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Reconstructing Christian Religious Education Through Reflective Learning to Foster Students' Empathy, Social Responsibility, and Christian Character: A Conceptual Model

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Abstract
Christian Religious Education in schools is expected to shape not only students' religious knowledge but also their character, yet its practice often remains cognitive, normative, and ritualistic, leaving a gap between students' understanding of Christian values and their everyday behavior. This study aims to reconstruct Christian Religious Education through reflective learning as a pedagogical pathway for fostering students' empathy, social responsibility, and Christian character. The study employed an integrative literature review with conceptual synthesis. Fifty-one sources, comprising peer-reviewed national and international journal articles published between 2016 and 2026 and seminal works, were retrieved from Google Scholar, Garuda, journal websites, and DOI registries, selected using explicit criteria, and analyzed through thematic analysis and conceptual model building. Five findings emerged. Character formation is hindered by knowledge-centered instruction and weak links between faith and life. Reflective learning is grounded pedagogically in experiential and transformative learning and theologically in shared praxis and the imitation of Christ. Empathy and social responsibility grow when reflection is connected to real encounters with others. Six reflective strategies are promising: guided journaling, narrative dialogue, case reflection, shared praxis dialogue, exemplar study, and service-based projects. These elements can be integrated into a cyclical model. The study proposes the Reflective-Empathic-Action-Evaluative model, which connects experiential reflection, empathy formation, social action, and continuous evaluation of Christian character. The model offers a conceptual foundation for teachers, curriculum developers, and future empirical studies of character-oriented Christian Religious Education.

Keywords: character education; christian religious education; empathy; reflective learning; social responsibility

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INTRODUCTION

Character formation has become one of the most pressing agendas of contemporary schooling. Students growing up in a digitally saturated environment are exposed to rapid shifts in values, individualistic lifestyles, and new patterns of interaction, which Indonesian scholars of Christian education regard as a challenge to students' sensitivity toward others (Gulo & Tapilaha, 2024; Widiyaningtyas & Duha, 2023). The empirical evidence on this point is mixed, however. A longitudinal study of adolescents found that social media use predicted gains rather than losses in empathy (Vossen & Valkenburg, 2016), which suggests that the decisive factor is not the digital environment itself but how students are guided to

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interpret their interactions within it. Schools are therefore expected to do more than transmit knowledge; they are called to cultivate moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action (Lickona, 1991). This integrated view remains central in recent frameworks that treat character as involving the perception, understanding, emotion, reasoning, and practice of virtue (Berkowitz, 2021; Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022). International evidence indicates that intentional character education is associated with better behavioral and academic outcomes (Jeynes, 2019) and that well-designed social and emotional learning programs produce effects that persist beyond the intervention period (Taylor et al., 2017). Such evidence suggests that character is not formed incidentally but through deliberate pedagogical design that engages students' thinking, feeling, and acting (Berkowitz, 2021).

Within the Indonesian school system, Christian Religious Education (*Pendidikan Agama Kristen*, hereafter CRE) occupies a strategic position in this agenda. CRE is not intended merely to inform students about doctrines and biblical narratives but to form persons whose lives reflect the character of Christ. Nuhamara (2018) argues that the character dimension must be prioritized in every form of CRE, whether in the family, the church, or the school. Sidjabat (2019) proposes a character-based curriculum framework for CRE in higher education, whose principles are relevant to, though not directly transferable to, school-based CRE. CRE teachers are positioned as key agents in responding to students' character crisis (Telaumbanua, 2018), and Christian character is understood to grow through spiritual formation cultivated both personally and communally (Prawiromaruto & Stevanus, 2023; Stevanus & Sitepu, 2020). Empirical findings also show that CRE in the family, together with parenting styles, significantly shapes Christ-like character among adolescents (Ester et al., 2022).

Despite these normative ideals, a persistent gap remains between students' understanding of religious values and their everyday behavior. Indicative empirical data point in this direction. Although religious education is a compulsory subject in Indonesian schools, the 2022 National Assessment found that 36.3% of students were potentially exposed to bullying, 34.5% to sexual violence, and 26.9% to physical punishment in their school environments (Zamjani, 2023). In a public senior secondary school in North Sumatra, students' baseline scores for behavioral awareness of religious moderation were lower than their cognitive scores (48.75 and 55, respectively) before a reflective and participatory intervention was introduced (Sihotang et al., 2024). These data do not isolate the contribution of CRE, and direct empirical comparisons of Christian students' religious knowledge and conduct remain scarce, but they indicate that religious instruction alone does not guarantee caring behavior. Hasugian et al. (2022) describe CRE practice as largely normative, ritualistic, and conventional, and call for a reconstruction of CRE strategies that are contextual, innovative, and responsive to social issues. Boiliu et al. (2020) similarly criticize the dominance of knowledge- and cognition-centered instruction, which tends to produce students who can explain Christian teaching without necessarily embodying it. This condition mirrors what moral psychology describes as the knowledge-action gap, namely the distance between

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moral understanding and moral conduct. Bridging it requires an integrative capacity of practical wisdom, or *phronesis* (Darnell et al., 2019; Kristjánsson, 2021b). Comparable concerns have been reported internationally. Religious education teachers generally believe that their subject contributes to pupils' character and virtues, yet the pedagogical pathways through which this contribution occurs often remain implicit and under-theorized (Metcalfe et al., 2024; Metcalfe & Moulin-Stożek, 2021).

Reflective learning offers a promising pathway for bridging this gap. Drawing on Dewey, Rodgers (2002) describes reflection as a meaning-making process that moves learners from one experience to a deeper understanding of its relationships with other experiences and ideas. Such reflection is systematic and disciplined, takes place in community, and requires attitudes that value personal and intellectual growth. Schön (1983) extends this notion through reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, while Kolb (2015) situates reflective observation within a cycle that links concrete experience, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Subsequent reviews have synthesized diverse conceptualizations of reflection across professional contexts (Marshall, 2019) and revised Kolb's model by emphasizing contextually rich concrete experience and critical reflection (Morris, 2020). When reflection leads learners to reexamine the frames of reference that shape their perceptions, it becomes transformative (Hoggan, 2016; Mezirow, 1991). In Christian education, this dynamic resonates with shared Christian praxis, first formulated by Groome (1980) and restated in Groome (2011), which moves learners from life to faith and back to life through critical reflection on present praxis in dialogue with the Christian Story and Vision. This study draws mainly on the 2011 formulation because it presents the approach in its most recent and comprehensive form.

Several studies have begun to explore this direction in Indonesian Christian education, and they can be grouped into two strands. The first strand concerns reflective and experiential approaches within CRE itself. Lase (2025), in a systematic literature review, argues that the experiential learning cycle can move faith from cognitive understanding toward concrete practice, although it carries risks of subjectivism and depends heavily on teacher capacity. Pasang (2024) highlights the contribution of Dewey's experience-based learning to contemporary Christian education, including through social service, while Rangga (2024), through a literature-based analysis, argues that life-narrative learning encourages personal reflection and strengthens community through dialogue. Studies on shared Christian praxis have examined its theoretical strengths and weaknesses (Harjanto, 2016), its use in church-based CRE (Sianipar, 2019), its application in student cell groups (Zebua & Usmany, 2025), and its reinterpretation for multicultural Indonesia through the values of *gotong royong*, *musyawarah-mufakat*, and *tepo seliro* (Woenardi, 2026). This strand has clarified how reflection can deepen faith understanding, but it has three limitations. Most of these studies are conceptual or library-based, the only empirical study is set in a campus ministry rather than a school, and empathy, social responsibility, and the evaluation of character outcomes are rarely treated as explicit learning targets.

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The second strand addresses reflection, empathy, and social responsibility outside CRE. In a multifaith public senior secondary school, a mixed-methods study found that reflective and participatory pedagogy improved both students' understanding and their behavioral awareness of religious moderation (Sihotang et al., 2024). Among university students in Islamic religious education, reflective digital pedagogy has been associated with religious character, empathy, and responsibility (Amirudin et al., 2026). Research also shows that school-based interventions can promote empathy-related responding (Malti et al., 2016), that empathy and social responsibility values contribute to adolescents' civic behavior (Silke et al., 2021), and that service-learning increases empathy among university students, particularly when it involves direct contact with communities (Gordon et al., 2022). This strand offers stronger empirical evidence, but its findings come from other religious traditions, higher education, or secular programs, so their transferability to school-based CRE must be argued rather than assumed. None of these studies situates empathy and social action within a Christian theological framework.

Taken together, these studies show that reflection, empathy, social action, and character evaluation have each received scholarly attention, but largely in separate strands. None of the reviewed sources examined how character outcomes are assessed in school-based CRE, and the available accounts of CRE practice describe instruction that remains predominantly knowledge-centered (Boiliu et al., 2020; Hasugian et al., 2022). Integrative frameworks do exist, but each covers only part of what CRE requires. Lickona's (1991) triad of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action identifies the components of character without specifying a learning sequence or the role of reflection. Critical reflection models in service-learning, such as the DEAL model (Describe, Examine, Articulate Learning), structure reflection on service experiences but are not theologically grounded and do not treat empathy as a distinct formative phase (Ash & Clayton, 2009). The Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm, which moves through context, experience, reflection, action, and evaluation, is the closest existing model in Christian education (International Commission on the Apostolate of Jesuit Education [ICAJE], 1993). However, it was developed for the Jesuit educational tradition, whereas CRE in Indonesian schools is a subject distinct from Catholic religious education and draws mainly on Protestant theological resources. It also treats empathy implicitly within reflection rather than as a distinct phase. Within the corpus analyzed in this study, no source proposed a theologically grounded model for school-based CRE that integrates experiential reflection, empathy formation, social action, and the continuous evaluation of Christian character. The closest, Amirudin et al. (2026), links reflective pedagogy with empathy and responsibility, but in Islamic higher education and without a cyclical evaluation mechanism. This gap matters because, without an integrative model, reflective activities risk remaining introspective exercises, empathy risks remaining a passing sentiment, and social action risks becoming a routine activity without formative meaning.

Accordingly, this study aims to reconstruct CRE through reflective learning as a pedagogical approach for fostering students' empathy, social responsibility, and Christian

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character. It addresses five research questions (RQ). RQ1 asks what problems hinder character education in CRE learning. RQ2 asks what pedagogical and theological foundations support reflective learning in CRE. RQ3 asks how empathy and social responsibility can be integrated through reflective learning experiences. RQ4 asks which reflective learning strategies can form students' Christian character. RQ5 asks how these elements can be reconstructed into a conceptual model of reflective learning based on Christian values. The novelty of this study lies in the development of the Reflective-Empathic-Action-Evaluative (REAE) model, a conceptual model that integrates experiential reflection, empathy formation, social action, and continuous evaluation of Christian character in a cyclical and sustainable manner around an explicit Scripture-centered core. Theoretically, the study contributes to the discourse on character education in CRE by connecting reflective pedagogy, moral psychology, and Christian theology. Practically, it offers CRE teachers, curriculum developers, and schools a conceptual framework for designing learning that connects faith with students' lived experiences and social engagement.

METHODS

This study employed an integrative literature review combined with conceptual synthesis. An integrative review was selected because the study aimed to assess, critique, and synthesize empirical and conceptual literature from different disciplines in order to generate a new theoretical framework, rather than to estimate effects or to collect primary field data (Snyder, 2019). The reporting of the search and selection process was informed by the PRISMA 2020 statement (Page et al., 2021), adapted to the integrative and conceptual purpose of the review. Because of this theory-building purpose, the review was not pre-registered as a systematic review protocol. The conceptual synthesis combined theory synthesis and model-building approaches, in which concepts from different theoretical streams are integrated into a higher-order framework that explains the relationships among them (Jaakkola, 2020). The research objects were scholarly texts addressing CRE, character education, reflective and experiential learning, empathy, social responsibility, and Christian formation. The search, screening, and analysis were completed in 2026, so the corpus covers publications available up to that year. Because the study did not involve human participants, ethical approval was not required.

The data sources were classified according to common usage in library research. Primary sources were the seminal works in which the theories used in the synthesis were originally formulated or authoritatively restated, namely Schön (1983), Lickona (1991), Mezirow (1991), Hoffman (2000), Rodgers (2002), Groome (2011), Kolb (2015), and Berkowitz (2021). A work was treated as seminal when it (1) formulated, or was its originator's authoritative restatement of, a theory used in the synthesis and (2) is widely cited as foundational in the subsequent literature, including the reviewed journal articles; such works were included regardless of publication year. Secondary sources were peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2016 and 2026 that interpret, apply, or test these theories.

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National journals included *KURIOS*, *Jurnal Jaffray*, *Jurnal Shanan*, *Evangelikal*, *DUNAMIS*, and *Didache: Journal of Christian Education*. International journals included the *British Journal of Religious Education*, *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, *International Journal of Christianity & Education*, *Reflective Practice*, *Child Development*, and *Educational Research Review*.

The literature was searched through Google Scholar, Garuda (*Garba Rujukan Digital*), journal websites, and DOI registries. These platforms were chosen because most Indonesian CRE journals are indexed in Garuda and Google Scholar but not in international databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, or the ATLA Religion Database; the omission of these databases is acknowledged as a limitation. Indonesian and English keywords were combined with Boolean operators, as illustrated by the following combinations. The Indonesian combination was ("pendidikan agama Kristen") AND ("pendidikan karakter" OR "pembelajaran reflektif" OR "shared Christian praxis" OR "empati" OR "tanggung jawab sosial"). The English combinations were ("Christian religious education" OR "religious education") AND ("character education" OR "reflective learning" OR "shared Christian praxis") and ("empathy" OR "social responsibility") AND ("character education" OR "service-learning" OR "reflective learning"). Filters restricted the results to journal articles published between 2016 and 2026 in Indonesian or English. Because Google Scholar ranks results by relevance and is not fully reproducible, the search cannot be replicated exactly, and this is acknowledged as a limitation.

Sources were selected using explicit criteria. The first two inclusion criteria were (1) peer-reviewed journal articles or scholarly books and (2) journal articles published between 2016 and 2026, with seminal works included regardless of publication year according to the criteria above. The other two were (3) direct relevance to at least one focal construct of the study, namely CRE and character formation, reflective or experiential learning, empathy and social responsibility, or Christian and virtue-based character education, and (4) verifiable bibliographic information, preferably with a digital object identifier (DOI). The exclusion criteria were: (1) non-peer-reviewed materials such as blogs, news reports, and opinion pieces; (2) unpublished theses and papers without verifiable bibliographic details; (3) duplicate publications; and (4) studies addressing religious activities without explicit relevance to learning or character formation. Studies from higher education, church settings, or other religious traditions were retained only when they offered insight into the relationship between reflection and character formation that was not available from school-based CRE studies. Their context is stated wherever they are used, and their transferability is treated with caution. The peer-review status of articles without a DOI was verified on the journal websites; for example, *DOREA* publishes a peer-review policy, and *DIDAKTIKOS* is accredited in SINTA and assigns DOIs. Table 1 summarizes the screening stages, the criteria applied at each stage, and the composition of the final corpus. The final corpus consisted of 51 sources: 21 national journal articles, 22 international journal articles, and 8 seminal works. The methodological references used to design the review (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Jaakkola, 2020;

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Page et al., 2021; Snyder, 2019) and the contextual references added to define constructs and position the model are cited separately and were not part of the analyzed corpus.

Table 1. Screening Stages and Composition of the Analyzed Corpus

Stage or Category	Description	n
Identification	Searches in Google Scholar, Garuda, journal websites, and DOI registries using Indonesian and English keyword combinations	
Screening	Titles and abstracts examined against the focal constructs; duplicates and non-peer-reviewed materials removed	
Eligibility and appraisal	Full texts assessed against inclusion criteria 1–4 and exclusion criteria 1–4, and appraised for venue, methodological clarity, and relevance	
Seminal works	Original theoretical works added according to the seminal-work criteria	8
Included by origin	National journal articles	21
	International journal articles	22
	Seminal works	8
Included by evidence type	Empirical studies	9
	Reviews and meta-analyses	12
	Conceptual, theoretical, or documentary works	30
Total	Sources in the analyzed corpus	51

Note. Evidence type was classified by the authors on the basis of each source's stated design.
Source: Authors' documentation of the search and selection process, 2026.

Data analysis proceeded in five stages. First, in the identification stage, relevant sources were collected based on the search strategy. Second, in the screening and appraisal stage, titles, abstracts, and full texts were examined against the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Because the corpus combined empirical, review, and conceptual works, each source was then appraised against three explicit criteria rather than with a design-specific tool such as CASP or MMAT. The criteria were (1) a peer-reviewed or scholarly publication venue, (2) methodological clarity, meaning a transparent design and analysis in empirical studies or a traceable line of argument in conceptual works, and (3) relevance to at least one research question. The appraisal also informed how much weight each source carried in the synthesis, as reflected in the distinction between empirical, review, and conceptual sources in Table 2. Third, in the extraction stage, information from each source was recorded in a synthesis matrix covering the author, year, setting, educational level, evidence type, focus, method, main findings, and relevance to the research questions. Fourth, in the thematic analysis stage, the extracted data were coded and organized into themes through familiarization, coding, theme generation, theme review, and theme definition (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding combined deductive codes derived from the five research questions with inductive codes emerging from the literature. Fifth, in the conceptual synthesis stage, the themes were integrated by identifying relationships among concepts, comparing theoretical positions, and constructing a conceptual model (Jaakkola, 2020).

Trustworthiness was pursued through source triangulation, by comparing national and international studies as well as empirical and conceptual works, and through critical comparison of convergent and divergent findings, which is reported explicitly in the Results. An audit trail documented search terms, selection decisions, and coding categories in the

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synthesis matrix. The synthesis matrix and codebook are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Interpretations were repeatedly checked against the original sources to ensure that the synthesis remained grounded in the literature rather than in the researchers' assumptions. The authors' own theological standpoint within Christian education may have shaped the framing of the synthesis; this reflexive consideration is addressed in the limitations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis of the reviewed literature produced five interrelated themes corresponding to the five research questions. Table 2 summarizes these themes, the number and type of reviewed sources contributing to each, representative sources, and the core insight that each theme contributes to the reconstruction of CRE. The themes are discussed sequentially, moving from the diagnosis of problems to the formulation of foundations, the integration of values, the mapping of strategies, and the construction of a conceptual model. Throughout this section, claims supported by the reviewed evidence are distinguished from the authors' theoretical inferences, which are explicitly presented as propositions.

Table 2. Thematic Map of the Reviewed Literature

Theme	n (E/R/C)	Representative Sources	Core Insight for the Reconstruction of CRE
Problems of character education in CRE (RQ1)	13 (4/0/9)	Boiliu et al. (2020); Hasugian et al. (2022); Darnell et al. (2019); Metcalfe et al. (2024)	CRE remains largely cognitive and normative; the knowledge-action gap requires a pedagogy that integrates thinking, feeling, and acting.
Pedagogical and theological foundations (RQ2)	16 (0/4/12)	Rodgers (2002); Kolb (2015); Morris (2020); Groome (2011); Horowski (2020)	Reflection is a disciplined and communal meaning-making process which, in CRE, takes place in dialogue with the Christian Story and Vision.
Empathy and social responsibility (RQ3)	10 (3/3/4)	Malti et al. (2016); Silke et al. (2018, 2021); Gordon et al. (2022); Lasut et al. (2021)	Empathy grows through encounter and perspective taking, and becomes social responsibility when reflection is linked to concrete action.
Reflective learning strategies (RQ4)	18 (4/4/10)	Rangga (2024); Sianipar (2019); Groome (2011); Han et al. (2017); Gordon et al. (2022); Chalwell (2025)	Six complementary strategies (guided journaling, narrative dialogue, case reflection, shared praxis dialogue, exemplar study, and service-based projects) are promising when facilitated by reflective teachers.
Conceptual model of reflective CRE (RQ5)	16 (3/2/11)	Lase (2025); Pasang (2024); Woenardi (2026); Kristjánsson (2021b)	Existing approaches address parts of the formative cycle; an integrated cycle with continuous character evaluation is needed.

Note. n = number of reviewed sources synthesized in each theme; a source may contribute to more than one theme. E = empirical study; R = review or meta-analysis; C = conceptual, theoretical, or documentary work.
Source: Synthesis of the reviewed literature, 2026.

Problems of Character Education in Christian Religious Education Learning (RQ1)

The first theme concerns the problems that hinder character formation in CRE learning. The literature consistently identifies the dominance of cognitive orientation as the most

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fundamental problem. Boiliu et al. (2020) observe that education centered on knowledge and cognition is insufficient to respond to rapid behavioral changes driven by media, and they propose the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 5:6–12 as a model of character education rooted in the imitation of Christ. Hasugian et al. (2022) reach a similar conclusion, describing CRE practice as normative, ritualistic, and conventional, trapped in a comfort zone that keeps it distant from students' contexts and from social issues. In such conditions, students may master biblical content and doctrinal formulations, yet this mastery does not automatically translate into compassionate attitudes or responsible behavior.

This problem can be explained through the knowledge-action gap discussed in moral psychology. Darnell et al. (2019) argue that moral knowledge does not automatically produce moral action; what is needed is *phronesis*, an integrative capacity that enables a person to perceive what a situation requires and to act accordingly. Kristjánsson (2021b) further outlines how such practical wisdom can be made an explicit object of educational research and practice. Read through this lens, the weakness of CRE is not that it teaches too much knowledge but that it rarely provides structured opportunities for students to apply, examine, and integrate that knowledge in concrete situations. Learning that stops at the transmission of content leaves the integrative work of character formation to chance.

The second problem is the fragmentation of formative environments. Nuhamara (2018) emphasizes that CRE in the family, the church, and the school must share a common orientation toward character, while Ester et al. (2022) show that CRE in the family and parenting styles jointly influence adolescents' Christ-like character. These findings imply that school-based CRE cannot work in isolation. When values taught in the classroom are not reinforced, discussed, or practiced in the family and congregation, students receive inconsistent messages and the formative power of CRE is weakened. Prawiromaruto and Stevanus (2023) add that Christian character is formed through spiritual formation that is both individual and communal, which means that the absence of communal practices of reflection limits the depth of formation.

The third problem relates to the changing context of learners. Students today live in digital environments that shape their attention, relationships, and moral sensibilities. Gulo and Tapilaha (2024) argue that CRE must integrate spirituality and critical reasoning to remain meaningful in the digital era, and Widiyaningtyas and Duha (2023) argue that blended learning can extend the character-formation function of CRE beyond the classroom. However, technology does not by itself resolve the problem; without reflective design, digital learning may reproduce the same content-centered patterns in a new medium.

The fourth problem concerns evaluation. None of the reviewed sources examined how character outcomes are assessed in school-based CRE, and the available descriptions of CRE practice portray learning outcomes that are framed predominantly in terms of knowledge (Boiliu et al., 2020; Hasugian et al., 2022). This absence is itself a finding of the review. The only school-based study in the corpus that assessed both cognitive understanding and behavioral awareness concerns religious moderation in a multifaith classroom rather than

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CRE assessment, but it found that reflective and participatory pedagogy improved both dimensions (Sihotang et al., 2024). We therefore infer that what is assessed shapes what is formed, and that CRE needs evaluation practices that capture character as well as knowledge.

These problems are not unique to Indonesia. In England, religious education teachers broadly agree that their subject contributes to pupils' character, virtue literacy, and moral virtues (Metcalfe et al., 2024), and multi-faith religious education carries moral assumptions framed in deontological or virtue-ethical terms (Moulin-Stożek & Metcalfe, 2020). However, these studies largely capture teachers' perspectives and curricular assumptions rather than explicitly designed and evaluated pedagogical pathways (Metcalfe & Moulin-Stożek, 2021). The evidence base for this theme should therefore be read with caution. Of the 13 reviewed sources synthesized here, only four report empirical data (Ester et al., 2022; Metcalfe et al., 2024; Metcalfe & Moulin-Stożek, 2021; Sihotang et al., 2024), and none of them directly observed CRE classroom instruction in Indonesian schools; the remaining sources are conceptual or documentary analyses. Within these limits, the convergence between national and international literature suggests that a central part of the problem is pedagogical: CRE requires a learning design that intentionally connects knowledge, affect, and action. This diagnosis provides the rationale for reconstructing CRE through reflective learning.

Pedagogical and Theological Foundations of Reflective Learning in Christian Religious Education (RQ2)

The second theme concerns the foundations that justify reflective learning as the core of a reconstructed CRE. Rather than reviewing these theories in general, this section identifies the specific principle that the synthesis retains from each of them for the REAE model; Table 4 in the fifth theme summarizes this mapping. Pedagogically, the most fundamental foundation is Dewey's concept of reflective thinking as reinterpreted by Rodgers (2002). Reflection in this sense has four characteristics: it is a meaning-making process that connects experiences and ideas, a systematic and disciplined way of thinking, an activity that requires interaction with others in community, and a practice that requires attitudes valuing personal and intellectual growth. These characteristics are important for CRE because they position reflection not as a vague feeling or private daydreaming but as a disciplined inquiry into experience that can be taught, guided, and evaluated. The synthesis therefore retains from Rodgers the principle that reflection is a disciplined and communal practice, which grounds the facilitated and community-based character of all four phases of the model.

Schön's (1983) distinction between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action adds that reflection can occur both during and after experience. For CRE, this suggests that students should be trained not only to look back on what they did but also to become aware, in the moment, of how their responses toward others express or contradict Christian values. The model retains this as in-the-moment awareness during social action combined with structured reflection afterward. Kolb's (2015) experiential learning cycle provides a structural sequence for this process, moving from concrete experience to reflective observation, abstract

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conceptualization, and active experimentation. Morris (2020) refines this cycle by highlighting that learning is most powerful when concrete experiences are contextually rich and when reflection is critical rather than merely descriptive. The REAE cycle retains Kolb's sequential structure and Morris's emphasis on contextually rich experience. Marshall (2019) similarly underlines that reflection involves a purposeful examination of experience oriented toward learning and change. Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory and Hoggan's (2016) typology of transformative outcomes further indicate that deep reflection can alter learners' worldviews, self-understanding, and ways of acting, which corresponds closely to the goal of character formation. From these theories, the model retains the idea that evaluation should discern changes in perspective and conduct, not only in knowledge.

Theologically, reflective learning in CRE finds a strong foundation in Groome's (2011) shared Christian praxis. The approach begins with a focusing act and moves through naming present praxis, critical reflection on that praxis, encountering the Christian Story and Vision, appropriating the Story and Vision into learners' lives, and making decisions for lived Christian faith. This movement from life to faith to life gives reflection a theological horizon: students do not merely reflect on experience in general but interpret their experience in light of Scripture and the tradition of the faith community and respond with renewed commitment. Sianipar (2019) notes that this approach remains underused in Indonesian Protestant contexts, while Harjanto (2016) appreciates its rich epistemology and its balance of theory and praxis. Harjanto also cautions against overemphasizing freedom as the goal and against an unclear delimitation of the Christian Story and Vision. This critique is relevant for the present reconstruction, as it underscores that reflection in CRE must remain anchored in the normative witness of Scripture and the person of Christ. The REAE model therefore retains Groome's movement from life to faith to life as the structure of its first phase and makes the Christian Story and Vision the explicit normative core of the whole cycle.

The biblical narratives themselves model reflective formation. The parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25–37 ends with a reflective question that reorients the understanding of who one's neighbor is and calls for compassionate action across ethnic and religious boundaries (Stevanus, 2020). The teaching of Jesus in Matthew 5:6–12 presents character as a set of dispositions formed through following Christ (Boiliu et al., 2020). From the perspective of virtue theory, Horowski (2020), drawing on Thomas Aquinas, shows that Christian religious education can contribute to the development of moral virtues. In the Thomistic tradition, acquired moral virtues are formed through repeated good acts guided by reason, while infused virtues are given and perfected by grace (Aquinas, ca. 1265–1274/1981, I–II, q. 63, aa. 2–3). Kristjánsson (2017) reminds educators that the aim of education is human flourishing, which includes meaning and purpose. Integrating these perspectives, reflection in CRE can be understood as a practice of discernment before God in which learners examine their experience, encounter the Word, and are moved toward Christ-like character within a community of faith. The model retains this as the expectation that character grows through repeated cycles of action and reflection rather than through a single learning event.

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The Indonesian context offers additional cultural resources. Nugroho and Sari (2020) identify the Javanese *Kawruh Pamomong* values, including *ngraosaken raosipun tiyang sanes* (feeling what others feel), as compatible with Christian character, and Woenardi (2026) reinterprets Groome's movements through the values of *gotong royong*, *musyawarah-mufakat*, and *tepo seliro*, positioning the faith community as a space for moral formation. These studies show that reflective CRE can be contextualized without losing its theological identity. The synthesis of pedagogical, theological, and cultural foundations thus indicates that reflection in CRE is simultaneously cognitive, affective, spiritual, and communal, and this multidimensional character makes it particularly suitable for forming empathy and social responsibility.

Integrating Empathy and Social Responsibility through Reflective Learning Experiences (RQ3)

The third theme concerns how empathy and social responsibility can be integrated into CRE through reflective learning experiences. Empathy is commonly understood as having both affective and cognitive dimensions, namely the capacity to share in another person's emotional state and the capacity to understand another person's perspective (Cuff et al., 2016). Hoffman (2000) argues that empathy develops through increasingly mature modes and becomes a basis for moral principles of caring and justice when it is connected with a cognitive understanding of others' situations. This view implies that empathy is not merely an innate trait but a capacity that can be nurtured through experiences and through guided interpretation of those experiences, which is precisely the domain of reflective learning.

The literature indicates that schools can intentionally foster empathy. Malti et al. (2016) review school-based interventions that promote empathy-related responding among children and adolescents and emphasize the importance of developmentally sensitive design. Silke et al. (2018) show that the development of empathy and prosocial behavior among adolescents is influenced by both contextual and psychological factors, while Silke et al. (2021) find that empathy and social responsibility values are associated with adolescents' civic behavior within their social contexts. Gordon et al. (2022), in a meta-analysis and meta-synthesis of programs for university students, report that service-learning produces small but significant gains in empathy, with direct contact with communities as an important driver. Because this evidence comes from higher education, its transfer to school-aged learners is plausible but not yet established. A broader meta-analysis that included students from elementary school to college found positive effects of service-learning on attitudes, social skills, and civic engagement, with larger effects in programs that followed recommended practices such as structured reflection (Celio et al., 2011). Taken together, these findings suggest that empathy grows when learners encounter real others, are guided to take their perspectives, and are supported by a social context that values care.

Reflection plays a mediating role in this process. Encounters with people in need, without reflection, may produce only temporary emotional reactions or may even reinforce

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stereotypes and paternalistic attitudes, a risk documented in critiques of traditional service-learning (Mitchell, 2008). Reflection transforms such encounters into understanding by helping students ask what others experience, why their situation occurs, and how Christian faith calls them to respond. Han et al. (2017) demonstrate that attainable and relevant moral exemplars are more effective than extraordinary exemplars in promoting students' voluntary service, indicating that reflection on concrete and relatable models of goodness can motivate action. Divergent views also deserve attention. Bloom (2016) argues that empathy is parochial and biased toward those who are similar or near, and can therefore mislead moral judgment. This critique does not remove the role of empathy in CRE, but it implies that empathy must be disciplined by reflection and oriented by a neighbor love that extends beyond one's own group, as in the Good Samaritan narrative. On this basis, we propose that empathy functions within the reflective cycle as the bridge between reflection and action: reflection deepens and corrects empathy, and empathy motivates responsible action. This proposition is a theoretical inference of the present synthesis rather than a finding reported in the reviewed studies.

Social responsibility, in turn, represents the outward expression of empathy in concrete commitments to the common good. In the plural Indonesian society, Lasut et al. (2021) propose that CRE should guide students to observe and evaluate social life in order to cultivate sympathy and empathy, and should develop faith-community approaches that foster social care across differences. Stevanus (2020) interprets the Good Samaritan narrative as a call to build caring relationships across ethnic and religious boundaries, which positions social responsibility as an integral form of Christian witness. Pasang (2024) similarly highlights social service as a means through which religious values become visible in real life. In the Christian frame, social responsibility is thus not an external addition to faith but the practical fruit of love for God and neighbor.

We further infer that the integration of empathy and social responsibility through reflective experience can be explained by the complementary roles of affect and cognition in moral functioning. Empathy without reflection risks becoming a fleeting sentiment, reflection without empathy risks remaining an intellectual exercise, and social action without both may become routine charity that leaves students' character untouched. This proposition is consistent with Gordon et al. (2022), who emphasize direct community contact among university students, and with Amirudin et al. (2026), who associate reflective digital pedagogy with empathy and responsibility among university students in Islamic religious education. The present synthesis extends these studies by placing the process within a Christian theological framework of neighbor love and within school-based CRE, although this extension remains to be tested empirically. For CRE, the implication is that learning experiences should be designed as connected sequences of encounter, reflection, and action rather than as isolated activities.

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Reflective Learning Strategies for Forming Students' Christian Character (RQ4)

The fourth theme maps reflective learning strategies that can be used to form students' Christian character. The literature suggests that no single technique is sufficient; rather, a repertoire of strategies is needed to engage students' cognition, affect, spirituality, and action. Six strategies emerged from the synthesis. Table 3 summarizes each strategy, its theoretical basis, the reviewed sources that support it, the type of evidence, and the REAE phase in which it is mainly used. As the table shows, the support for most strategies is conceptual; only exemplar study and service-based projects are supported by experimental or meta-analytic evidence, and the latter mainly from higher education.

Table 3. Reflective Learning Strategies Identified in the Synthesis

Strategy	Theoretical Basis	Supporting Reviewed Sources	Evidence Type	Main REAE Phase
1. Guided reflective journaling linking Scripture and life	Reflection as systematic meaning-making; reflection-on-action	Rodgers (2002); Schön (1983)	Conceptual (seminal works)	Experiential reflection
2. Narrative and life-story dialogue	Narrative meaning-making in community	Rangga (2024)	Conceptual (literature-based)	Experiential reflection; empathy formation
3. Case-based moral reflection and perspective taking	Phronesis as the bridge between moral knowledge and moral action	Darnell et al. (2019)	Conceptual	Empathy formation
4. Shared praxis dialogue in small groups	Movements of shared Christian praxis	Groome (2011); Sianipar (2019); Zebua & Usmany (2025); Woenardi (2026)	Conceptual; one qualitative study in a campus ministry	Experiential reflection; empathy formation
5. Exemplar study	Attainable and relevant moral exemplars motivate action	Han et al. (2017)	Experimental	Empathy formation
6. Service-based reflective projects	Experiential learning; direct community contact	Gordon et al. (2022); Lase (2025); Pasang (2024)	Meta-analysis (university students); review; conceptual	Social action

Note. Reflection portfolios are not a separate strategy but an evaluation instrument that compiles evidence from Strategies 1–6 (see Table 5).
Source: Synthesis of the reviewed literature, 2026.

The first strategy is guided reflective journaling that links Scripture and life. Students record experiences, feelings, and decisions, then respond to guiding questions that connect these experiences with biblical texts, such as how they treated others, what the teaching of Christ reveals about the situation, and what change they will pursue. This practice operationalizes Rodgers' (2002) view of reflection as systematic meaning-making and Schön's (1983) notion of reflection-on-action. The second strategy is narrative and life-story dialogue. Rangga (2024), through a literature-based analysis, argues that life-narrative learning enriches

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faith understanding, encourages personal reflection, and strengthens community through dialogue, provided that teachers act as facilitators. Sharing stories of struggle, failure, and grace enables students to recognize themselves and others as persons, which is a precondition for empathy.

The third strategy is case-based moral reflection and perspective taking. Teachers present real or realistic cases, such as bullying, online harassment, poverty, or interreligious tension, and guide students to analyze the perspectives of each party, discern relevant biblical principles, and formulate responsible responses. This strategy cultivates the practical wisdom that Darnell et al. (2019) identify as the bridge between moral knowledge and moral action. The fourth strategy is shared praxis dialogue in small groups. Following the movements proposed by Groome (2011), students name their present praxis, reflect critically, encounter the Christian Story and Vision, and decide on responses together. Sianipar (2019), on the basis of library research, argues that this approach suits church-based CRE, and Zebua and Usmany (2025) report from a phenomenological study of student cell groups that it deepened theological understanding and produced positive changes in behavior and spirituality. Woenardi (2026) argues for its compatibility with communal Indonesian values.

The fifth strategy is exemplar study. Students examine the lives of biblical figures, church figures, and ordinary people in their communities who embody Christian virtues. Han et al. (2017) suggest that attainable and relevant exemplars are particularly effective, which implies that CRE should not rely solely on heroic figures but should also present peers, teachers, and local community members as models. The sixth strategy is service-based reflective projects. Students plan and carry out projects addressing real needs in the school, church, or society, with structured reflection before, during, and after the activity. Service-learning research shows that such experiences foster empathy, especially through direct contact with communities, although the reported gains are small and come from university programs (Gordon et al., 2022). Lase (2025) and Pasang (2024) argue that experiential learning helps translate faith into concrete practice, while Lase (2025) also cautions that experiential cycles can fragment and drift into subjectivism. Digital tools, such as online reflective journals and blended discussion forums, may extend these strategies beyond the classroom. The available support, however, comes from Islamic higher education (Amirudin et al., 2026) and from conceptual work on CRE (Widiyaningtyas & Duha, 2023). Online reflection also risks becoming superficial or performative when students write for an audience rather than for honest self-examination, so digital reflection should complement rather than replace face-to-face dialogue.

The effectiveness of these strategies depends heavily on the teacher. In a small case study, Chalwell (2025) shows that teaching Christianly is intertwined with being Christian, with relationships with God and with students, and with time devoted to reflection, indicating that teachers must themselves be reflective practitioners. Berkowitz's (2021) PRIMED principles, namely prioritization, relationships, intrinsic motivation, modeling, empowerment, and developmental pedagogy, provide a useful frame. In this frame, reflective strategies work

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best when character is a genuine priority of the school, when relationships are caring, when motivation is intrinsic rather than reward-driven, when adults model the values they teach, when students are empowered to participate, and when pedagogy is developmentally appropriate (Berkowitz et al., 2017). Lavy (2020) similarly argues that character strengths can be fostered through intentional school practices. The strategies identified in this study therefore require supportive school cultures rather than techniques applied in isolated lessons.

Compared with previous studies that typically examined a single strategy, such as life-narrative learning (Rangga, 2024) or shared praxis (Sianipar, 2019), we propose that the strategies are complementary and can be sequenced. Journaling and narrative dialogue appear best suited to initiating reflection on experience; case reflection, exemplar study, and shared praxis dialogue deepen empathy and discernment; and service-based projects provide opportunities for social action. Reflection portfolios, which are an evaluation instrument rather than a seventh strategy, compile the evidence produced by all six strategies for character evaluation (Table 5). This sequencing logic forms the basis of the conceptual model presented in the next section.

Reconstructing a Conceptual Model of Reflective Learning Based on Christian Values (RQ5)

The fifth theme synthesizes the previous findings into a reconstructed conceptual model, termed the Reflective-Empathic-Action-Evaluative (REAE) model. Following Jaakkola's (2020) model-building approach, the focal phenomenon is the formation of Christian character in school-based CRE, understood as the integration of knowledge, affect, and action. The components of the model were derived in three steps. First, the codes grouped under each theme were examined for the formative processes they describe, such as interpreting experience in light of Scripture, perspective taking, service with structured reflection, and the assessment of behavior. Second, recurring processes were consolidated into four phases, a theological core, and a formative context, and each component was linked to the theoretical principles identified in the second theme. Third, the relationships among the phases were specified from the evidence that empathy, social responsibility, and character grow through connected sequences of encounter, reflection, action, and evaluation. Table 4 shows the themes, principles, and sources from which each component was derived. The model has not yet been reviewed by experts or practitioners and is therefore presented as a proposition for validation rather than as a validated framework. As shown in Figure 1, the model consists of a theological core, four cyclical phases, and a formative context.

Table 4. Derivation of the REAE Components from the Synthesis

REAE Component	Derived from Theme(s)	Theoretical Principles Retained	Supporting Reviewed Sources
Theological core: Christian Story and Vision	1, 2	Life–faith–life movement in dialogue with Scripture (Groome, 1980, 2011); explicit normative reference against subjectivism	Boiliu et al. (2020); Harjanto (2016); Lase (2025); Stevanus (2020)

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Formative context: classroom, family, church, society	1, 2	Reflection as a communal practice (Rodgers, 2002); shared responsibility of formative environments	Ester et al. (2022); Nuhamara (2018); Prawiromaruto & Stevanus (2023); Nugroho & Sari (2020); Woenardi (2026)
Phase 1: Experiential reflection	2, 4	Reflection as disciplined meaning-making (Rodgers, 2002); reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983); contextually rich concrete experience (Kolb, 2015; Morris, 2020)	Rangga (2024); Sianipar (2019); Zebua & Usmany (2025)
Phase 2: Empathy formation	3, 4	Affective and cognitive empathy maturing toward caring and justice (Hoffman, 2000); perspective taking; attainable exemplars	Malti et al. (2016); Silke et al. (2018); Han et al. (2017); Lasut et al. (2021)
Phase 3: Social action	3, 4	Active experimentation (Kolb, 2015); reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983); neighbor love across boundaries	Gordon et al. (2022); Silke et al. (2021); Stevanus (2020); Pasang (2024)
Phase 4: Christian character evaluation	1, 2, 4	Transformation of frames of reference (Mezirow, 1991; Hoggan, 2016); virtues formed through repeated acts and grace (Horowski, 2020)	Sihotang et al. (2024); Kristjánsson (2021b); Berkowitz (2021)
Teacher as reflective facilitator and model	4	Teaching Christianly as reflective practice; PRIMED design principles	Chalwell (2025); Berkowitz (2021); Berkowitz et al. (2017)

Source: Authors' conceptual synthesis, 2026.

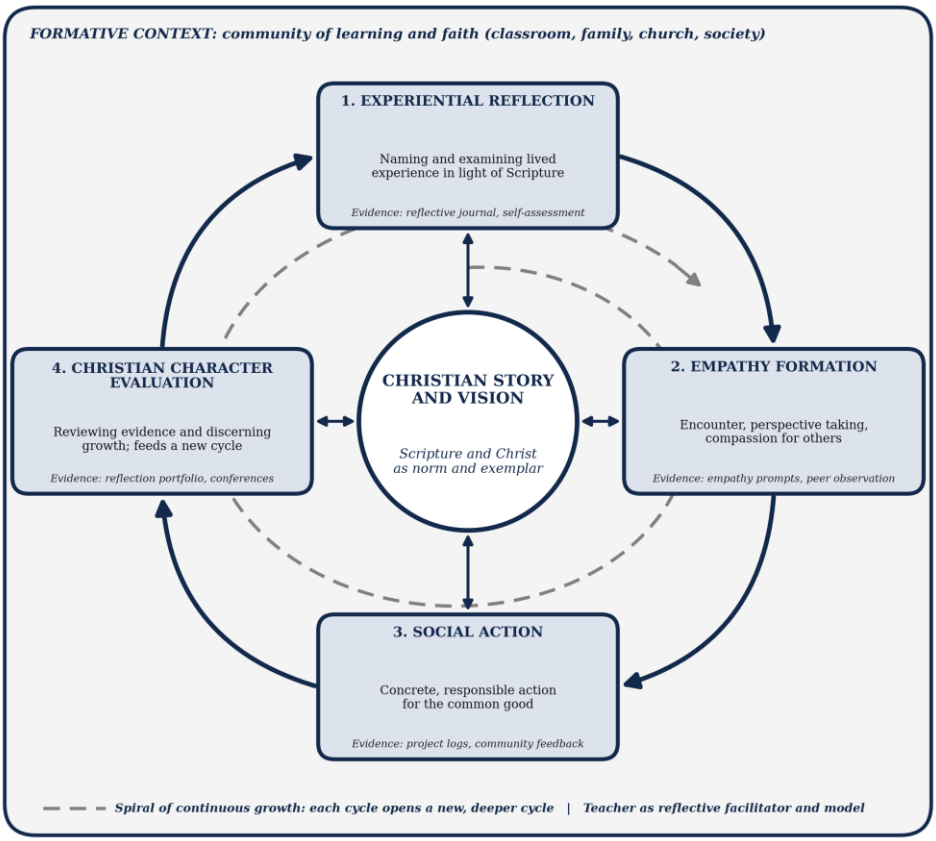


Figure 1. The Reflective-Empathic-Action-Evaluative (REAE) Model of Christian Religious Education
Source: Authors' conceptual synthesis, 2026.

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At the center of the model is the Christian Story and Vision, embodied in Scripture and in the person of Christ as the norm and exemplar of character. This core responds to Harjanto's (2016) critique of shared praxis by making the normative reference of reflection explicit: every phase of learning is interpreted in dialogue with the Word, so that reflection does not drift into subjectivism, a risk also noted by Lase (2025). Surrounding the core is the formative context of the learning community, including the classroom, family, church, and wider society. This context reflects the communal nature of reflection (Rodgers, 2002), the shared responsibility of formative environments (Ester et al., 2022; Nuhamara, 2018), and the Indonesian communal values of *gotong royong* and *tepo seliro* (Woenardi, 2026). The teacher functions as a reflective facilitator and model who guides each phase (Chalwell, 2025).

The first phase, experiential reflection, invites students to name and examine concrete experiences from their daily lives, including relationships at school, family dynamics, digital interactions, and social realities, and to interpret them in light of Scripture. The second phase, empathy formation, deepens reflection through encounter and perspective taking, enabling students to understand and feel the situations of others, particularly those who are vulnerable or different from themselves. The third phase, social action, translates empathy into concrete and responsible actions, such as peer support, service projects, and advocacy for justice within the students' reach. The fourth phase, Christian character evaluation, assesses the development of character through multiple sources of evidence and feeds the results back into a new cycle of reflection. Although evaluation is presented as the fourth phase, formative evidence is gathered within every phase, as the instruments listed for each phase show; the fourth phase is the point at which this evidence is reviewed and discerned together. Table 5 presents the operational components of each phase.

Table 5. Operational Components of the REAE Model

Phase and Aim	Learning Activities	Character Indicators and Evaluation Instruments
Experiential reflection: interpreting lived experience in light of Scripture	Guided reflective journaling, life-story sharing, naming present praxis, Scripture-life dialogue	Honest self-examination and awareness of values in daily decisions; reflective journal rubric and self-assessment
Empathy formation: understanding and sharing the perspectives and feelings of others	Case-based reflection, perspective taking, exemplar study, encounters with community members	Sensitivity to the needs of others, compassion, and respect for differences; empathy reflection prompts, peer observation, and anecdotal records
Social action: translating empathy into responsible action	Service-based projects, peer support, collaborative community initiatives with structured reflection	Responsibility, initiative, cooperation, and perseverance; project logs, observation checklists, and community feedback
Christian character evaluation: discerning growth and planning renewal	Portfolio review, teacher-student conferences, communal reflection involving family and church	Consistency between faith and behavior, humility, and commitment to growth; reflection portfolio, Christian character rubric, and longitudinal records

Note. The character indicators and evaluation instruments are proposed by the authors on the basis of the synthesis and have not yet been validated. They are formulated for junior and senior secondary students; activities for primary students would require simplification. Formative evidence is collected within every phase and reviewed in the fourth phase.
Source: Authors' conceptual synthesis, 2026.

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The model is cyclical and sustainable rather than linear. The evaluation phase does not end the learning process but generates new questions and experiences for subsequent reflection, so that each new cycle begins at a deeper level and character formation proceeds as a spiral of growth. This design responds to the absence of character evaluation identified in the first theme. Evaluation in the REAE model is formative and developmental: it uses reflective journals, portfolios, observation, peer feedback, and self-assessment to trace changes over time, consistent with the finding that assessing both understanding and behavior reveals the effects of reflective pedagogy (Sihotang et al., 2024). Evaluation is also framed theologically as discernment and growth in grace rather than as moral grading, so that students are encouraged toward honest self-examination rather than performative behavior. This formative framing complements rather than replaces the formal assessment required in Indonesian schools. The current graduate competency standards specify eight dimensions of the graduate profile, including faith and devotion to God Almighty, citizenship, and collaboration (Kementerian Pendidikan Dasar dan Menengah, 2025). Evidence from REAE portfolios, journals, and observations can inform the descriptive reporting of these dimensions, while scores remain reserved for the knowledge and skill outcomes for which they are appropriate.

The REAE model differs from existing approaches in several respects, as summarized in Table 6. Compared with Lickona's (1991) integrated model of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action, the REAE model shares the same three dimensions but turns them into a learning sequence with explicit reflective and evaluative steps. Compared with Kolb's (2015) experiential cycle and its revision by Morris (2020), the model adds an explicit theological core and an affective-empathic phase, so that learning is directed not only toward knowledge construction but toward Christ-like character. Compared with Groome's (2011) shared Christian praxis, the model retains the movement from life to faith to life but makes empathy formation and social action distinct phases and adds continuous character evaluation as a feedback mechanism. The Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm is the closest existing model, since it already links context, experience, reflection, action, and evaluation within Christian education (ICAJE, 1993). REAE differs from it in three ways: it makes empathy formation a distinct phase between reflection and action, it anchors every phase in an explicit Scripture-life dialogue suited to CRE in Indonesian schools, and it specifies character indicators and instruments for each phase. Compared with critical reflection models in service-learning, such as the DEAL model (Ash & Clayton, 2009), REAE embeds reflection on service within a theological account of neighbor love and within a repeating cycle rather than a single project. Compared with the experiential approaches to CRE discussed by Lase (2025) and Pasang (2024), the model positions social responsibility as an essential outcome and specifies indicators and instruments for evaluating character. These differences constitute the novelty of the study, namely the integration of experiential reflection, empathy formation, social action, and continuous evaluation of Christian character in a single, theologically grounded cycle for school-based CRE.

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Table 6. Comparison of the REAE Model with Related Models

Model	Phases or Components	Theological Core	Distinct Empathy Phase	Evaluation Mechanism
Integrated character model (Lickona, 1991)	Moral knowing, moral feeling, moral action (components, not a sequence)	None (general character education)	No (moral feeling as a component)	Not specified as part of a learning cycle
Experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 2015; Morris, 2020)	Concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, active experimentation	None	No	Implicit in the cycle; not focused on character
Shared Christian praxis (Groome, 1980, 2011)	Focusing act and movements from naming present praxis to decision for lived faith	Christian Story and Vision	No	Not specified as a distinct mechanism
Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm (ICAJE, 1993)	Context, experience, reflection, action, evaluation	Ignatian spirituality	No (implicit within reflection)	Evaluation of academic mastery and growth as persons for others
DEAL model of critical reflection (Ash & Clayton, 2009)	Describe, Examine, Articulate Learning	None	No	Articulated learning statements documenting learning from service
REAE model (this study)	Experiential reflection, empathy formation, social action, Christian character evaluation, around a theological core and within a formative context	Christian Story and Vision; Scripture and Christ as norm and exemplar	Yes	Formative evidence gathered in every phase, reviewed in Phase 4, and fed into a new cycle

Source: Authors' analysis, 2026.

Theoretically, the model offers a pedagogical response to the knowledge-action gap. By embedding reflection, empathy, and action in a repeated cycle, it creates conditions for cultivating *phronesis*, the integrative capacity that Darnell et al. (2019) and Kristjánsson (2021b) regard as essential for moral action. The model also connects CRE with the broader field of virtue-based character education, which Kristjánsson (2021a) defends against criticisms that it is individualistic or neoliberal, showing that a theologically grounded model can contribute to the wider discourse on character education. Practically, the model provides CRE teachers with a framework for designing lesson plans and units in which each meeting, or series of meetings, moves through the four phases. Curriculum developers can use it to formulate learning outcomes that include empathy, social responsibility, and Christian character alongside cognitive outcomes, while schools can use it to build partnerships with families and churches so that reflection and action continue beyond the classroom, consistent with the PRIMED principles (Berkowitz, 2021). Teacher education programs can also prepare CRE teachers as reflective practitioners who are able to facilitate dialogue, guide perspective taking, and conduct formative character evaluation.

For illustration, consider a four-meeting unit for Grade 10 of senior secondary school on loving one's neighbor in the digital space. In the first meeting (experiential reflection),

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students write a guided journal entry on an online interaction in which they or a peer were hurt or excluded and read it alongside Luke 10:25–37. In the second meeting (empathy formation), they analyze an anonymized cyberbullying case from the perspectives of the victim, the perpetrator, and the bystanders, and study an attainable exemplar, such as a student who defended a peer. In the third meeting (social action), small groups design and carry out a modest initiative, such as a peer-support campaign or class norms for respectful online communication, and keep project logs. In the fourth meeting (Christian character evaluation), students review their journals and logs in teacher-student conferences, receive feedback from peers and, where possible, from their families, and formulate a personal commitment that opens the next cycle. This example is illustrative and has not been tested; its feasibility, including its time demands, should be examined in implementation studies.

This study has several limitations. First, the REAE model is conceptual and has not been empirically tested or reviewed by experts, so its effectiveness in classrooms remains to be examined. Second, the search relied on Google Scholar, Garuda, journal websites, and DOI registries and did not include indexed databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, or the ATLA Religion Database. Combined with the relevance ranking of Google Scholar, this limited coverage may have introduced selection bias and omitted relevant works in other languages or databases. Third, the review was not pre-registered, record counts for the identification and screening stages are not reported, and no inter-coder agreement statistic is reported, which limits the reproducibility of selection and coding decisions. Fourth, several reviewed studies originate from higher education, church settings, or other religious traditions, which requires caution when transferring their findings to school-based CRE, and most of the national sources are conceptual rather than empirical. Fifth, the authors' own theological standpoint within Christian education may have shaped the selection and interpretation of sources, which affects the transferability of the model to other Christian traditions and to plural classroom settings. Future research should therefore validate the model through expert judgment, develop and test instruments for assessing Christian character, and examine its implementation through design-based research, classroom action research, or mixed-methods studies across different levels of schooling and cultural contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that reconstructing Christian Religious Education through reflective learning offers a coherent pathway for addressing the gap between students' understanding of Christian values and their everyday behavior. Regarding the first research question, character education in Christian Religious Education is hindered mainly by knowledge-centered instruction, fragmented formative environments, and the absence of character evaluation. Regarding the second, reflective learning rests on reflective, experiential, and transformative learning theories and on a theology of shared praxis and the imitation of Christ. Regarding the third, empathy and social responsibility can be integrated when reflection is connected to real encounters with others and to concrete action for the

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common good. Regarding the fourth, six complementary strategies, from guided journaling to service-based projects, can be sequenced to support this process. Regarding the fifth, these elements form the Reflective-Empathic-Action-Evaluative model, a cycle of experiential reflection, empathy formation, social action, and Christian character evaluation centered on the Christian Story and Vision.

Because the model was developed through library research and conceptual synthesis, it has not yet been tested in actual classrooms or reviewed by experts. Future studies are recommended to validate the model with experts and practitioners, to develop reliable instruments for assessing Christian character, and to examine the implementation and effects of the model at various levels of schooling and in diverse cultural settings.

The added value of this study lies in offering Christian Religious Education a single, theologically grounded cycle that turns reflection, empathy, and action into a form of character formation that can be planned and evaluated. Beyond Christian Religious Education, the model shows how a faith-based pedagogy can contribute to the wider discourse on character education by bridging the gap between moral knowledge and moral action, and it gives teachers, curriculum developers, schools, families, and churches a shared framework for forming character in a sustainable manner.

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Author Contributions
Andrea Elfata Ratulangi; contributed to conceptualization, methodology, literature search and screening, data curation, formal analysis, visualization, and writing, original draft. Devrialdo Daniel Paat; contributed to conceptualization, validation, and writing, review and editing.

Conflict of Interest
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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