



The Strategic Role of Christian Religious Education in the Context of Pluralism in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Indonesia's diversity presents challenges in the form of intolerance and social inequality, both of which threaten the nation's harmony. Christian Religious Education (CRE) holds a strategic role in shaping a generation that is faithful, tolerant, and committed to inclusive Christian values. This study aims to examine the contribution of CRE in a pluralistic society through an analysis of its curriculum, learning materials, and the role of teachers. The research employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical design. Data were collected through a systematic literature review of CRE curriculum documents, textbooks, and relevant journal articles. Data analysis utilized content analysis techniques to identify key concepts related to inclusivity, tolerance, and Christian values within the context of pluralism. The findings indicate that CRE plays a strategic role in the holistic formation of students' character and spirituality. The CRE curriculum emphasizes Christ's love, personal relationship with God, and the integration of biblical values within cultural, religious, and social diversity. Christian teachers serve as key role models of faith, capable of embodying Gospel values contextually. CRE makes a significant contribution to shaping students into inclusive and transformative individuals within Indonesia's pluralistic society through a contextual curriculum and the exemplary character of teachers.

Keywords: Christian Religious Education; pluralism; curriculum; tolerance; inclusivity

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a populous nation endowed with an extraordinary wealth of cultures, ethnicities, and languages. This diversity forms the national identity embodied in the motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* ("Unity in Diversity"). According to the 2020 Population Census, Indonesia is home to more than 1,200 ethnic groups and 694 local languages used across its vast archipelago (BPS, 2020). The diversity of religions and belief systems further colors Indonesian society, creating a complex form of pluralism. Such plurality is both a national treasure and a challenge, especially in maintaining social integration and building harmonious communal life. Within this context, Christians exist as part of a pluralistic society that is not only called to coexist peacefully but also to contribute actively to preserving and nurturing this diversity. Christian Religious Education (CRE), as a formal instrument

for nurturing the faith and character of Christian students, plays a strategic role in shaping individuals who not only internalize the Christian faith but also uphold the values of tolerance, love, and justice within a diverse society.

Christian education is not merely a medium for transferring religious knowledge but a process of character formation and identity strengthening rooted in God's love universal and inclusive in nature. In the reality of Indonesian society, which is often marked by social tensions, fanaticism, and identity segregation, CRE is required to go beyond doctrinal teaching. It must serve as a transformative instrument that equips students to become peacemakers in social life. Therefore, this study aims to critically examine the strategic role of CRE in the context of Indonesia's pluralism, and how it can be creatively and contextually integrated to form citizens who are religious, inclusive, and nationally minded.

Several previous studies have explored the contribution of CRE within plural societies. Gulo et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of humanistic character formation in CRE as a means of countering intolerance and religious fanaticism. Their study focuses on shaping a humanistic Christian identity as a response to social tensions in a religiously plural context. Meanwhile, Lasut et al. (2021) highlight the role of CRE in framing pluralism through the integration of cognitive, social, spiritual, and communal dimensions within the curriculum, aiming to strengthen social cohesion and appreciation for cultural and religious differences. On the other hand, Manalu et al. (2023) develop an inclusive and multicultural model of CRE by emphasizing interreligious dialogue, social justice, and active community involvement as foundational pillars for building a harmonious society amidst diversity.

Distinct from those previous studies, this research positions CRE not only as a responsive tool toward diversity but also as a strategic transformative agent in shaping students with a strong faith identity, contextual dialogical skills, and practical orientations relevant to the challenges of pluralism in Indonesia. The study integrates theological, pedagogical, and sociological approaches to evaluate and propose adaptive Christian educational strategies that remain deeply rooted in Gospel values. Thus, the novelty of this research lies in its emphasis on the strategic role of CRE as a transformative force that nurtures spiritual maturity and social competence within a pluralistic society in a systemic and structured manner.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical design to examine the contribution of Christian Religious Education (CRE) in Indonesia's pluralistic society. The research was conducted through systematic literature review and curriculum content analysis. Data were collected from multiple sources including official CRE curriculum documents, textbooks used in Christian schools, academic journal articles, and scholarly books published between 2015 and 2025. The selection criteria focused on materials addressing inclusivity, tolerance, and Christian values in pluralistic contexts. A total of 45 relevant sources were identified and analyzed.

Content analysis was utilized as the primary analytical technique to identify key concepts related to inclusivity, tolerance, and Christian values within CRE materials. The analysis followed three systematic stages: (1) data reduction through coding and categorization of themes related to curriculum content, teaching materials, and teacher roles; (2) data display through thematic mapping to identify patterns and relationships among concepts; and (3) conclusion drawing to synthesize findings regarding CRE's contribution to pluralistic education. To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, triangulation was applied by cross-referencing multiple data sources. Peer debriefing sessions were conducted with two Christian education experts to validate interpretations and findings. Additionally, reflexivity was maintained throughout the analysis process to minimize researcher bias.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Identity of Christian Schools Amid Indonesia's Pluralism

Christian schools can be understood as educational institutions that conduct structured learning processes, curriculum management, administrative activities, and social interactions within a disciplined environment. However, what distinguishes Christian schools from general educational institutions is their theological character, which permeates every aspect of their existence. This character is manifested in values, vision, and practices grounded in the Christian faith as their existential foundation (Sidjabat, 2006, p.106).

As institutions founded upon divine revelation, Christian schools serve as centers of formation designed to shape students in the light of God's Word. Christian education does not pursue the cognitive, affective, and volitional aspects separately but integrates them into a holistic transformation that encompasses knowledge, emotion, and human action. In other words, the ultimate goal of Christian education is comprehensive and profound life transformation.

The transformation expected in Christian education is not the result of human ability alone but is the effect of divine truth revealed by God. The transformative power of Christian education lies in the Bible as its primary source of teaching and in the work of the Holy Spirit as the agent of renewal operating within students. Roy Zuck emphasizes that the uniqueness of Christian education does not rest solely on its content the Bible as God's written revelation but also on the process of spiritual transformation initiated by the Holy Spirit (Zuck, 1991, p.114).

Thus, Christian schools possess a distinctive role as educational institutions rooted in God's truth and dependent on divine work in shaping humanity. Tung (2018, p.5) argues that schools must not lose their true and biblical vision. Schools must have and understand a clear vision an image of the goals to be achieved and realized in a specific future. Therefore, Christian schools have great potential to contribute significantly to the development of a better quality of society.

Furthermore, Sidjabat identifies six strategic roles of Christian schools in the contemporary context. First, Christian schools must develop individual potential through the cultivation of talents, gifts, and professional abilities; therefore, strengthening vocational education becomes an unavoidable necessity. Second, they should equip students to use their leisure time productively and in a manner consistent with Christian values achieved through humanities education and creative extracurricular activities. Third, Christian education must instill a sense of civic responsibility so that citizenship education remains an integral part of the curriculum. Fourth, students should be guided to become mature members of the church who understand deeply the church's identity and mission in the world, necessitating synergy between school and church. Fifth, Christian schools should foster critical awareness of social dynamics and prepare students to face various moral challenges in today's changing world. Sixth, they are expected to facilitate students' participation in holistic community development. Christian education does not separate the sacred from the secular but views both as an integrated whole. This aligns with Indonesia's national philosophy, Pancasila, which calls every citizen to think and act holistically for the renewal of a civilized society (Sidjabat, 2006, p.109).

Glen Schultz (2003, p.114) asserts that education plays a highly strategic role in the ongoing and future "value conflict" shaping the next generation. He argues that education has become an ideological battlefield for winning the hearts and minds of future generations. Within this framework, Christian education cannot be neutral; it must actively function as an instrument of God's kingdom *kingdom education*. Schultz emphasizes that Christian schools should not stand apart from the home but function as extensions of Christian families, supporting and reinforcing the faith values that parents are called to teach. True Christian education, according to him, is a

collaborative effort among the home, church, and school to ensure that divine values are consistently instilled in children's lives.

Schultz further highlights the crucial role of schools in accompanying children's spiritual growth, in alignment with the divine mandate given to parents. In this sense, the school does not replace the parents' responsibility for spiritual education but acts as a strategic partner that strengthens and harmonizes Christian principles throughout the learning and character formation process (Schultz, 2003, p.114).

Accordingly, the identity of Christian schools offering Christian Religious Education (CRE) in Indonesia is not only reflected in their Bible-based curriculum but also in a learning process that integrates faith values, Christian community participation, and methodologies that form holistic individuals. Students' diverse backgrounds shaped by their families and social environments should serve as a foundation for designing effective and relevant learning strategies that enable comprehensive transformation in cognitive, affective, and spiritual dimensions.

The Praxis of Christian Religious Education in a Pluralistic Society

Within the context of national education, CRE in Indonesia is expected to contribute meaningfully to the improvement of educational quality while maintaining its distinct Christian identity. This means that students formed through CRE in schools are not only required to meet national qualification standards but also to develop character rooted in Christian values. The Indonesian National Education System Law affirms that the function of national education is to develop capabilities and enhance the quality and dignity of human life to realize national goals. Education aims to enlighten the nation and form holistic Indonesian citizens intellectually, morally, and spiritually (Sisdiknas, 2003).

CRE in Indonesia is largely influenced by two main factors: students' affective backgrounds (shaped by family, church, and environment) and the quality of the learning process. Christian education plays a vital role in shaping students' attitudes and behaviors through approaches emphasizing affective development and active learning. Factors such as family affection, relevant teaching approaches, and adequate facilities all contribute to learning outcomes, both cognitively and in terms of Christian character transformation. Holistic learning encompasses cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains, shaping students comprehensively in knowledge, skills, and life values (Tangyong, 2006, p.68).

Forming an integrated and holistic personality is a key focus of CRE. One relevant approach to achieving this goal is *mastery learning*, which emphasizes that behavioral change as an educational outcome is influenced by two key factors: first, the affective entry characteristics shaped by family, church, and community experiences; and second, the quality of the school learning process. In this context, CRE holds a great opportunity to instill faith values through learning approaches that emphasize affective aspects attitudes, values, and character rooted in Christ's teachings.

Therefore, CRE in a pluralistic society plays a strategic role in integrating faith values with social realities characterized by diversity. Banks' concept of multicultural education provides an important foundation for developing socially and culturally relevant CRE. Education must guarantee equality for all learners regardless of ethnic, religious, cultural, or social background (Banks, 2002, p.11).

Important dimensions in the praxis of CRE that consider pluralism include several aspects: (1) *content integration*, the use of materials from various cultures to explain concepts and theories in CRE; (2) *empowering school culture*, restructuring the school culture to ensure equality for all students; (3) *knowledge construction*,

helping students understand how cultural values influence knowledge formation; (4) *prejudice reduction*, focusing on developing anti-discriminatory attitudes; and (5) *equity pedagogy*, where educators adapt teaching methods so that all students can achieve academic success (Erbaş, 2019, p.143).

In the Indonesian Context: Christian Religious Education (CRE) Amid Inherent Pluralism

In Indonesia's inherently pluralistic context, *Pendidikan Agama Kristen* (PAK) or Christian Religious Education (CRE) serves not only as a means of faith instruction but also as an instrument for building social cohesion. Tafona'o emphasizes that CRE must be responsive to the religious and cultural diversity within society (Tafona'o, 2015, p.18). Religious education teachers thus become key figures in shaping a tolerant and democratic society.

The role of CRE in a pluralistic society can be classified into three main aspects. First, the *educational role*, which involves providing instruction that is not only grounded in Christian faith but also relevant to national and multicultural contexts. Ideally, the CRE curriculum encourages students to engage ethically in social life with a sense of national awareness. Second, the *social role*, in which CRE serves as a medium for internalizing humanitarian values such as empathy, solidarity, and respect for differences. An example of this can be seen in church-based social services that reach various layers of society, as well as models of CRE for children affected by poverty developed by Gratia and colleagues (Gratia et al., 2020). Third, the *spiritual role*, which distinguishes CRE from general education. Through CRE, students are nurtured to live in obedience to God and to understand the spiritual consequences of faith and sin. As future generations, they are shaped to become godly, faithful, and hopeful leaders who make the Word of God the foundation of their daily lives (Waruwu et al., 2021).

Thus, the presence of CRE in a pluralistic society is not only theologically relevant but also strategically vital in forming a generation that is tolerant, spiritually intelligent, and committed to inclusive national life.

The CRE Curriculum in the Context of Indonesia's Pluralism

In the context of Christian education, as in general education, the curriculum serves as a central element that determines the direction, content, and learning experiences of students. Daryl Eldridge emphasizes that the curriculum encompasses more than subject matter and teaching methods; it reflects the totality of the educational process that takes place within the school. He views the curriculum as a dynamic reality unfolding in actual school activities, such as social interactions, extracurricular programs, and interpersonal relationships. In other words, every student activity whether structured, such as formal instruction, or unstructured, such as peer and staff interactions—contributes to the overall learning experience (Eldridge, 2001, p.188).

Similarly, Tangyong explains that the curriculum is a systematically designed learning experience. In this sense, it includes various supporting aspects of education such as learning materials, teaching staff, infrastructure, funding, management systems, assessment methods, and counseling services. Therefore, the curriculum is not merely a planning document but an integrated system aimed at achieving holistic educational goals (Tangyong, 2006, p.69).

Moreover, the curriculum is dynamic and cannot be fully controlled or predicted. Each student brings unique experiences, backgrounds, and life contexts into the classroom. As a result, teacher–student interactions during the learning process are often spontaneous and distinctive. This makes curriculum implementation an exploratory and adaptive process. In this framework, the teacher's role extends beyond content delivery to that of

a facilitator and mentor responsible for developing and contextualizing the curriculum according to students' needs (Mulyasa, 2006, pp.24–25).

According to Miller (1956, p.44), the curriculum is essentially the student's guided learning experience. It involves learning processes that shape students' thinking and behavior. Sanjaya (2006, p.6) further notes that curriculum design is not confined to a list of subjects but encompasses all learning experiences under the supervision of the school and teacher. Eli Tanya (2006, p.28) explains that the CRE curriculum includes all experiences of students at home, in the church, and at school each used to achieve the educational mission of the church.

From these definitions, it can be synthesized that the CRE curriculum is a structured and purposeful educational system designed to develop students' holistic learning experiences in the light of Christian faith. It aims to cultivate spiritual maturity and a true knowledge of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior through biblical study, Christian character formation, and spiritual experiences guided by the Holy Spirit. This process unfolds through active interaction between students and their learning environments in the church, school, family, and community. Thus, the CRE curriculum serves as the church's instrument for fulfilling its lifelong educational mandate, centered on Christ and contextualized to Indonesia's pluralistic society.

An effective curriculum requires the support of adequate resources professional educators, sufficient facilities, planned financing, participatory school management, and active community involvement. The success of curriculum implementation depends largely on the quality of the learning process, which involves students, teachers, principals, and academic counselors as key components. Curriculum success is not determined merely by content but by those who deliver it. Hence, within CRE, two main components must receive serious attention in addressing Indonesia's pluralism: learning materials and teacher profiles. These elements play strategic roles in shaping students' character and responses to social and cultural diversity, as elaborated below.

CRE Learning Materials from a Pluralistic Perspective

Learning materials within CRE that are responsive to pluralistic realities encompass teachings designed to shape students according to Christian life principles. Such materials are not limited to cognitive dimensions but also address affective and behavioral aspects, consistent with national curriculum policies that promote a holistic learning approach. Each subject area is expected to contribute to the comprehensive development of students' character and worldview both intrapersonally and interpersonally (Mulyasa, 2006, pp.24–25).

CRE in a pluralistic context rests on two main elements: fellowship with Christ and the experience of God's love. Schultz (2003, p.38) asserts that an intimate personal relationship with Christ is essential for avoiding dualism in life. A deep relationship of love with God serves as the foundation for personal transformation. This relationship with God becomes the decisive factor for understanding His will and living faithfully according to one's Christian calling.

These two elements fellowship with Christ and divine love—serve as the *indicative* dimension of Christian faith, forming its existential basis. Meanwhile, Christian life principles taught through learning materials serve as the *imperative* dimension, providing moral and spiritual guidance for daily living. Thus, learning materials not only transmit information but also serve as means of integrated and contextual faith formation.

Within the context of religious diversity, the foundational principle taught is the confession of faith in the one true God revealed in Christ and the rejection of syncretism or faith compromise. To instill this principle, Christian religious instruction serves as the primary instrument, complemented by spiritual activities such as chapel

services and Bible classes that help students know God personally. The integration of faith and knowledge becomes a crucial pedagogical approach linking all academic subjects to biblical truth so that students understand all aspects of life as under God's authority (Eldridge, 2001, p.188).

Mission education is also an essential part of the curriculum, teaching non-compromising yet loving communication of faith with people from different religious backgrounds. Such instruction includes interfaith dialogue and living witness, enabling students to engage peacefully and wisely in religiously diverse settings.

Materials Related to Cultural Pluralism

CRE also aims to cultivate respect for the human body as the temple of the Holy Spirit and discipline rooted in love. Lessons about the Christian life's purpose centered on God's glory (1 Corinthians 10:31) shape how students view themselves, their bodies, and their lives. Schools implement discipline systems grounded in love rather than punishment to support moral growth. Christian freedom is understood within the framework of love that is not self-seeking. Students are therefore taught to limit personal freedom for the sake of a good testimony before others. This can be integrated into moral education and multicultural instruction grounded in Christian values. Lessons on gender relations are also essential, helping students understand healthy male–female relationships from a biblical perspective.

In addressing ethnic diversity, students are taught that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God, regardless of ethnicity or race. Such instruction builds awareness that all people hold equal value before God, encouraging respect, honor, and loving relationships across ethnic boundaries. This fosters a missional consciousness that every ethnic group is both a field for evangelism and a partner in the fellowship of Christ's body.

In contexts of social and economic difference, students are shaped to avoid discriminating based on wealth or status. The curriculum encourages social sensitivity, empathy, and solidarity. The biblical truth that all humans are created in God's image provides a strong theological foundation for developing inclusive and egalitarian attitudes. Schools should also provide genuine opportunities for interaction among students from varied social and economic backgrounds to nurture empathy and cross-class learning. Through such experiences, students not only learn to respect others but also encounter real social complexities that deepen their understanding of Christian love in practice.

Teacher Profile with an Understanding of Indonesia's Diversity

In the context of education, the role of a teacher extends beyond the mere transfer of knowledge—it also encompasses moral and spiritual dimensions. Jessen defines an educator as a person who helps others learn, guides them, and serves as an example in life (Jessen, 2001:678). Within the framework of Christian Religious Education (PAK), this role is elevated by emphasizing the mission of Christ: to teach and disciple in accordance with the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20). The ultimate goal of PAK is not only to produce intellectually competent students but also to bring about behavioral transformation that reflects the character of Christ.

An effective Christian teacher is one who can integrate biblical principles into every aspect of teaching, both curricular and extracurricular. The fundamental difference between Christian and non-Christian schools lies in the integration of biblical values that serve as the foundation for curriculum development, artistic activities, sports, and approaches to various issues in daily life (Braley, 2005:21). In Christian education, there is no dichotomy between the sacred and the secular, for every aspect of life is under the authority of God's truth.

The curriculum of a Christian school is built upon the Word of God, in which every subject, artistic activity, and sporting event is directed toward glorifying God. Activities such as music and art, for instance, are viewed as reflections of the Creator, and creative learning is regarded as a means to emulate God's ability to create and solve problems (Braley, 2005:22). Even in the context of sports competition, Christian values are instilled through the way teachers guide students to demonstrate Christlike attitudes in both victory and defeat.

The school climate also plays a crucial role in supporting the character formation process. As facilitators and agents of transformation, teachers must be competent both academically and spiritually. A teacher's competence is not measured solely by educational background or professional certification, but also by the ability to live out the Christian faith daily. Research in Indonesia shows that a teacher's influence on student learning outcomes remains relatively low only about 25% (Mulyasa, 2006:80). This presents a serious challenge, particularly for Christian teachers, to enhance the quality of their educational service.

According to Gangel, a Christian teacher is not merely a professional in the field of education but someone who has experienced salvation in Christ, depends on the work of the Holy Spirit in the teaching process, and continues to grow in a personal relationship with God (Gangel, 2001:14). Emphasis on the teacher's personal life is key, as studies show that the most significant factor influencing learning is not the environment or instructional material, but the teacher's own character.

The qualifications of a Christian teacher encompass both academic and spiritual dimensions. In addition to having adequate formal education, a Christian teacher must also possess spiritual integrity that is evident in everyday life. Interviews in the recruitment process of Christian teachers should emphasize one's personal experience with Christ and commitment to the Great Commission. A teacher who feels uncomfortable discussing salvation will not be effective in discipling students (Darmadi, 2021). True Christian teachers are those who enthusiastically lead their students to Christ and regard such moments as the highest achievement in their calling.

Amid the challenges of globalization and social diversity, Christian teachers are also expected to possess a global mission perspective integrated into the curriculum. They are not only responsible for teaching content but also for guiding students to participate in God's mission worldwide. Moreover, Christian teachers must maintain a consistent prayer life, interceding for their students not only for academic success but also for their spiritual growth and protection.

Students may forget the lessons taught, but they will always remember who their teacher was and how that teacher lived. Example is the most effective form of teaching in Christian education. The Word of God that forms the foundation of a teacher's life will be reflected in their actions, and students will learn not only from what is said but from what is lived (Taylor, 2017). Christian ethics can only be taught through a life of example. Therefore, Christian schools carry a great responsibility to ensure that their teachers are "living curricula" who authentically reflect the character of Christ.

The characteristics of Christian teachers who remain relevant in the context of Indonesia's pluralistic society can be grouped into three main dimensions:

1. Religious Diversity: Christian teachers must experience salvation in Christ, maintain a close personal fellowship with God, possess sound theological understanding and the ability to integrate it into teaching, and live with integrity and a missionary spirit.
2. Cultural Diversity: Christian teachers must recognize that their purpose is to glorify God, understand multicultural education, appreciate cultural diversity, and embody biblical values in social relationships.

3. Socioeconomic and Ethnic Diversity: Christian teachers must treat every individual with equal dignity as a creation of God with the potential for salvation, making Christ's love the foundation for social interaction within the learning community.

Thus, in the pursuit of an education that is both relevant and transformative within a pluralistic society, the presence of Christian teachers who fully understand their theological and pedagogical roles is an indispensable necessity.

CONCLUSION

Christian Religious Education (PAK) in a pluralistic society is not merely a tool for transmitting faith but also a strategic instrument for shaping a generation that is tolerant, spiritually intelligent, and committed to inclusive and Christ-centered national values. The PAK curriculum within the context of Indonesia's diversity represents a holistic educational system designed to form the faith, character, and spiritual experiences of students in the light of Christ. This curriculum encompasses not only the teaching materials but also the entirety of learning experiences that take place within schools, churches, families, and communities. Its success depends greatly on the quality of the educators and the contextual relevance of the content to Indonesia's sociocultural diversity.

The PAK learning materials in a pluralistic context are designed to develop students holistically based on Christian life principles, emphasizing a personal relationship with Christ and love as the foundation of faith. These materials integrate biblical values within the diversity of religions, cultures, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds, enabling students to live in love, appreciate differences, and become inclusive and contextual witnesses of Christ in a pluralistic society.

Christian teachers in the context of Indonesia's diversity must therefore be educators who are not only academically competent but also spiritually grounded living in fellowship with Christ and capable of integrating biblical values into every aspect of teaching and life. In a society that is plural in religion, culture, and socioeconomic background, Christian teachers are called to be living examples who embody Christ's love and inspire students to grow in an inclusive and transformative Christian faith and character.

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