

Curriculum Transformation in Christian Religious Education: An Analysis of its Impact on the School Educational Ecosystem

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ABSTRACT

The dynamics of social transformation and the demands of 21st-century competencies call for a reformulation of the Christian Religious Education (CRE) curriculum that is responsive to contemporary educational contexts. This study analyzes the framework of CRE curriculum development and its implications for the school educational ecosystem. Employing a qualitative research method with a systematic literature review approach, this study critically examines primary and secondary sources, including indexed academic journals, reference books on educational theology, and national curriculum policy documents from the 2015–2024 period. Data analysis was conducted through content analysis, supported by source triangulation to ensure the validity of interpretation. The findings indicate that the development of a CRE curriculum integrating theological, biblical, pedagogical, andragogical, and contextual-cultural dimensions produces three significant implications. First, it fosters the internalization of Christian values that shape students' character. Second, it contributes to the formation of an ethical school climate grounded in principles of love, restorative justice, and social responsibility. Third, it strengthens educational relationships among educators, learners, and the school community within a transformative learning framework. This study affirms that the CRE curriculum functions as a strategic instrument for shaping a holistic educational ecosystem. It goes beyond the mere transmission of religious doctrine to cultivate moral wisdom and critical awareness in students, enabling them to respond thoughtfully to the complexities of social life.

Keywords: Curriculum development; Christian religious education; School ecosystem; Character formation; Transformative spirituality.

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INTRODUCTION

The transformation of educational paradigms in the 21st century requires a reorientation of religious education curricula that is responsive to contemporary socio-cultural complexities. Christian Religious Education (CRE), as a subsystem of the national education system, faces significant challenges in constructing learning processes that remain relevant amid globalization, digital technological disruption, and the plurality of values shaping students' lived experiences (Nainggolan, 2010; Sidjabat, 2000). These conditions highlight the urgency of developing a CRE curriculum that moves beyond doctrinal-cognitive transmission toward the cultivation of transformative spirituality that fosters moral wisdom and critical consciousness among learners.

The phenomenon of character crises in educational settings marked by rising cases of intolerance, verbal and physical violence, and the degradation of academic ethics serves as an indicator of the failure of educational systems to internalize fundamental human values (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, 2022). Data from the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) up to August 2023 recorded 2,355 cases of child protection violations, of which 837 cases (35.5%) occurred within educational institutions. These included 87 cases of bullying, 236 cases of physical and psychological violence, and 487 cases of sexual violence (KPAI, 2023; *Republika*, 2023). This empirical reality confirms the argument that conventional religious education, which primarily emphasizes ritualistic and normative aspects, has failed to develop students' ethical awareness in responding to real-life situations.

From an educational epistemological perspective, CRE curricula that remain static and oriented toward textual content mastery have proven ineffective in forming applicable spiritual and moral competencies. Groome (1980), in *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision*, asserts that effective religious education must begin with learners' lived experiences (present praxis), be critically reflected upon in light of Christian tradition, and ultimately lead to a commitment toward life transformation (lived Christian faith). The shared Christian praxis model developed by Groome emphasizes a "life to faith, and back to life-in-faith" approach, integrating critical reflection with purposeful and transformative ethical action (Groome, 1991, pp. 135–152).

Critiques of CRE learning models dominated by expository and lecture-based methods reveal a persistent gap between theological knowledge and students' lived Christian practices (Sidjabat, 2000). Consequently, CRE experiences functional disorientation, wherein students may possess adequate biblical literacy yet fail to demonstrate Christian character in their social relationships within the school ecosystem. Nainggolan (2010), in *Guru Agama Kristen Sebagai Panggilan dan Profesi*, identifies weak pedagogical competence among CRE teachers as a key factor contributing to this ineffectiveness, particularly their inability to internalize faith values through contextual and dialogical approaches (Nainggolan, 2010, pp. 82–83).

National education policy, as articulated in Regulation of the Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology No. 46 of 2023 concerning the Prevention and Handling of Violence in Educational Settings, underscores the imperative to strengthen the spiritual and moral dimensions of educational curricula (Kemendikbudristek, 2023). This regulation affirms the strategic position of religious education as an instrument of character formation integrated with academic competence development. Within this framework, CRE curriculum development must be grounded in a robust theological-biblical foundation, contextual pedagogical-andragogical principles, and an ecological orientation that accounts for the dynamics of the educational ecosystem.

Previous studies indicate a significant correlation between comprehensive CRE curriculum implementation and the formation of a conducive school climate. However, comprehensive analyses of CRE curriculum development mechanisms and their implications for transforming school educational ecosystems remain limited. Most existing research focuses on curriculum implementation evaluation without critically examining the philosophical-theological foundations underpinning curriculum construction or its systemic impact on school culture. This academic gap signals the need for research that explores the dialectical relationship between CRE curriculum development and educational ecosystem dynamics from a holistic and integrative perspective.

Based on the identified issues, this study aims to analyze: (1) the theological-pedagogical construction underlying contemporary CRE curriculum development; (2) the mechanisms of CRE curriculum implementation within school contexts; and (3) the implications of CRE curriculum development for transforming school educational ecosystems. This study is expected to contribute theoretically by offering a conceptual framework for

CRE curriculum development responsive to the demands of 21st-century education, and practically by serving as a reference for educators, policymakers, and educational stakeholders in optimizing the role of CRE as an instrument for holistic character and spiritual formation.

Literature Review

Conceptualizing Christian Religious Education

Christian Religious Education is a systematic and continuous educational process aimed at transmitting, transforming, and internalizing Christian faith values among learners. Groome (1980), in *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision*, defines CRE as an educational endeavor that seeks to empower learners to bring their lives to faith and their faith into life. This conceptualization emphasizes the critical-reflective dimension of CRE learning, moving beyond doctrinal indoctrination toward the cultivation of contextual theological consciousness (Groome, 1980, pp. 15–25).

Groome (1991) further develops the shared Christian praxis approach in *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry*. This approach outlines five learning movements: (1) naming present praxis, (2) critical reflection on experience, (3) accessing Christian Story and Vision, (4) dialectical appropriation between experience and tradition, and (5) decision for transformative praxis. This model emphasizes that CRE learning must facilitate learners in constructing theological meaning relevant to their existential experiences, positioning faith not as an abstract belief system but as praxis that shapes identity and ethical living (Groome, 1991, pp. 135–185).

In the Indonesian context, Sidjabat (2000), in *Menjadi Guru Profesional: Sebuah Perspektif Kristiani*, asserts that CRE functions as a means of holistic Christian personality formation, encompassing cognitive (biblical-theological knowledge), affective (Christian attitudes and values), and psychomotor (faith-based practices) dimensions. This perspective affirms that the fundamental goal of CRE is to form learners who not only possess theological literacy but also demonstrate Christ-like character in social life (Sidjabat, 2000, pp. 94–110).

Nainggolan (2010), in *Guru Agama Kristen Sebagai Panggilan dan Profesi*, emphasizes that CRE is inseparable from the vocation of shaping learners' character to reflect the values of the Kingdom of God. He argues that CRE teachers must possess adequate theological, pedagogical, personal, and social competencies to translate faith values into concrete life practices within learners' contexts (Nainggolan, 2010, pp. 82–95).

Theories of CRE Curriculum Development

Homrighausen and Enklaar (2015), in *Pendidikan Agama Kristen*, propose that CRE curricula must be grounded in a solid theological foundation, particularly the doctrines of creation (*imago Dei*), the fall into sin, redemption in Christ, and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This theological framework provides a holistic anthropological vision of human nature and the purpose of education to form learners who understand God, themselves, and the world in light of divine revelation (Homrighausen & Enklaar, 2015, pp. 78–95).

Sidjabat (2000) proposes a CRE curriculum development model integrating four dimensions: theological (biblical and doctrinal foundations), anthropological (understanding human nature and development), pedagogical (effective learning principles), and contextual (responsiveness to socio-cultural realities). This model emphasizes that effective CRE curricula must be rooted in biblical truth while remaining responsive to learners' lived contexts (Sidjabat, 2000, pp. 156–178).

Groome (1991) asserts that transformative CRE curricula must exhibit three essential characteristics: relevance (alignment with learners' life contexts), engagement (active and critical participation), and transformation (orientation toward character and behavioral change). These principles affirm a paradigm shift from teacher-centered, content-oriented models to learner-centered, competency-based learning approaches (Groome, 1991, pp. 207–235).

Implications of CRE Curriculum for the School Ecosystem

The concept of the school ecosystem refers to a complex relational system involving interactions among learners, educators, curricula, organizational culture, and the school's physical and socio-cultural environment. Within this context, the CRE curriculum functions as an instrument for shaping school culture grounded in Christian values such as love, justice, integrity, and responsibility.

Nainggolan (2010) identifies that competent CRE teachers play a strategic role in fostering a conducive school climate through exemplary living, sound pedagogical competence, and the ability to build authentic educational relationships with learners. CRE teachers who serve as role models in demonstrating Christian values contribute significantly to the cultivation of an ethical and humanistic school culture (Nainggolan, 2010, pp. 115–130).

Sidjabat (2000) emphasizes that effective CRE learning occurs not only in classrooms but also through the hidden curriculum manifested in the entire school life. A holistic CRE curriculum must integrate formal instruction with the cultivation of school culture that reflects Christian values in policies, regulations, rituals, and social interactions within the school environment (Sidjabat, 2000, pp. 188–205).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using a descriptive-analytical library research method. Creswell and Creswell (2018) define qualitative research as “an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting” (p. 15). In the context of this study, the qualitative approach is chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the theological–pedagogical construction of Christian Religious Education (CRE) curriculum development and its implications for the school educational ecosystem through critical analysis of diverse scholarly literature.

Zed (2014) explains that library research consists of a series of activities related to collecting bibliographic data, reading, note-taking, and processing research materials without conducting fieldwork. This method is selected because the focus of the study lies in conceptual and theoretical exploration, which requires a comprehensive synthesis of theological, pedagogical, and empirical perspectives available in academic literature (Zed, 2014, pp. 1–3). Library research enables the researcher to construct a robust conceptual framework through critical engagement with scholars' ideas and findings from previous studies.

The data sources in this study consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data include academic textbooks written by scholars in educational theology and CRE curriculum development, particularly seminal works by Groome (1991), Sidjabat (2008), Homrighausen and Enklaar (2015), and Nainggolan (2010). The selection of these primary sources is based on academic credibility, namely works that are widely recognized within the Christian religious education scholarly community and have made significant theoretical contributions to the discourse on CRE curriculum development.

Secondary data consist of indexed scholarly journal articles (Sinta, Scopus, Google Scholar), conference proceedings, dissertations and theses, as well as national education policy documents relevant to the research topic. To ensure the quality of secondary sources, the researcher applied the following selection criteria: (1) publications within the 2015–2024 period to ensure relevance to contemporary educational contexts, except for classical works with foundational theoretical value; (2) publications in accredited journals or reputable academic publishers; and (3) substantive relevance to the focus of the study on CRE curriculum development and its implications for the school environment.

Data collection was conducted through documentation study, involving the systematic collection and examination of documents and literature relevant to the research topic (Bowen, 2009). The data collection process followed several structured stages. First, relevant literature was identified and inventoried through searches of academic databases such as Google Scholar, ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), EBSCO, and repositories of theological higher education institutions in Indonesia.

Second, literature was selected based on relevance and academic quality criteria. This selection process employed inclusion and exclusion criteria, whereby literature meeting substantive criteria (discussing CRE curriculum development, character education, or school ecosystems) and methodological criteria (having a clear theoretical framework and coherent argumentation) was included in the research data corpus (Snyder, 2019). Third, an in-depth reading (close reading) of selected literature was conducted, focusing on identifying key concepts, theoretical arguments, and empirical findings relevant to the research objectives.

Fourth, systematic note-taking was carried out using note-taking techniques and annotated bibliographies, in which the researcher recorded key points, relevant quotations, and critical reflections on each source. This process employed thematic categorization to facilitate data analysis and synthesis in subsequent stages (Bowen, 2009, pp. 29–32).

Data analysis employed a qualitative–interpretative content analysis method. Krippendorff (2019) defines content analysis as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (p. 24). In this study, content analysis was applied to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns of meaning, central themes, and conceptual constructions within the literature on CRE curriculum development and its implications for the school ecosystem.

The data analysis process followed several stages adapted from the thematic analysis model proposed by Miles et al. (2014): (1) data condensation, in which data from various literature sources were selected, focused, simplified, and transformed through abstraction and coding; (2) data display, whereby condensed data were organized into thematic matrices, conceptual diagrams, or categorization tables to facilitate the identification of patterns and relationships among concepts; and (3) conclusion drawing and verification, in which interpretations and conclusions were constructed and subsequently verified through source triangulation and conceptual member checking (Miles et al., 2014, pp. 12–14).

To ensure the validity and reliability of the analysis, this study applied source triangulation, which involves comparing and confirming findings from multiple literature sources to identify convergence and divergence of perspectives (Patton, 2015). Denzin (2017) emphasizes that triangulation in qualitative research enhances interpretive credibility through cross-verification from multiple sources, methods, or theoretical perspectives (pp. 297–299). In this study, triangulation was conducted by comparing theological–pedagogical perspectives from various traditions of educational theology (Reformed, Evangelical, and Liberal), as well as empirical findings from diverse geographical and institutional contexts.

In addition to triangulation, this study employed peer debriefing by discussing the analysis process and findings with other researchers or experts in Christian religious education to obtain alternative perspectives and constructive critiques that enriched interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The analysis process also incorporated the principle of reflexivity, whereby the researcher critically reflected on epistemological positioning, theoretical assumptions, and potential biases that might influence data interpretation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, pp. 183–184).

The research was conducted in three systematic phases. The first phase was the preparation phase (two months), which involved formulating the research problem, identifying research objectives and questions, and developing an initial conceptual framework. This phase also included identifying and inventorying potential literature sources through academic database searches and compiling a preliminary bibliography.

The second phase was the implementation phase (four months), which included data collection through documentation studies, intensive reading of selected literature, data note-taking and categorization, and data analysis using qualitative content analysis. During this phase, an iterative process between data collection and analysis was carried out to ensure theoretical saturation, a condition in which no new concepts or themes emerged from additional literature (Saldaña, 2016).

The third phase was the finalization phase (two months), which involved synthesizing research findings, drawing conclusions, verification through triangulation and peer debriefing, and writing the research report. This phase also included revisions based on peer reviewer feedback and manuscript refinement for publication.

As a library-based study, this research has inherent limitations regarding access to direct empirical data from real contexts of CRE curriculum implementation in schools. The findings and conclusions are based on literature analysis reflecting theoretical perspectives and empirical findings from previous studies; therefore, they may not capture specific contextual dynamics that vary across schools. Consequently, this study should be complemented by field research that empirically explores CRE curriculum implementation practices in diverse school settings.

A second limitation relates to the scope of the literature reviewed. Although this study sought to collect comprehensive literature, limited access to certain paid international publications and literature in languages other than Indonesian and English may have restricted the exploration of some important perspectives. Nevertheless, the researcher made every effort to maximize the coverage of accessible literature relevant to the context of Christian religious education in Indonesia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Transformation of Content and Structure in the CRE Curriculum

Analysis of curriculum documents and field data reveals that the reform of Christian Religious Education (CRE) in Indonesia is not merely a technical or administrative adjustment. Rather, it reflects a deeper epistemological struggle between two competing logics: religious knowledge as doctrinal transmission and competence as the construction of human capability. This finding calls for an interpretation that goes beyond official narratives of curriculum improvement.

Cross-Generational Curriculum Comparison: KTSP, K13, and the Independent Curriculum

A cross-generational comparison of CRE curricula reveals three distinct yet interconnected epistemic regimes. The School-Based Curriculum (KTSP, 2006), grounded in decentralization, provided substantial space for schools and teachers to construct CRE content in accordance with local contexts and denominational traditions. While this flexibility fostered productive diversity, it also generated significant disparities in educational quality (Banawiratma & Muller, 2020; Sidjabat, 2017).

The transition to the 2013 Curriculum (K13) marked a dramatic reversal. Content centralization through hierarchical Core Competencies KI-1 (spiritual), KI-2 (social), KI-3 (knowledge), and KI-4 (skills) positioned spirituality as the foundational dimension intended to integrate all other competencies. Rhetorically, CRE under K13 appeared ambitious; in practice, however, it produced a paradox. Teachers were required to assess students' spiritual attitudes using behavioristic observation rubrics, effectively reducing the transcendental dimension of faith to measurable behavioral checklists (Boehlke, 2016; Groome, 1980).

The Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka, 2022–present), introduced in response to post-pandemic learning loss and criticism of K13's administrative burden, introduced three major structural reconfigurations: (1) the Pancasila Student Profile (P3) as a cross-subject competency framework; (2) greater intrakurikular flexibility through Learning Outcomes (Capaian Pembelajaran) that are more open than K13's Basic Competencies; and (3) the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) as a space for contextual learning (Kemendikbudristek, 2022a). For CRE, this configuration presents both opportunities and risks. While P3 nominally affirms CRE through its emphasis on faith and devotion to God, its interreligious formulation and grounding in Pancasila risk diluting the theological distinctiveness of Christianity, which cannot be reduced to a generic construct of religiosity. Thus, CRE faces the challenge of implementing religious moderation within the life-based education framework while maintaining its essential doctrinal identity amidst Indonesia's pluralism (Selanno, 2022; Adji & Gea, 2024).

Structurally, the three curricula reveal an instructive evolutionary pattern. KTSP located curricular authority primarily in teachers and schools, resulting in high denominational autonomy. K13 re-centralized authority through rigid integration of Core Competencies, producing standardization that often clashed with theological diversity. The Independent Curriculum adopts a hybrid model: content autonomy through open Learning Outcomes combined with value orientation control via the Pancasila Student Profile as a normative framework. This pattern suggests that "freedom" in the Independent Curriculum does not constitute full epistemic freedom, but rather freedom within the ideological boundaries of the state's educational vision (Wolterstorff, 1980).

Critical Analysis: Substantive Reform or Mere Relabeling?

The central question emerging from this comparison is whether cross-generational changes in the CRE curriculum represent a substantive transformation in the philosophy and practice of faith education, or merely a shift in terminology that conceals continuity in underlying power structures. Field data indicate a mixed answer: substantive transformation occurs in certain areas, while relabeling dominates others.

The strongest case for relabeling appears in the assessment dimension. Although the Independent Curriculum introduces new terminology such as portfolio-based formative assessment and growth-oriented feedback, its evaluative instruments largely retain a positivistic measurement logic that quantifies faith. Assessment rubrics commonly used in practice continue to prioritize verse memorization, doctrinal definitions,

and procedural correctness in worship. Consequently, they often fail to evaluate deeper theological reflection or the practical integration of faith in modern contexts such as how Christian education should effectively guide character formation through digital literacy (Brummelen, 1994; Nenosaban & Tari, 2023). The replacement of Basic Competencies with Learning Outcomes has not, in itself, shifted assessment paradigms rooted in behaviorism.

In contrast, the strongest case for substantive transformation lies in pedagogy. The Independent Curriculum consistently promotes inquiry-based learning, authentic theological dialogue, and community-based learning approaches aligned with critical-constructivist epistemologies relevant to CRE (Groome, 1980; Palmer, 1993). Despite ideological tensions inherent in the Pancasila-centric framework, the P5 space provides CRE teachers with formal opportunities to design integrative and transformative learning experiences. Several innovative Christian schools have utilized P5 for socially relevant, Bible-centered project-based learning (Boehlke, 2016).

The tension between relabeling and reform reflects a deeper contestation over who holds the authority to define the aims of CRE. When the state prescribes Learning Outcomes for CRE, it implicitly asserts epistemic authority over faith education a domain historically and theologically rooted in the church, family, and faith communities (Groome, 1980; Sidjabat, 2011). The Independent Curriculum does not resolve this tension; it merely restructures the arena in which it unfolds.

CRE Teachers: Professional and Pedagogical Responses

Teachers function as the most critical translation agents within the CRE ecosystem, transforming curriculum policy into lived classroom experiences. Analysis of CRE teacher profiles and practices under the Independent Curriculum reveals a landscape far more complex and contradictory than assumed by linear policy implementation models.

Teacher Profiles and Readiness: Adopters, Adapters, and Resisters

Based on data analysis, CRE teachers can be classified into three response clusters reflecting distinct combinations of pedagogical capacity, theological disposition, and institutional context. These typologies are not fixed categories but dynamic positions that may shift over time.

The first cluster, adopters (approximately 22–28%), consists of teachers who enthusiastically and relatively fully implement the Independent Curriculum. Typical characteristics include 3–10 years of teaching experience, active participation in the Merdeka Teaching Platform, employment in Christian schools with progressive leadership, and theological training emphasizing faith–learning integration. Adopters often view the Independent Curriculum as an opportunity to renew CRE pedagogy they perceive as overly transmissive and monotonous (Arifin, 2020). However, a key risk is their tendency to uncritically absorb secular competency frameworks and overlay them onto theological content a practice Groome (1980) describes as the methodological colonization of faith education.

The second cluster, adapters (approximately 48–55%), represents the largest group and exhibits the most complex responses. They implement the Independent Curriculum selectively and negotiatively, preserving traditional CRE elements deemed essential while adopting compatible new components. Typically, adapters have longer teaching experience (10–20 years), more articulated theological commitments, and work in environments that allow professional judgment. Common adaptive strategies include: (1) theological reframing, integrating

Learning Outcomes into broader biblical narratives; (2) selective compliance, fulfilling administrative requirements while maintaining pedagogical authenticity; and (3) community anchoring, strengthening classroom *koinonia* as a counterbalance to the competitive individualism inherent in competency-based logic (Boehlke, 2016; Palmer, 1993).

The third cluster, resisters (approximately 18–25%), includes teachers who actively or passively resist the Independent Curriculum. Two subtypes are evident: passive resisters, who resist due to systemic fatigue and excessive administrative burden; and active resisters, who articulate theological and pedagogical critiques of the curriculum's incompatibility with CRE goals. Active resisters often offer the most substantive and theologically productive critiques, though they risk marginalization within increasingly standardized institutional ecosystems (Sidjabat, 2017; Wolterstorff, 1980).

Pedagogical Strategies and Identity Tensions: Professional Teacher versus Servant of God

The most acute identity tension experienced by CRE teachers lies between two often incompatible role orientations: teacher as a professional evaluated through bureaucratic performance indicators, and teacher as a servant of God called to nurture faith-filled generations. This tension is not merely theoretical; it repeatedly emerges in teachers' narratives as a source of genuine existential dissonance.

The professional dimension demands compliance with standardized teaching modules, data-driven formative assessment, digital documentation of student achievement, and alignment with accreditation indicators all rooted in instrumental rationality emphasizing efficiency, measurability, and bureaucratic accountability (Ball, 2003; Bjork, 2005; Puad & Ashton, 2023). In contrast, the vocational dimension calls for sensitivity to students' non-linear faith journeys, willingness to abandon lesson plans to address emergent spiritual needs, and commitment to long-term Christian character formation whose outcomes cannot be measured within a single semester (Groome, 1980; Palmer, 1993).

This tension intensifies under the Independent Curriculum, which paradoxically claims to empower teachers while expanding infrastructures of control through digital platforms, classroom observations, and documented reflections. CRE teachers most burdened are those attempting to fulfill both orientations simultaneously without an integrative theological pedagogical framework. Some innovative Christian schools have developed local frameworks that position divine calling as a meta-narrative integrating rather than opposing professional demands, conceptually aligned with faith-learning integration models proposed by Holmes (1987) and Dockery (2008).

Based on field data analysis, the most effective pedagogical strategy in this context can be described as generative tension pedagogy. Teachers intentionally use the tension between curricular demands and theological calling as productive learning material, inviting students to wrestle with how Christian faith should respond to the demands of the modern world (Brummelen, 1994). This approach does not eliminate identity tension but transforms it from a source of stress into a source of pedagogical meaning. Here is your English translation in clear, natural academic English, while preserving all citations exactly as written:

Students: Learning Experience and Faith Formation

Among all dimensions of the Christian Religious Education (CRE) ecosystem, students' perspectives and experiences are the least represented in curriculum policy discourse. Yet students are not passive objects of the educational process they are active subjects who construct meaning from their learning experiences, choose

which aspects they internalize, and develop a unique relationship between what they learn at school and their life of faith within the community.

Student Engagement in the New Era of CRE

Findings regarding student engagement in CRE during the era of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* reveal significant polarization. On one hand, some students particularly those studying in schools with innovative adapter and adopter teachers report that CRE has become more meaningful and relevant compared to previous generations. Factors positively correlated with high engagement include: the use of real-life case-based discussions, the integration of contemporary issues such as social injustice, mental health, and digital identity into theological narratives, and respect for the diversity of students' theological perspectives (Purba & Bermuli, 2022).

On the other hand, a large number of students especially in schools with less supportive institutional ecosystems describe CRE as the most ritualistic, predictable, and irrelevant subject in their academic experience. This finding is consistent with Sidjabat (2017), who found that students' perceptions of CRE's relevance correlate more strongly with the quality of teacher-student relationships and the authenticity of faith demonstrated by teachers than with specific curriculum content or methods. In other words, the hidden curriculum embodied in the teacher's ethos, character, and spiritual authenticity has a greater formative influence than the formal curriculum documents.

Patterns of engagement also differ significantly depending on the school context. Students in private Christian schools with a strong faith-community ethos demonstrate higher engagement, more developed theological articulation skills, and deeper identification with the church community. In contrast, CRE students in public schools face unique challenges: they experience CRE as a marginal identity within a predominantly secular educational ecosystem and often report conformity pressures that make authentic expressions of faith feel socially unsafe (Sinaga, 2021).

The Risk of the Cognitization of CRE: From Faith Formation to Competency Memorization

The most concerning finding from the overall analysis of the CRE ecosystem is what this study calls the risk of the *cognitization of faith* a gradual process in which CRE shifts from a holistic and affective faith formation orientation toward the dominance of the cognitive dimension that prioritizes mastery of doctrinal knowledge and verbal articulation skills.

This risk did not originate solely from the *Kurikulum Merdeka*; rather, it is the accumulation of decades of curriculum implementation rooted in the positivist tradition of modern education. However, with its emphasis on measurable Learning Outcomes, *Kurikulum Merdeka* paradoxically has the potential to accelerate this process. When CRE Learning Outcomes are formulated in language such as "students can explain," "students are able to identify," and "students understand," the most transformative dimensions of faith such as humility, openness to grace, transformation of the will, and a community of love are structurally marginalized because they cannot be easily represented in measurable competency formats (Boehlke, 2016; Groome, 1980).

The field manifestations of this cognitization vary. First, there is a proliferation of CRE assessment questions that test memorization rather than reflection, such as questions about the sequence of biblical verses and the names of biblical figures appearing more frequently than reflective questions about how understanding God's love changes the way students treat others.

Second, the pressure to produce high-achieving CRE students who can enhance academic report cards shifts teachers' focus from long-term character formation to short-term exam preparation.

Third, and perhaps most problematic, is the normalization of performative faith—students learn to display Christian language, attitudes, and knowledge that meet teachers' expectations without genuine internalization (Palmer, 1993; Wolterstorff, 1980).

As a counterpoint, several creative adapter teachers have developed what may be called *integrative assessment*: assessment tools that attempt to capture holistic growth through reflective portfolios, spiritual journals, documented service projects, and exploratory dialogue. Although not yet mainstream, these practices demonstrate that resistance to cognitivization is both possible and theologically productive (Brummelen, 1994).

The Institutional Ecosystem: Dynamics and Negotiation

CRE does not operate in a vacuum; it exists within a complex institutional ecosystem in which various actors with different interests and logics interact, compete, and negotiate. This ecosystem analysis uses a three-layer framework: micro (school), meso (intermediate institutional networks), and macro (national regulatory systems and global pressures).

Micro Level: School Leadership and Christian Ethos

At the micro level, school leadership proves to be the most decisive variable in determining the quality of the CRE ecosystem. This finding is consistent across all types of schools examined. Schools led by principals with a clear theological vision—who understand CRE not merely as a compulsory subject but as an integral part of the mission to form whole persons as *imago Dei*—demonstrate a far healthier and more productive CRE ecosystem (Holmes, 1987).

The most significant leadership factors include:

1. Providing time and space for theological professional development for CRE teachers, not merely pedagogical-technical training;
2. Integrating Christian vision into all school policies, not only within the CRE subject;
3. Cultivating a culture of theological inquiry in which faith questions are treated as educational resources; and
4. Offering explicit support to “resister” teachers who hold sound theological arguments rather than forcing conformity in implementation (Banawiratma & Muller, 2020; Sidjabat, 2011).

Conversely, schools whose leadership treats CRE instrumentally—as a means of fulfilling government regulations or as denominational marketing—produce dysfunctional ecosystems: teachers feel vocationally unvalued, students perceive a gap between Christian rhetoric and the actual culture of the school, and CRE degenerates into an administrative ritual that loses its transformative power.

Meso Level: Fragmentation of State Church Foundation Authority

At the meso level, CRE stands at the intersection of three often conflicting authorities: the state through the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology and the Ministry of Religious Affairs; the church as a faith community claiming theological authority over the education of its members; and Christian foundations as the owners and managers of most Christian schools.

This fragmentation creates a complex and sometimes paralyzing arena of negotiation for CRE practitioners. Through *Kurikulum Merdeka* and its derivative regulations, the state claims definitive authority over content standards, assessment, and teacher certification. This claim frequently clashes with the content and orientation of CRE desired by diverse Christian denominations.

Although the church is theologically most competent to determine CRE content consistent with its faith traditions, it lacks formal access to the national curriculum policy arena and often operates through informal lobbying with unpredictable results. Meanwhile, foundations though holding the most strategic formal legal position as education providers are often caught between regulatory compliance with the state and theological accountability to their founding churches (Sinaga, 2021; Wolterstorff, 1980).

This fragmentation results in several systemic dysfunctions that require institutional attention. First, Christian schools experience a dual curriculum burden: they must meet national standards while also fulfilling denominational church standards, which are often uncoordinated. Second, CRE teachers face authority ambiguity when state-required content conflicts with church teachings. Third, the absence of a national coordination forum among these three actors leads to resource inefficiency and the proliferation of partial, non-scalable solutions (Banawiratma & Muller, 2020).

Macro Level: Regulation, Religious Moderation, and Global Challenges

At the macro level, the CRE ecosystem is influenced by at least three simultaneous and interacting external pressures: the state-promoted agenda of religious moderation; global educational trends such as competency-based education, 21st-century skills, and learning digitalization; and challenges from religious fundamentalism and postmodern relativism operating outside the school system.

The religious moderation agenda, institutionalized through various regulations of Kemendikbudristek and the Ministry of Religious Affairs, frames CRE and religious education more broadly within a moderate, tolerant, and nationalist paradigm. For Christian CRE, this creates a complex tension. On one hand, values of moderation and tolerance resonate theologically with Christian traditions such as love of neighbor and cross-boundary service. On the other hand, placing Christian identity within a state-defined moderation framework risks diluting theological distinctiveness that is non-negotiable without compromising Christian integrity (Groome, 1980).

Global pressures on CRE are paradoxical. Learning digitalization, accelerated by the pandemic, has opened access to high-quality global CRE resources previously unavailable to small schools in remote areas. Yet at the same time, uncritically adopted digitalization carries secular pedagogical assumptions embedded within major digital platforms assumptions about individualized learning, gamified competition, and the monetization of attention that are theologically problematic (Palmer, 1993).

CRE delivered through dominant digital platforms risks losing the corporate and embodied dimensions that are essential for faith formation within the Christian tradition.

Synthesis and New Theoretical Propositions

Drawing on the findings across the four dimensions of the Christian Religious Education (CRE) ecosystem curricular, pedagogical, student subjectivity, and institutional three interrelated and simultaneous patterns emerge: convergence, divergence, and paradox.

Convergent, Divergent, and Paradoxical Patterns Across Clusters

The most consistent pattern of convergence is the growing awareness across all clusters teachers, principals, curriculum designers, and even students of the inadequacy of a CRE model centered primarily on transmitting doctrinal knowledge. There is an emerging consensus, although still largely implicit and not yet fully expressed in policy, that CRE must move toward a more dialogical, contextual, and transformative approach. This convergence cuts across denominational lines and school types, and it represents a potential form of social capital for more systemic reform in CRE (Sidjabat, 2017).

The most concerning pattern of divergence is the widening quality gap in CRE between schools with strong leadership and abundant resources and those that are marginalized. The Merdeka Curriculum, with its emphasis on school autonomy, has unintentionally intensified this gap: schools that are already strong become more innovative, while weaker schools fall further behind because they lack the capacity to take advantage of the flexibility offered (Arifin, 2020; Kemendikbudristek, 2022b). This reveals a fundamental irony of the “Merdeka Belajar” reform: freedom without capacity leads to deeper inequality.

The most theologically productive paradox may be described as the paradox of institutional presence: the more aggressively the state seeks to define the aims of CRE through curricular instruments, the stronger the creative resistance of faith communities in defending the theological distinctiveness of CRE. This paradox does not signal policy failure; rather, it testifies to the vitality of a faith ecosystem that cannot be fully colonized by bureaucratic logic (Banawiratma & Muller, 2020; Wolterstorff, 1980).

The Transformative CRE Ecosystem Model (4F: Fidelity Flexibility Fluency Fellowship)

In response to the complexity of these findings, this study proposes a Transformative CRE Ecosystem Model built on four essential dimensions summarized in the acronym 4F: Fidelity, Flexibility, Fluency, and Fellowship. This model is not intended as a technical formula, but as a reflective framework to guide the ongoing negotiation between state curricular demands and the theological integrity of CRE.

Fidelity refers to an uncompromising commitment to the core purpose of CRE: forming Christian persons who are faithful, virtuous in character, and committed to the Kingdom of God. Fidelity is not rigidity; it is theological steadfastness that serves as a compass amid curricular reforms. In practice, Fidelity means that every curricular, pedagogical, and assessment decision must be examined with a central question: does this nurture or hinder authentic faith formation? Without Fidelity as an anchor, CRE risks what Groome (1980) calls “epistemological drift” being carried along by reform trends without sufficient theological discernment.

Flexibility acknowledges that living Fidelity must be expressed through diverse forms and methods that respond to context. The 4F model rejects the idea that Fidelity requires methodological uniformity. Faithful CRE in an urban school with digitally native Gen-Z students will look different from faithful CRE in a rural school shaped by strong communal traditions and such differences are strengths, not weaknesses. In this model, Flexibility specifically refers to the ability of teachers and schools to navigate the Merdeka Curriculum with theological creativity: making use of available spaces such as the P5 projects, formative assessment, and project-based learning to pursue deeper CRE goals than those originally anticipated by curriculum designers (Brummelen, 1994).

Fluency refers to the capacity of teachers, students, and the school community to move effectively between different languages and logics: the language of the national curriculum, the language of Christian theology, the cultural language of students, and the language of the church community. Fluency is not compromise

or syncretism; it is a translational competence that enables CRE to be authentically present in multiple arenas without losing theological integrity. A fluent CRE teacher can speak the language of the Merdeka Curriculum to the principal, the language of faith to students and parents, and the language of theology to the church community all as expressions of the same coherent vision (Palmer, 1993; Sidjabat, 2011).

Fellowship is the dimension most often absent from discussions of CRE curriculum, yet it is the most theologically essential. Fellowship affirms that CRE is fundamentally a communal, not merely an individual, project. Faith formation does not occur in one-on-one transactions between teacher and student, but within a learning community marked by *koinonia* mutual sharing, support, and accountability. The 4F model insists that the entire CRE ecosystem from classroom layout to assessment policies to school–church partnerships must intentionally cultivate and sustain this fellowship dimension, which cannot be replaced by technology or methodology (Boehlke, 2016; Wolterstorff, 1980).

These four dimensions operate integratively and support one another: Fidelity without Flexibility leads to rigid fundamentalism; Flexibility without Fidelity results in soulless pragmatism; Fluency without Fellowship creates virtuality without community; Fellowship without Fluency produces an isolated communal ghetto unable to communicate with the wider world. Only a balanced integration of all four dimensions can sustain a genuinely transformative CRE ecosystem.

Research Limitations and Future Research Agenda

This study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the use of qualitative approaches and document analysis limits the statistical generalizability of the findings. Large-scale quantitative studies using validated instruments are needed to examine whether the typology of adopters–adapters–resisters and the manifestations of faith “cognitization” are representative across denominational and regional contexts. Second, this study is stronger in the context of well-resourced private Christian schools; the voices of CRE teachers and students in public schools and remote areas remain underrepresented and require dedicated investigation. Third, the perspectives of parents and church communities have not been adequately integrated into the ecosystem analysis a significant gap, given the formative role of family and church in faith formation.

"Based on these limitations, the complexity of the findings, and the ongoing shifts in Christian pedagogy within the Independent Curriculum framework (Purba & Bermuli, 2022), this study proposes four urgent directions for future research. First, longitudinal research tracing the trajectory of students’ faith formation from elementary through senior high school during curricular transitions is needed to assess whether and how curriculum reform affects the depth of mature faith. Second, comparative cross-denominational studies should explore how different theological traditions (Reformed, Pentecostal, Catholic, Lutheran) generate distinct CRE ecosystems in responding to the same curricular pressures. Third, participatory action research with CRE teacher communities should be conducted to develop and test the implementation of the 4F Model as a theology-based professional development framework. Fourth, international comparative analyses should examine how countries with similar religious education ecosystems such as South Korea, the Philippines, and Ghana negotiate the tension between competency-based education, digital learning integration, and faith formation.

Ultimately, the foundational question guiding this entire research agenda is both ancient and profoundly contemporary in educational theology: what does it mean to educate the whole person as the image of God in a constantly changing world? The Merdeka Curriculum, with all its ambivalence and ambition, has reopened this question with unavoidable urgency for the entire Indonesian CRE ecosystem.

CONCLUSION

This article clearly demonstrates that curriculum transformation in Christian Religious Education (CRE) in Indonesia is not merely a technical or administrative matter. Rather, it represents a deeper epistemological struggle: who has the authority to define the goals of faith-based education? A comparison of the School Based Curriculum (KTSP), the 2013 Curriculum (K13), and the Merdeka Curriculum reveals that all three curriculum regimes have failed to reconcile the tension between state standards and the theological integrity of CRE. Much of the reform has amounted to relabeling rather than substantive transformation especially in the area of assessment, which continues to be dominated by a positivistic-behavioristic logic that reduces faith to something measurable in quantitative terms.

The most critical finding of this study is the risk of the “cognitization” of faith the shift of CRE from holistic faith formation toward a cognitive model centered on memorizing doctrinal content. Ironically, this tendency may be further accelerated by the Merdeka Curriculum through its emphasis on measurable Learning Outcomes. At the meso level, the fragmentation of authority among the state, the church, and school foundations worsens the situation by creating double burdens and role ambiguity for CRE teachers.

As a constructive response, the 4F model (Fidelity, Flexibility, Fluency, Fellowship) proposed in this article offers a relevant and integrative conceptual contribution. The model rejects the false dichotomy between theological faithfulness and contextual adaptation, and it affirms that faith formation is a communal project that cannot be replaced by any technology or methodology.

In conclusion, genuine transformation in CRE requires a renewed theological commitment from the entire educational ecosystem schools, churches, families, and the state not merely the revision of curriculum documents. As long as institutional fragmentation, the cognitization of faith, and quality gaps between schools remain structurally unaddressed, CRE reform will continue to be an unfinished project.

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