

Article

Educating with Love: Inclusive Christian Religious Education Strategies to Answer the Challenges of Diversity in the Modern Era

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Abstract: This research aims to formulate an inclusive Christian Religious Education (CRE) strategy by making love the core pedagogical principle in responding to the challenges of diversity in the modern era. The problem addressed is the prevalent tendency toward exclusive and normative CRE approaches, which are often less relevant in diverse societies. The methodology employed is qualitative descriptive through a literature review of theological and pedagogical works. The novelty of this study lies in integrating love as an educational approach that is not only a taught value but also a teaching method and a transformative goal. The findings indicate that love can foster dialogical and empathetic relationships in the learning process, strengthen Christian identity without being exclusive, and empower teachers to act as facilitators of reconciliation. Thus, this approach enables CRE to be relevant and contextual, shaping students with Christian character who are ready to be agents of peace in a pluralistic society.

Keywords: Christian Religious Education; love; inclusive; diversity; pedagogical

1. Introduction

In the context of an increasingly plural and complex global society, religious education faces significant challenges to remain relevant and transformative. Christian Religious Education (CRE), as part of both the national and ecclesiastical education systems, is required not only to instill values of faith but also to respond to social dynamics characterized by cultural, religious, ethnic, and lifestyle diversity (Giban & Rangga, 2025). This reality places CRE in a strategic position to build bridges between differences through the values of love, tolerance, and respect for fellow human beings as creations of God. However, exclusive and normative educational approaches often hinder this process and create social barriers within the educational environment.

The main problem emerging in current CRE practices is the tendency towards exclusivism in the delivery of materials and teaching methods. This results in a lack of cross-identity dialogue and openness to diverse social realities. In a number of educational institutions, the CRE curriculum is still oriented towards strengthening internal identity without accommodating healthy dialogue with different parties (Rangga & Gulo, 2025). This raises critical questions regarding the relevance and effectiveness of CRE in shaping students who can coexist harmoniously in a multicultural society. Education, which should be a vehicle for liberation, instead risks becoming a tool for ideological exclusivity.

Specifically, this problem becomes even more complex in the modern era, as students are exposed to various global ideological influences, digital media, and conflicting social narratives. In this context, CRE needs to re-design its approach to instill Christian values of love in a way that is contextual, applicable, and transformative. One proposed approach is through an inclusive education strategy based on love as the primary principle. Love, in Christian understanding, is not merely an emotion or an individual act, but a life orientation that enables individuals to see and accept the full existence of others. Naturally, this inclusive approach in CRE aims to build an awareness that diversity is not a threat but a gift from God that must be managed in a spirit of love and humility. This strategy shifts the focus from dogma-based education to education that prioritizes dialogue, empathy, and collaboration

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(Diana, 2019). Within this framework, love becomes not only a teaching value but also the method and goal of the educational process itself. Thus, CRE not only educates in love but also educates through love and for love.

In a study conducted by Sahartian (Sahartian, 2018), the importance of CRE teachers' roles in shaping students' spiritual intelligence was emphasized, but it did not elaborate on inclusive pedagogical strategies in responding to diversity. Meanwhile, (Diana, 2019) highlighted the role of parents in educating children in the era of the Industrial Revolution 4.0, focusing on love- and justice-based education within the family context, but did not discuss formal education in schools. Furthermore, research by (Tari & Tafonao, 2019) focused more on child education within the family based on Colossians 3:21, emphasizing love without violence. However, it did not integrate the value of love into curricular approaches and active learning strategies in the context of a pluralistic society. While these three studies offer important contributions, none specifically address the integration of love as an inclusive pedagogical principle in formal CRE that shapes students into agents of reconciliation amidst diversity, as proposed in this study.

Therefore, this paper presents novelty in the discourse of CRE by positioning love as an inclusive pedagogical approach in responding to the challenges of diversity. Unlike traditional approaches, which are more normative and exclusive, this study offers a new framework that stems from theological understanding and the praxis of inclusive education. Another novelty lies in the integration of the value of love into active learning strategies capable of shaping students into agents of reconciliation and peacemakers within a pluralistic society.

Thus, the primary goal of this study is to formulate an inclusive CRE strategy by making love the main foundation in addressing diversity in the modern era. Specifically, this article seeks to identify the elements of love-based education that can be applied in the context of CRE learning in schools and churches. This study also aims to provide guidance for Christian educators in building open, empathetic, and collaborative learning communities. The main contribution of this article lies in the development of a theoretical and practical framework that can serve as a reference for designing an inclusive CRE education model relevant to the challenges of the times (Rangga & Hutahaeon, 2025). This paper also provides a reflective basis for theologians, educators, and Christian education policymakers to evaluate existing approaches and develop strategies that are more contextual and oriented toward social transformation.

2. Proposed Method

The research method used in this study is a descriptive qualitative method based on library research (Wijaya, 2013). This approach was chosen to deeply explore theological, pedagogical, and practical concepts related to inclusive Christian religious education based on love within the context of diversity. Data was collected through a literature review of educational theology books, scholarly articles, academic journals, and relevant curriculum documents. The analysis was conducted in a descriptive-critical manner to identify patterns, principles, and strategies that can support the implementation of a love-based approach in the curriculum and teaching practices of Christian Religious Education.

3. Results and Discussion

Love as a Transformative Pedagogical Principle

When discussing love in the context of Christian Religious Education (CRE), love is at the heart of Jesus Christ's teachings, which are not only theological but can also be implemented pedagogically. The Bible already states that the principle of love is not limited to teaching about God's love for humanity, but also how this value is lived out and actualized in the educational process (Chen, 2024). When love is placed as the pedagogical foundation, education is no longer understood merely as a transfer of knowledge but as a human relationship that is mutually edifying and humanizing. This forms the basis of a transformative pedagogical approach.

Love as a pedagogical principle means that the relationship between teachers and students is built on a foundation of respect, care, empathy, and acceptance (Nofrion, 2016). Education doesn't just demand academic obedience; it also recognizes the student's complete being—with their unique qualities, backgrounds, weaknesses, and potential. Here, the teacher isn't a dominating authority, but a partner and guide who helps students grow in faith and character through a loving approach. The transformation referred to isn't just about cognitive

aspects; it touches on affective and moral dimensions. When students feel unconditionally accepted and valued, the internalization of Christian values like patience, forgiveness, and solidarity becomes more effective. This is the transformative power of love: it can change attitudes, shape consciousness, and renew one's life orientation toward God's peaceful and just will.

Therefore, love as a pedagogical principle also forms the foundation for creating an inclusive school culture or learning community. In such a community, every difference—be it cultural, socioeconomic, or diversity of understanding—is not seen as a threat but as a shared richness that enriches the learning process. Love enables students and educators to overcome prejudice and create healthy spaces for dialogue. This is highly relevant in the context of modern society, which is often characterized by social fragmentation.

From a practical standpoint, a love-based pedagogical approach can be implemented through collaborative, reflective, and participatory learning methods. For example, teachers can apply problem-based learning with current social issues that demand empathy and cross-identity understanding. Teachers can also use Biblical narratives that showcase Christ's acts of love as material for reflection when addressing real-life situations in society (Rangga, 2024). This strategy broadens students' perspectives and shapes them into agents of love in the world. Furthermore, love also serves as a guiding principle for evaluation in education. Evaluation is not just about grades and academic results but also about the development of character and students' spiritual growth. Teachers who educate with love will prioritize a restorative approach, rather than a punitive one. They view mistakes as opportunities to guide, not to judge. This creates a learning environment that supports growth and minimizes fear in learning.

From a theological-pedagogical perspective, this approach aligns with the example of Jesus as the Teacher who taught with heart. Jesus didn't just deliver lessons; he was fully present in his disciples' lives (Tendean, 2024). He cared for their needs, healed the wounded, restored the rejected, and lifted up the fallen. This is the true model of Christian education—one that doesn't solely center on the curriculum but on a liberating and redemptive relationship of love. Thus, love as a pedagogical principle is not a soft or passive approach. Instead, it's a transformative force that can change how teachers teach, how students learn, and how the educational community lives together. This principle challenges us to place humanity and the love of Christ as the foundation of the entire educational process. When love becomes the basis of pedagogy, education doesn't just enlighten; it also liberates and restores lives.

Inclusive Strategies Strengthen Christian Identity Without Being Exclusive

One of the main challenges for CRE in the modern era is how to affirm Christian faith identity without falling into exclusivism, which closes itself off to differences. In a diverse society, an exclusive attitude can create social tension and reinforce divisions between religious communities. Therefore, an inclusive approach is crucial, not to weaken faith identity, but to purify and strengthen it in a spirit of love and respect for those who are different. An inclusive educational strategy in CRE begins with the understanding that Christian identity is not formed through the rejection of others, but through a deep appreciation of Christ's universal love (Groome, 2020). The love taught by Christ knows no boundaries of race, ethnicity, or religion. So, when students learn to understand their faith in the light of open love, they will see diversity not as a threat but as a call to express God's love in real contexts.

An inclusive approach demands that the CRE curriculum incorporate cross-cultural and interfaith perspectives into learning. This isn't to mix up doctrines but to develop social sensitivity and empathy. For example, students are encouraged to engage in critical dialogue about how the teachings of love can be applied in relationships with people of different faiths. In this process, Christian identity is affirmed precisely because students are challenged to live out the value of love in real contexts, not just within a theoretical framework. Exclusive education tends to create "walls" that separate "us" from "them," while inclusive education builds "bridges" to foster relationships (Antone, 2010, p. 40). A healthy identity isn't one that's defensive and suspicious of others, but one that can stand firm while remaining open to building peace. Inclusive strategies help students understand that being Christian doesn't mean being superior; instead, it means being a humble servant of love in a pluralistic society.

In practice, this strategy can be realized through experiential learning and cross-community social projects, such as collaborating with schools from different backgrounds,

interfaith visits, or open discussions about tolerance. Through these experiences, students don't just learn about love cognitively; they also internalize an inclusive attitude as part of their faith life. Faith identity is formed not in isolation, but in reflective and loving interaction. It's important to note that an inclusive strategy doesn't mean reducing the firmness of faith doctrines. On the contrary, through an inclusive approach, students are encouraged to delve into their beliefs more critically and relevantly. Christian identity is not built upon narrow dogmatism, but on a deep understanding of God's love and the calling to be light and salt in the world (Tea & Rangga, 2025). Thus, students not only know what they believe but also why and how that faith should be authentically manifested.

An inclusive strategy also impacts the character formation of students. They are shaped into individuals who are not just formally religious, but also possess an open, just, and loving attitude when facing life's realities. They are not quick to judge; instead, they are ready to engage in dialogue and bridge differences. In a world fraught with identity conflicts, the presence of such a Christian generation is greatly needed as agents of peace and restorers of social relationships (Kumowal, 2024). Thus, an inclusive education strategy is not a threat to Christian identity, but rather a means of true faith maturation. When love becomes the foundation of education, openness to others actually strengthens commitment to Christ. An identity built on love and humility will be able to endure and shine amidst diversity. This is the face of CRE that is relevant and transformative for the present and the future.

CRE Curriculum Needs Reorientation Towards Dialogue and Collaboration

Historically, the CRE curriculum has tended to focus on strengthening doctrine and forming faith identity internally. While these goals are important, in the context of an increasingly plural and complex society, this approach needs revision to become more dialogical and collaborative. Curriculum reorientation is a necessity so that CRE is not only internally relevant within the church community but also able to make a tangible contribution to building a harmonious and just society (Rambitan, 2017). Exclusive and one-sided education is no longer adequate to address the challenges of an era that demands openness, cooperation, and cross-cultural literacy. In this regard, reorienting the CRE curriculum toward a dialogical approach does not mean blurring Christian teachings. Instead, it enables students to communicate their faith reflectively and lovingly amidst diversity. Dialogue in this context is not a debate to justify one position but a process of mutual listening and understanding, thereby creating a learning space that respects differences and builds relationships. A curriculum that provides room for dialogue will help students develop critical thinking, empathy, and intercultural communication skills, all of which are crucial in today's global life.

Collaboration is also a crucial principle in a curriculum aimed at addressing the challenges of diversity. The CRE curriculum needs to be designed so that students don't just learn individually, but also through teamwork, social projects, and cross-community involvement (Restanti et al., 2021). Through this approach, students will learn to understand others' perspectives and realize that Christian faith is inseparable from social responsibility. Collaboration in the context of CRE learning also creates space for the practical application of love, such as in service actions, social campaigns, or dialogues with students from other religious backgrounds. However, most current CRE curricula are still normative and focused on memorizing theological material. While the theological aspect remains important, overly rigid and theoretical learning often fails to connect faith with students' real-life experiences. Therefore, curriculum reorientation needs to prioritize a contextual approach, where students are invited to reflect on their life experiences in light of Christ's teachings. This approach allows them to find the meaning of faith in their daily lives, not just within the classroom.

Concrete steps in this reorientation include integrating current themes into the curriculum, such as social justice, ecology, human rights, peace, and interfaith relations. These themes don't contradict the Christian faith; instead, they become real arenas for actualizing God's love in a wounded world. In this way, the curriculum doesn't just produce students who know the Bible's contents, but also those who are ready to be Christ's witnesses in their pluralistic and challenging social contexts. Furthermore, the role of the teacher is crucial in implementing a dialogical and collaborative curriculum. Teachers are not merely tasked with delivering material but also become facilitators of an open and reflective learning process (Harjali, 2019). Teachers need to be trained to develop participatory learning methods, such as group discussions, case studies, simulations, and project-based learning. When teachers are open to dialogue and collaboration, the classroom atmosphere will transform into a dynamic space for spiritual and social growth.

Therefore, a curriculum geared towards dialogue and collaboration offers a great opportunity to foster servant Christian leadership. Through cooperation and active involvement, students are taught not to live individualistically, but to become part of the solution to real problems within society. This aligns with the Christian mission that places love and service at the core of faith life (Sidjabat, 2021). Thus, the CRE curriculum doesn't just teach "what to believe," but also "how to live in the light of faith." Most importantly, the reorientation of the CRE curriculum towards dialogue and collaboration is a strategic step to ensure that religious education doesn't become a space for isolation, but rather a bridge for social transformation. By making love the foundation, dialogue the method, and collaboration the lifestyle of learning, CRE can emerge as an education that is relevant, critical, and full of hope in responding to the challenges of diversity in the modern era.

The Role of PAK Teachers as Facilitators of Love and Reconciliation

In the framework of inclusive and transformative CRE, teachers hold a central position, not merely as instructors, but as facilitators of love and reconciliation. CRE teachers are called to transcend their traditional role as doctrine deliverers and become living examples who practice Christ's love in their relationships with students and the school community (Tu'u, 2007). Amidst the realities of diversity, social conflict, and identity polarization, the teacher's role is increasingly vital in guiding students to become peacemakers and bridge-builders across differences. A CRE teacher who acts as a facilitator of love must possess high spiritual and social sensitivity. They must be able to understand the emotional and spiritual needs of students and be attuned to social dynamics in the classroom that might be laden with prejudice or tension. In such situations, teachers are required to create a friendly, open, and empathetic learning atmosphere where every student feels valued, safe, and heard. Through this approach, teachers facilitate an educational experience that touches hearts and builds healthy relationships among individuals.

In addition to nurturing with love, teachers also bear the responsibility of being agents of reconciliation, bringing a spirit of restoration to broken relationships—whether among students, between students and teachers, or between students and the social realities they face. CRE teachers are called to emulate Jesus Christ as a peacemaker who does not repay evil with evil but brings forgiveness and restoration (Gainau, 2021). In educational practice, this means teachers do not allow conflicts to escalate into animosity but actively support the conflict resolution process through an approach of dialogue, empathy, and forgiveness. Being a facilitator of reconciliation means teachers must integrate the values of peace and restoration into their teaching methods. For example, through case studies of actual social conflicts, discussions about forgiveness in biblical stories, or critical reflection on injustices occurring around students. In this kind of learning, teachers do not just convey values; they guide students to live out these values through concrete actions in their environment. Reconciliation does not stop at theory but becomes a practical expression of faith.

This role also requires teachers to be reflective and continuous learners, because being a facilitator of love and reconciliation cannot be achieved with a rigid or purely normative approach. Teachers need to develop deep pedagogical, psychological, and spiritual competencies to be able to respond to educational challenges holistically. Training and mentoring for CRE teachers need to be provided continuously so that they have contextual methodological tools and are sensitive to issues of diversity and social reconciliation (Sihotang et al., 2024). Therefore, a CRE teacher who acts as a facilitator of love and reconciliation will be an inspiration for students in forming their faith identity. The teacher's example in being fair, patient, and forgiving will shape students' characters so that they are not only formally religious but also compassionate in action. This is where the power of religious education lies: it doesn't just teach "what is right," but shows "*how to live in truth.*"

In the context of Indonesia's cultural and religious diversity, the role of the CRE teacher becomes even more relevant and strategic. Teachers must not be actors who reinforce exclusivism; instead, they should be educational practitioners who build harmony and cross-border solidarity (Wahyuni, 2021). This task isn't easy, but it's crucial in shaping a Christian generation that isn't allergic to differences, but rather acts as bearers of love and agents of peace within society. Thus, the CRE teacher as a facilitator of love and reconciliation is not merely an additional role, but a service identity that must be lived out in all educational activities. Through this approach, religious education not only becomes a space for doctrinal inheritance but also a vehicle for the formation of a complete Christian personality—one that lives in love and becomes an instrument of restoration for a wounded world.

4. Conclusions

In the modern era, CRE needs to move towards a more inclusive approach, placing love as the primary foundation throughout the entire learning process. Love is understood not only as a taught value but also as a pedagogical method capable of fostering empathetic relationships, respecting diversity, and building cross-identity dialogue. The reorientation of the curriculum and the role of the teacher become crucial in creating an open, participatory, and collaborative learning community. Thus, education functions not merely as a transmission of faith values, but also as a means of social transformation that produces Christian individuals who are humble, just, and bring peace in a diverse society.

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