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# **Teacher Strategies in Building Respect for Human Dignity**

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Abstract: Education is a process to develop students' potential optimally. In the education process, teachers play an important role in forming the character of students. One of the important characters that learners should have is respecting human dignity. Students who come from different backgrounds have the potential to experience discrimination. Therefore, teachers need to have strategies to embrace students from different backgrounds to respect human dignity. This research aims to delimit the different backgrounds in terms of economy, culture and academic ability, to identify teachers' strategies in embracing students from various backgrounds to respect human dignity and to highlight the perspective of the Church document, Gravissimum Educationis, on the importance of respecting human dignity. This research uses a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach. The research subjects were teachers in Catholic Senior High Schools in Malang City. Data were collected through in-depth interviews. The results showed that the teachers used various strategies to embrace learners from different backgrounds to respect human dignity. These strategies include: Creating an inclusive learning environment, Encouraging learners to get to know each other, Teaching learners about the importance of respecting differences, Being a role model in respecting human dignity. This research shows that teachers have an important role in teaching learners to respect human dignity. By using the right strategies, teachers can help learners to develop characters that value differences and uphold human dignity.

## **INTRODUCTION**

This writing addresses the theme of theological education. Nowadays, the church's service to young people in the field of education is an integral part of the Church's commitment to serve. The focus of youth services is directed towards the cultivation of Christian spirituality. The goal is to ensure continuous growth and progress in these services so that the youth continue to love the Church (Melo et al., 2023: 34). However, due to the demands of the education world, some young people have to leave their hometowns and migrate to other cities in Indonesia to pursue knowledge.

Malang is one of the preferred cities for Catholic youth, especially students, to acquire knowledge (Purwanto, 2021). Despite the distance from home and family, they are enthusiastic about starting a new life in the new city. They believe they will be accepted and welcomed by the people of Malang, feeling comfortable and content living in this city. However, the reality they encounter is not as smooth as they imagined. Malang, being an economically advanced

city with different cultural and educational levels compared to their hometowns, presents challenges. Not all residents come from affluent families, and those from outside Java Island face limitations in terms of clothing, food, and shelter.

Apart from economic disparities, students from outside Malang also undergo an adaptation process in terms of culture. Unfortunately, many struggle to adapt due to difficulties in self-assessment, adjusting to new situations, environments, and social interactions in the city. The challenges in adapting to the local culture are influenced by various factors, including the psychological turbulence of adolescence, a period of identity search and exploration (Sijabat et al., 2021: 10).

Adolescence is a transitional period from childhood to adulthood, marked by various changes in physical, emotional, social, intellectual, psychosocial, and self-understanding aspects. These changes can make adolescents feel unstable and struggle to adapt to their surroundings (Aristya, 2018: 75). Difficulties arise when students try to present themselves with branded items, excessive makeup, and gold accessories, despite facing economic limitations. This can lead to conflicts among students, highlighting the importance of teachers in guiding students towards positive behaviors (Wini, 2020: 2).

In addition to embracing students from diverse backgrounds, this study also examines the perspective of the Vatican II Council's document, Gravissimum Educationis, regarding the challenges faced by students. Gravissimum Educationis, in paragraph 1, states that education has a lofty purpose: to help humans achieve their ultimate life goals. Education should assist individuals in developing their full potential—intellectual, moral, spiritual, and physical while enhancing their understanding and appreciation of their dignity as beings created in the image and likeness of God.

In the context of an urban Catholic school in Malang, the dignity of students is valued through the efforts of teachers to embrace those with different backgrounds, experiences, values, and perspectives. However, in practice, students with diverse backgrounds are often treated differently, leading to discrimination and potential intolerance. Teachers play a crucial role in creating an inclusive environment that values differences to uphold human dignity. Teachers need to apply approaches suitable for the social conditions of students, recognizing the significant influence of the social environment on their development (Handayani & Watiyah, 2023: 32).

Chan (2019: 441) says that effective classroom management strategies are essential in planning the learning process. Teachers must consider students' backgrounds to create a conducive and motivating learning atmosphere. Teachers who neglect the importance of students' educational backgrounds may contribute to disparities in learning success. Therefore, educators should enrich their knowledge related to students' backgrounds (Shubchan, 2021: 167). Understanding students' backgrounds is crucial because teachers constantly interact with human beings—students. Every individual deserves respect and recognition for their inherent dignity. Human dignity is a unique and natural value that should be treated well and even

regarded as a friend. Friendship is clarified as a relationship that upholds human dignity (Aliano & Riyanto, 2022: 163).

The role of guidance counselors (BK) in reducing the disparities experienced by students, especially as motivators, is crucial. Motivation is provided both personally and in group settings or classical guidance. Through these guidance sessions, BK counselors direct students to think positively about the social-economic disparities present in the school (Handayani & Watiyah, 2023: 35).

Pranyoto (2018) emphasizes the need for balanced education that considers both material and moral dimensions. Students should be taught about the communities that bind them with fellow humans, past generations, and the transcendent reality (Pranyoto, 2018: 63). The implementation of child-friendly school policies in Catholic schools demonstrates that love and brotherhood principles can cultivate moderation and religious values from an anti-violence perspective (Ibo & Lorensius, 2023: 23). Ultimately, the Gravissimum Educationis document advocates for a more humane, just, equitable, and contextually relevant education in schools (Azi, 2021: 97).

Previous research has not specifically addressed the differences in students' backgrounds, considering economic, cultural, and academic abilities simultaneously. The research questions formulated include examining teacher strategies in embracing students with different economic, cultural, and intellectual backgrounds in the school. It also explores where teachers acquire models of service that respect and uphold the dignity of students. Additionally, the study analyzes how the Church's document Gravissimum Educationis evaluates the importance of respecting human dignity in Christian education.

Through this research, we hope to identify teacher strategies in embracing students with different backgrounds in terms of economics, culture, and intellectual ability. The study aims to analyze the importance of respecting the dignity of each student in Christian education and evaluate the relevance of the Church document Gravissimum Educationis in Christian education's approach to honoring human dignity. The results of this research can enrich the experiences of teachers in embracing students who differ in economic, cultural, and intellectual backgrounds, especially in urban settings.

#### METHOD

The method used in this research is a qualitative and descriptive approach. Qualitative research is seen as an exploratory investigation to understand a central problem. The central phenomenon is understood through interviews, and the data from these interviews are then analyzed, leading to descriptions or themes. After a series of interpretations by the researcher to grasp deeper meanings, qualitative research is also referred to as field research. This implies that the research aims to involve the researcher in the field and engage with teachers and students in Catholic Schools, experiencing what they feel (Azhari, 2022: 20–21). The goal of descriptive research is to depict a phenomenon or situation in detail and depth (Nikodemus & Fangalanso, 2023: 57). The author considers qualitative research effective in exploring the

phenomena faced by students in two Catholic schools, namely Catholic Frateran Bunda Hati Kudus High School and Catholic Bhakti Luhur Middle School. The research in these two Catholic schools is related to the difficulties faced by students and the efforts of teachers to find strategies to help them overcome these challenges.

#### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Students acquiring knowledge in Malang come from various regions and islands in Indonesia. Ms. Josephin Lilin Setyowati, Vice Principal in the student affairs department at Catholic Frateran Bunda Hati Kudus High School Malang (Interview October 31, 2023), states, "Here, students come from Sumatra to Papua. Some are from Kalimantan, Sulawesi, and Maluku, representing various ethnicities such as Chinese, Javanese, and Madurese."

This sentiment is echoed by several other teachers. Mr. Albertus Iwan Setia Darmadi, S.Pd, a Catholic Religion teacher at Frateran High School (Interview October 31, 2023), notes that the students' backgrounds differ, coming from cities, villages, Java, and beyond Java, with various backgrounds. Sister Gertrudis Seuk, a Catholic nun and Scripture teacher at Bhakti Luhur Catholic Middle School (Interview November 01, 2023), confirms that 90% of the students in her school come from outside Java, scattered across regions like Blitar, Bandung, Malang's surrounding areas, and most notably from Sumatra, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Maluku, Papua, and NTT. The efforts of students striving to change their fate through education receive positive support. Aini (2018) writes, "In education, an individual is provided with knowledge, skills, and the cultivation of national character values integrated into subjects for future wellbeing" (Aini et al., 2018: 3).

Students find Malang to be a suitable place to fulfill what Aini describes above, thanks to its reputation as an Education City. Malang is one of the cities in Indonesia with several Catholic schools that not only accept urban Malang students but also students from various regions in Indonesia. This diversity results in students in Catholic schools in Malang having different economic backgrounds. Recognized by several teachers in Catholic schools in Malang based on interviews with the author, Sister Getrudis Seuk, a Catholic nun and Scripture teacher at Bhakti Luhur Catholic Middle School (Interview November 02, 2023), states that the organization of Bhakti Luhur Middle School (SMAK), including the foundation, the school principal, and the teachers, consistently embraces economically less privileged children.

Several measures are taken, such as a mandatory service contract, where children from economically challenged families are schooled by the nuns, and all school and boarding fees are covered by the foundation. After three years of schooling and successfully completing their education, these children serve in assisting people with special needs for three years. Afterward, they are allowed to continue their education or work elsewhere. Many students benefit from this foundation policy, and their concern for those in need continues to grow.

According to Sister Udis (Interview November 02, 2023), the foundation's policy to assist economically disadvantaged children is based on the school's founding principles. Bhakti Luhur School was established to help economically less fortunate students. The Founder, Rev.

Paul Janssen, CM, inspired by the compassionate spirit of Saint Vincentius a Paulo, instilled the spirit of love by caring for poor and neglected children, accepting them as partners in work.

Students with different economic backgrounds can pose various challenges, including social disparities. Students from more economically privileged backgrounds have better access to educational resources, such as complete educational books and personal laptops or computers. This can lead to social jealousy among students. Nevertheless, in Catholic schools in Malang, students support each other. Discussing economic matters, some children from economically disadvantaged families usually join wealthier peers. The phenomenon of willingly helping one another among students, regardless of economic status, is an implementation of cross-subsidies in Catholic schools. Friends who are economically better off willingly share their fortunes, and this happens in these schools. Mr. Daniel Johanes Lintang, S.Pd, a Sociology teacher at Catholic Frateran High School (Interview October 31, 2023), regarding the phenomenon of mutual help among students, says, "Maybe we've experienced it, we have a rich friend, and we say, hey, pay first."

In Catholic schools, cross-subsidies occur not only among students but also at the institutional level. Catholic schools do not exclusively enroll students from economically privileged backgrounds; they also admit students from middle to lower-class families or those with financial constraints. Despite gathering students from diverse backgrounds, the educational services provided in these schools are not haphazard. All students, without discrimination, receive the best education. Schools conduct education according to government requirements and parental expectations when enrolling their children in Catholic schools. To ensure quality education, Catholic schools implement a cross-subsidy system. The foundation covers school expenses, including students' graduation. Afterward, they are accepted as collaborators by the foundation as per the service agreement.

Regarding all student school expenses, they are covered by the foundation, and after graduation, students serve the foundation according to the agreement. Sr. Helena Gulo, the Head of SMAK Bhakti Luhur (Interview November 02, 2023), states, "We refer to this practice as cross-subsidy." Not only moral support and motivation are provided, but through financial aid for school and college from the Catholic Bhakti Luhur Foundation, students have been helped to boost their confidence and enthusiasm for learning (Karyasa et al., 2023: 8444).

Students attending Catholic schools face challenges not only in terms of economic difficulties but also cultural challenges. As mentioned earlier, students in Catholic schools in Malang come from various regions in Indonesia. In daily life, cultural differences can pose various challenges, such as conflicts and prejudices. However, cultural differences also have positive meanings that can benefit students. As stated by some teachers teaching in Catholic schools in Malang:

Mrs. Yosephin (Interview October 31, 2023) says, "Cultural richness is evident in language, especially accents. Sumatra children with Sumatra accents, or children with NTT accents or children with Papua accents, if a child is from there, their accent is strong, that's

normal, using Indonesian, their accent is the same. They also learn to understand when their friends speak Javanese; there are no differences, we don't experience disparities."

Mr. Daniel (Interview November 01, 2023), who also comes from outside Malang, adds, "I thought only I was helped, but children from outside Java are also helped by their friends to adapt to local culture." Instilling an attitude of respecting others' cultures means eliminating the emergence of social conflicts on one side and shaping human thoughts and behaviors and forming our communication patterns on the other (see Rizak, 2018, p. 80). Catholic schools instill values of brotherhood, mutual respect, and upholding the dignity of fellow human beings from an early age, from the educational bench.

In addition to economic and cultural factors, students face academic challenges. The presence of students in Catholic schools adds variety to academic abilities. This can be seen in the academic grades, talents, and interests of students. However, differences in academic abilities also have positive meanings that can benefit students. Differences in academic abilities can be opportunities for students to learn and develop. Based on the author's interviews with several teachers, it was found that cultural differences in Catholic schools do not worsen communal life.

Compared to urban Malang children, students have different backgrounds and experiences from those in Malang. They usually have more limited access to technology, posing a challenge for them in the technology-based education world. Faced with this difficulty, teachers do not stand idly by; schools adapt to the demands of the education world. Schools provide facilities that support students' knowledge of technology. In this regard, Catholic schools provide Computer Laboratories. This effort greatly helps students in catching up with their technological lag.

In addition to technology challenges, some students are not yet fluent in reading. In this regard, schools implement literacy practices, mandatory for 30 minutes every day, both at school and in the dormitory for students living in the dormitory, conducted in the afternoon or evening for 30 minutes. The purpose of literacy is to improve children's ability to understand learning materials (Sari et al., 2021: 227). The books read during the literacy period by students in Catholic schools in Malang are related to the learning materials. This literacy greatly helps students develop their vocabulary and understanding of various educational aspects. Sr. Helena, the Head of SMAK Bhakti Luhur (Interview November 02, 2023), says, "To overcome students' academic difficulties, we hold a mandatory 30-minute literacy session in the morning at school and 30 minutes in the evening in the dormitory."

Regarding students' varying academic abilities, Malang Catholic schools have a language development program, encouraging students to participate in this activity. Catholic schools collaborate with Brawijaya University. The hope related to this program is expressed by Mr. Albert, a religion teacher at Frateran Bunda Hati Kudus Catholic High School (Interview October 31, 2023), who says, "If it pleases God, with good language skills, students can study and work abroad because they have been equipped with good language skills in this school."

Teachers in Catholic schools play a crucial role in education, including helping alleviate students' economic burdens. This assistance may not always be in the form of material support but can also manifest as guidance, direction, and other efforts to build awareness within the hearts of each student. Teachers acknowledge the diverse physical and psychological needs of every individual, as well as varying economic capacities (Handayani & Watiyah, 2023: 36).

Based on interviews with two teachers from Catholic schools in Malang, we found that these schools are not oblivious to students facing economic difficulties, especially those affected by the recent Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic has impacted the parents' businesses, and even after its conclusion, they are still reconstructing their ventures. Consequently, the economic effects of Covid-19 persist for some students. To aid those facing economic challenges, schools provide relief in terms of educational expenses.

During the enrollment process, schools conduct interviews with parents. If parents genuinely encounter economic difficulties, they can present a Less Affluent Family Card (KKKM) from the social affairs department. If not in possession of KKKM, parents can provide a letter from the sub-district or the church, stating that the student's family requires financial assistance. By offering financial relief for education costs, schools aim to ensure that students from less affluent families can still receive a quality education. Mrs. Yosephin (Interview October 31, 2023) stated, "The school does not turn a blind eye to the parents of students facing economic difficulties, as long as they show a certificate from the government or the church, the school helps as much as possible." Similarly, Mr. Albertus (Interview October 31, 2023) mentioned, "Some children face difficulties affording the foreign language life skill program, and the school helps them through the student affairs department."

In their efforts to embrace students from challenging economic backgrounds, Catholic schools reduce school fees. However, the commitment to providing quality education remains a top priority for all students without discrimination. Quality education equips students with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to become responsible citizens (Azi, 2021: 92). Regarding the presentation of quality services in the Catholic education world, acknowledged by Sr. Helena (Interview November 02, 2023), who said, "At Bhakti Luhur School, there are many students from middle to lower economic backgrounds; however, educational efforts are based on the best quality." Mr. Guru Dedi, a sociology teacher at SMAK Bhakti Luhur (Interview November 02, 2023), stated, "In order to provide quality education, teachers prepare high-quality and more interesting lessons, not only using sophisticated technological tools like laptops and others but also with ice-breaking methods." Sr. Getrudis from SMAK Bhakti Luhur (Interview November 02, 2023) added, "The dormitory education pattern is built to create an inclusive and tolerant learning environment."

As mentioned earlier, students in Catholic schools in Malang come from various regions in Indonesia. They not only have uniqueness in terms of economics, academic abilities, but also cultural richness. Regarding diverse cultures, teachers instill school culture from the moment students start attending. Some urban Malang cultures instilled in students include how to relate to friends and how to greet older people. Regarding cultural differences between

students and urban Malang students, Mrs. Yosephin Lilin Setyowati, S.Pd (Interview October 31, 2023), said, "Since the beginning of students learning at Frateran Catholic High School, school culture has been instilled in them."

Concerning differences in academic abilities between students and urban Malang students, especially in terms of reading and writing speed, teachers' efforts to help them include providing encouragement, assistance, and even giving them opportunities to photograph the writing on the blackboard so that children can practice reading and writing at home. Catholic schools in Malang have a commitment to providing quality education for all students, including those from outside Malang. They include those facing economic difficulties and those with physical limitations, such as those attending SMAK Bhakti Luhur. Catholic schools have a cultural adaptation system to help students from other regions adjust to Javanese culture. Sr. Getrudis Seuk, a Bible teacher at Bhakti Luhur Catholic High School (Interview Thursday, November 2, 2023), emphasized that, "The school always uses a positive and supportive approach to help students achieve their best potential." A great nation is one that has character derived from the cultural values of its society. Local wisdom values are relevant to the character development of the nation. Efforts to explore local wisdom values are a strategic step in character development (Parapat & Aritonang, 2020: 26). This is continuously pursued by teachers in two Catholic schools in Malang, namely Frateran Bunda Hati Kudus Catholic High School and SMAK Bhakti Luhur.

The Catholic Church and educators consistently emphasize the importance of inclusive Christian education that embraces diverse cultures. Inclusive education respects the dignity of all individuals, regardless of their differences. It provides a high-quality educational style for the future generations of the Church, the nation, and the state. Christian education is grounded in the love of Christ (Sunarko, 2020: 118).

Based on the unconditional love of Christ that does not discriminate among humans, the document Gravissimum Educationis asserts that all individuals, regardless of race, religion, or social status, share equal human dignity. This noble and dignified human dignity forms the basis for everyone to have the right to receive adequate education on par with others. Since its establishment by Jesus Christ, the Catholic Church has consistently placed great emphasis on education. Through its schools worldwide and specifically in Indonesia, it has provided quality Catholic education to shape the character of resilient, competitive, morally upright, tolerant, cooperative, patriotic, dynamic, cultured, and science- and technology-oriented generations based on Pancasila and inspired by faith and devotion to the Almighty God. Regarding the crucial role of Catholic Schools in instilling the habit of respecting the dignity of fellow human beings, whether in the past, present, or future. This is because Catholic schools focus not only on intellectual development but also on fostering strong faith and character formation (Betu, 2023: 21).

The character formation of students to respect the dignity of fellow human beings is inseparable from the family support, which is the foundation of a child's life. Therefore, the role of parents is crucial in the education process. Although parents are the first and foremost

educators, the church recognizes that non-formal education from parents must be continued with systematic and comprehensive formal education in schools, both Catholic Church-sponsored schools and public schools. This is done to accommodate the interests or fundamental rights of students to receive education (Daiman & Omin, 2023: 58). By sending children to schools that provide formal education, parents do not relinquish their responsibility but continue to accompany their children in formal education, in building their faith in church-related activities, teaching them social education on how to behave courteously, love others as brothers, greet, build friendships, be honest, patient, and treat others fairly (Nampar, 2018: 20). The document Gravissimum Educationis places high trust in parents as the primary educators of children's faith in the future of the Catholic Church. Catholic education aims to help individuals develop holistically, intellectually, morally, and spiritually. They should be taught and encouraged to experience forms of community that bind them together with fellow human beings, with the past, with the present generation, and also with the highest or transcendent reality (Pranyoto, 2018: 63).

In addition to family support for the school's efforts in shaping the character of students, Gravissimum Educationis specifically places trust in Catholic school organizers as agents of Christian education. As agents, they pay attention to two essential elements in education. First, students must be assisted in growing into holistic human beings. This means helping students develop their full potential, be it intellectual, emotional, spiritual, or physical. Second, as students grow into mature individuals, they must be assisted in realizing their roles and responsibilities in life within society and the Church. This means helping students become responsible citizens and active church members (Yulis & Goa, 2016: 160).

Christian education agents, along with families, in nurturing the successors of the church and the nation, should internalize that Christian education is part of a divine calling to develop personal and social characters, the green shoots of the church, and encourage them to live according to the teachings of Christ. Christian education aims to cultivate faith and achieve maturity in Christ. The lofty ideals expected by the church fathers through the declaration of Gravissimum Educationis (GE) are more achievable with synergistic collaboration between family, school, and society components in the Christian education environment (Daiman & Omin, 2023: 52).

Synergistic collaboration between family, school, and society components in the Christian education environment is outlined as follows: communities and parents who entrust their children to Catholic schools have a responsibility to provide school development funds for the provision of adequate educational facilities, as well as support educational activities in Catholic schools. Catholic schools have a responsibility to provide quality education, especially character education and respect for human dignity, in the light of Christian faith, in line with the school's vision and mission. The government has a responsibility to provide regulations and funding support for Catholic schools through Operational Assistance Funds. The Church has a responsibility to provide moral and spiritual support to Catholic schools (Azi, 2021: 97). The Church also regularly educates, monitors, and evaluates the implementation of

Catholic education in Catholic schools, to motivate Catholic schools in embracing students with different backgrounds in terms of economics, culture, and education levels, especially in urban Malang (Wea et al., 2022: 71).

### CONCLUSION

The two Catholic schools in Malang, namely Frateran Bunda Hati Kudus Catholic High School and SMAK Bhakti Luhur, employ unique strategies to embrace students with economic, cultural, and intellectual differences. Frateran Bunda Hati Kudus reduces educational costs for economically disadvantaged students by utilizing a "financially incapable" certificate from the government or the church. On the other hand, SMAK Bhakti Luhur provides full expenses, including boarding fees, with the condition that students are willing to serve the institution after completing their education.

Both schools also address cultural differences between urban students through educational strategies initiated at the beginning of the academic year and continued continuously. For students facing challenges in reading and writing, Frateran Bunda Hati Kudus collaborates with the University of Brawijaya in a language proficiency development program, while SMAK Bhakti Luhur implements daily reading literacy.

The strategic actions of these two schools reflect a high respect for human dignity, considering every individual as the image of God regardless of their origin, economic ability, culture, or intellectual capacity. Services to students are carried out with inspiration from the service of Jesus Christ, whether by allowing them to stay together after assistance or by providing opportunities to return home and engage in compassionate service to others. All of these are part of the Catholic education tradition that upholds the dignity and honor of humanity, in line with the teachings of Gravissimum Educationis.

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