social care. These sources were collected through academic databases such as Google Scholar and relevant theological and educational repositories, then analyzed using thematic coding to identify dominant concepts related to social competence, relational pedagogy, and compassion-based character education. The exegetical analysis of Exodus 3:12 was conducted using historical-critical and theological approaches to uncover the contextual, linguistic, and theological meaning of God's promise of presence ("I will be with you") as the foundation of compassionate mission, which later served as the interpretive framework for understanding teacher practices in the school context. Field data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with the CRE teacher and selected Christian students, as well as direct classroom and school environment observations. The interview questions focused on the teacher's communication style, interpersonal relationships with students, responsiveness to students' personal and academic needs, treatment of students from diverse social backgrounds, and strategies used to instill compassion in daily learning. Observations were conducted during CRE lessons and informal school interactions to identify concrete expressions of social competence such as empathy, fairness, encouragement, and social engagement. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Data analysis followed the interactive model of qualitative analysis, involving

data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings from field data were continuously compared with insights from the SLR and the exegetical results to ensure analytical triangulation and theoretical integration. To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, credibility was strengthened through source triangulation between interviews, observations, and literature, while dependability was ensured through detailed documentation of research procedures. Ethical considerations were addressed by obtaining permission from the school, securing informed consent from all participants, and maintaining confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms. Through this integrated methodological design, the study sought to provide a holistic understanding of how teacher social competence, grounded in biblical theology, contributes to the cultivation of compassion in Christian Religious Education.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that the social competence of the Christian Religious Education (CRE) teacher at SMK Negeri 1 Bilah Hilir plays a significant and formative role in cultivating students' compassion, both in cognitive understanding and in practical social behavior. This competence is manifested through consistent relational engagement, empathetic communication, inclusive interaction, and concrete modeling of care within the school environment. These empirical findings resonate strongly with the theological message of Exodus 3:12, in which God's promise of presence to Moses becomes the foundational pattern for a pedagogy of compassionate accompaniment. The convergence between biblical theology and lived educational practice becomes evident in the way the teacher embodies "being with" students in their academic, emotional, and social struggles. From the exegetical perspective, Exodus 3:12 ("I will be with you") emerges as a theological declaration of divine solidarity. Historically and literarily, this verse is situated within Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush, where Moses expresses fear and inadequacy concerning his mission to liberate Israel from oppression. God's response does not begin with a strategy or technical instruction but with a relational assurance of presence. Theologically, this reveals that mission is grounded not merely in authority but in compassionate accompaniment. God does not send Moses alone into the suffering of Israel; rather, He commits Himself to be actively present in the process of liberation. This principle of divine nearness becomes the normative pattern for human participation in God's redemptive mission, including in the vocation of teaching. In the educational context, the teacher is not only a transmitter of knowledge but also an embodiment of presence that affirms, strengthens, and accompanies students in their vulnerabilities.

Field data show that the CRE teacher consistently demonstrates this theology of presence through daily interactions with students. Interviews with students reveal that the teacher is perceived not merely as an instructor but as a relational figure who listens, understands, and responds to personal concerns. Several students testified that they felt comfortable sharing problems related to family, economic hardships, and peer relationships because the teacher approached them without judgment and with genuine concern. This relational openness reflects the core dimension of social competence: the ability to establish trust-based interpersonal relationships. Educational theory affirms that such trust is a precondition for moral and character formation, as students are more receptive

to value internalization when they feel accepted and respected. Compassion, in this context, is not taught merely as a doctrinal concept but is mediated through the teacher's social attitudes. Classroom observations indicate that during CRE lessons, the teacher frequently connects biblical narratives with contemporary social realities faced by students, such as poverty, discrimination, and peer conflict. These discussions are not abstract moral exhortations but are dialogical processes that invite students to reflect on their own experiences and responses. Through this pedagogical strategy, students are guided to see compassion as a lived response to human suffering rather than as a distant religious ideal. This approach corresponds with the exegetical insight from Exodus 3:12 that authentic compassion flows from presence and involvement, not from detached moralism. One of the most prominent dimensions of the teacher's social competence observed in this study is empathic communication. The teacher consistently employs a non-authoritarian communication style characterized by attentive listening, gentle correction, and affirmative feedback. When students display problematic behavior, the teacher responds with restorative dialogue rather than punitive measures. For example, in one observed incident involving a conflict between two students, the teacher facilitated a mediated conversation, allowing each student to express feelings and perspectives before guiding them toward mutual understanding and reconciliation. This practice mirrors the biblical pattern of God's engagement with Moses: a dialogical encounter that acknowledges human fear and limitation while offering reassurance and direction. Such practices cultivate compassion by modeling how conflicts and suffering should be addressed through understanding rather than domination.

The social competence of the CRE teacher is also evident in inclusive interaction across social, economic, and religious differences. Although the school is a public institution with students from diverse backgrounds, the teacher intentionally fosters an atmosphere of mutual respect and care that transcends group boundaries. Students reported that the teacher often emphasized that compassion is not limited to one's own religious community but extends to all people as fellow human beings created by God. This universal orientation of compassion is consistent with the broader theological scope of Exodus, where God's concern is directed toward the oppressed Israelites as a marginalized community. In the school context, this translates into a pedagogy that resists exclusivism and nurtures social solidarity. Students' compassion develops through repeated exposure to relational modeling rather than through isolated moral instruction. The findings demonstrate that students who regularly observe compassionate behavior from the teacher begin to imitate these patterns in peer relationships. Several students shared that they became more willing to help classmates who were struggling academically or financially after witnessing the teacher's consistent acts of care, such as providing learning support outside school hours or coordinating assistance for students in need. This process of social learning aligns with Bandura's social learning theory, which emphasizes that moral behaviors are acquired through observation of significant role models. The integration of compassionate values into vocational education holds particular significance. Vocational students are prepared for direct engagement with the labor market and society, where interpersonal skills and social sensitivity are as crucial as technical competence. The CRE teacher's social competence thus contributes not only to students' spiritual formation but also to their readiness for responsible professional life.

Students learn that success is not measured solely by personal achievement but also by one's capacity to care for others in the workplace and community. This educational outcome reflects the theological vision of Exodus 3:12, where God's presence empowers human participation in the liberation and well-being of others. Another key finding is that the cultivation of compassion is reinforced through the teacher's engagement beyond formal classroom instruction. Observations indicate that the teacher actively participates in students' extracurricular activities, visits students who are absent due to illness, and collaborates with other teachers in addressing students' social problems. These actions signify that compassion is embodied as a lifestyle rather than confined to instructional sessions. In theological terms, this reflects the continuity between God's promise of presence and His ongoing involvement in the history of Israel. In the same way, the teacher's consistent presence across various domains of school life deepens the authenticity and credibility of the moral values conveyed.

The discussion also reveals the transformative impact of compassionate pedagogy on students' self-perception. Students reported increased confidence and emotional security as a result of the teacher's supportive presence. They expressed that knowing a teacher genuinely cares about them motivates them to behave more responsibly and to show concern for others. This finding supports the argument that compassion is not only an ethical value but also a psychological resource that fosters resilience, empathy, and prosocial behavior. Theologically, this dynamic mirrors the empowering effect of God's promise to Moses, which transforms fear into courage and hesitation into obedient action. The study also identifies several challenges in cultivating compassion through teacher social competence. The CRE teacher faces substantial workload demands, limited instructional time, and large class sizes, which restrict the depth of individual interaction with students. Moreover, some students come from family environments marked by neglect, economic hardship, or exposure to violence, which complicates the process of moral formation. These structural and contextual limitations indicate that the cultivation of compassion cannot rely solely on individual teacher competence but requires systemic support from the school, family, and broader community. From a theological perspective, this reflects the reality that Moses' mission, though empowered by divine presence, also encountered persistent resistance and hardship. The teacher's social competence remains a crucial mediating factor in sustaining compassionate educational practice. The integration of exegetical insight from Exodus 3:12 provides a robust theological foundation for understanding why teacher presence matters. The promise "I will be with you" functions not only as a divine assurance for Moses but also as an ethical paradigm for educators who are called to be present with learners in their vulnerability. This theological paradigm challenges instrumental approaches to education that prioritize efficiency and outcomes over relational depth and moral formation.

The findings further suggest that compassion is most effectively cultivated when social competence is integrated with pedagogical and personality competencies. The CRE teacher's ability to design contextual learning activities, communicate biblical values meaningfully, and demonstrate personal integrity strengthens the impact of social competence on students' character. This holistic integration aligns with contemporary models of teacher professionalism that emphasize the inseparability of cognitive expertise, relational skill, and moral character. In Christian education, this integration is

not merely a professional requirement but a theological imperative grounded in the nature of God's relationship with humanity. The social competence observed in this study also contributes to the creation of a caring school culture. Compassionate teacher-student relationships gradually influence peer norms, classroom climate, and institutional values. Students become more attentive to the needs of others, reduce discriminatory behavior, and develop greater willingness to collaborate. These social dynamics illustrate how individual teacher competence can generate broader cultural transformation within the school community. In theological terms, this reflects the missional dimension of education, where acts of compassion become signs of God's kingdom in everyday life. The alignment between exegetical theology and empirical educational practice strengthens the validity of this study's conclusions. The promise of divine presence in Exodus 3:12 is not treated merely as a historical text but as a living theological resource that informs contemporary pedagogical praxis. This approach demonstrates that biblical exegesis can offer concrete ethical and educational implications when interpreted within real-life contexts. Conversely, the educational data enrich theological reflection by showing how divine compassion is mediated through human relationships in institutional settings.

In comparison with previous studies on teacher competence and character education, this study adds a distinctive contribution by foregrounding social competence as a theologically grounded dimension of Christian pedagogy. While many educational studies emphasize instructional strategies or assessment outcomes, the present findings highlight the centrality of relational presence and empathetic engagement in moral formation. This emphasis resonates with emerging discourses in holistic education that advocate for relational pedagogies as essential to human flourishing. The implications of these findings for CRE teacher education are significant. Teacher training programs should not focus solely on content mastery and teaching techniques but also prioritize the development of social and relational competencies rooted in Christian theology. Prospective teachers need to be equipped not only with pedagogical skills but also with the capacity for empathetic presence, reflective listening, and sustained social engagement. The theological vision of Exodus 3:12 can serve as a foundational framework for shaping such holistic teacher formation. Schools and educational authorities should recognize social competence as a core dimension of teacher professionalism. Institutional support systems, such as mentoring, peer collaboration, and counseling services, are necessary to sustain teachers' capacity to practice compassionate pedagogy amid increasing administrative and instructional demands. Without such systemic support, the burden of moral formation risks being individualized and unsustainable. The results and discussion demonstrate that the social competence of the CRE teacher at SMK Negeri 1 Bilah Hilir significantly contributes to the cultivation of students' compassion through relational presence, empathetic communication, inclusive interaction, and consistent modeling of care. These practices are deeply consonant with the theological message of Exodus 3:12, in which God's compassionate presence empowers human participation in liberation and care. The integration of biblical exegesis with qualitative educational analysis reveals that compassion in Christian education is not merely a value to be taught but a relational reality to be lived. Through the teacher's social competence, God's promise "I will be with you" finds concrete expression in the daily life of the school, shaping students not only as knowledgeable learners but also as compassionate members of society.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the social competence of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers plays a decisive role in cultivating compassion among students, particularly within the vocational school context of SMK Negeri 1 Bilah Hilir. Through the integration of biblical exegesis of Exodus 3:12 and qualitative field findings, this research confirms that compassion in Christian education is not formed merely through doctrinal instruction but is primarily shaped through relational presence, empathetic communication, and consistent modeling of care by the teacher. The divine promise, "I will be with you," which forms the theological core of Exodus 3:12, provides a powerful pedagogical paradigm for understanding the teacher's vocation as one of accompaniment, solidarity, and moral guidance. The findings reveal that the CRE teacher's social competence is expressed through several key dimensions: the ability to build trusting relationships with students, demonstration of empathy in responding to students' personal and social struggles, inclusive interaction across socio-economic and religious boundaries, and active involvement in students' lives beyond formal instruction. These relational practices function as a lived curriculum through which students internalize the value of compassion. Students do not merely learn about compassion cognitively; they experience it concretely through the teacher's attitudes and actions. This experiential learning process significantly shapes their social sensitivity, helping behavior, and sense of moral responsibility. The integration of exegetical analysis with empirical data also confirms that biblical theology is not merely abstract or historical but deeply relevant to contemporary educational practice. Exodus 3:12 reveals God as a compassionate presence who empowers His servant to enter into the suffering of others. When this theological vision is embodied by the CRE teacher, it becomes a transformative force in the school environment. The teacher's presence with students in their fears, failures, and struggles reflects God's own pattern of redemptive accompaniment. As a result, compassion becomes a shared value that influences not only individual character but also the broader school culture. This study also acknowledges several structural and contextual limitations. The cultivation of compassion through teacher social competence faces challenges such as high workload, limited instructional time, diverse student backgrounds, and socio-economic difficulties that affect students' emotional and moral development. These challenges indicate that the responsibility for character formation cannot rest solely on individual teachers. Institutional support, collaborative school culture, parental involvement, and educational policy that values character education are essential to sustain compassionate pedagogy in the long term. The implications of this study are both theological and pedagogical. It affirms that the mission of Christian education is inseparable from the mission of God to manifest His compassionate presence in the world. It underscores that social competence is not an auxiliary skill but a core dimension of CRE teacher professionalism. Teacher education programs should therefore intentionally integrate the development of relational skills, empathy, and social engagement alongside pedagogical and professional training. Schools, on the other hand, should create systemic support structures that enable teachers to practice compassionate pedagogy in sustainable ways. This study affirms that the social competence of Christian Religious Education teachers, when grounded in the theological vision of Exodus 3:12, functions as a powerful instrument for cultivating compassion among students. Through

relational presence, empathetic engagement, and consistent modeling of care, teachers become living witnesses of God's compassionate accompaniment in the everyday life of the school. This integrative approach offers a meaningful contribution to the discourse on Christian pedagogy and character education, particularly within the context of vocational secondary education in Indonesia.

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