

## Christian Education and Social Justice: Pursuing Shalom in the Public Sphere

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### ABSTRACT

Christian Education and Social Justice: Pursuing Shalom in the Public Sphere. Christian education is crucial in advancing social justice through a theological framework grounded in shalom. This article aims to critically examine how Christian education can serve as a transformative force amid global inequality and social fragmentation. A systematic literature review method was applied, analyzing peer-reviewed Scopus-indexed theology, education, and ethics publications. The findings reveal the need to integrate values such as reconciliation, compassion, inclusivity, and justice into Christian pedagogy, curriculum, and institutional culture. The approach includes relational learning, public religious pedagogy, and prioritizing marginalized communities through the principle of preferential options for the poor. The conclusion of this study is that shalom-based Christian education not only forms individuals with character, but also produces active agents of change in society. This study recommends that there needs to be an emphasis on the importance of the role of teachers, contextual curriculum, and public testimony as a real manifestation of the call of faith.

### ABSTRAK

Kata-kata kunci:

Pendidikan Kristen;

Keadilan Sosial;

Shalom;

Pedagogi Relasional;

Komunitas Marjinal.

**Pendidikan Kristen dan Keadilan Sosial: Mewujudkan Shalom di Ruang Publik.** Pendidikan Kristen memiliki peran penting dalam mendorong keadilan sosial melalui pendekatan yang berakar pada teologi shalom. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis secara kritis bagaimana pendidikan Kristen yang dapat menjadi sarana transformasi sosial di tengah ketimpangan dan fragmentasi masyarakat global saat ini. Metode yang digunakan adalah *systematic literature review* dengan menganalisis publikasi terindeks Scopus yang relevan di bidang teologi, pendidikan, dan etika. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa nilai-nilai seperti rekonsiliasi, kasih, inklusivitas, dan keadilan perlu diintegrasikan ke dalam kurikulum, pedagogi, dan budaya institusional pendidikan Kristen. Pendekatan ini mencakup pembelajaran relasional, pedagogi publik religius, serta perhatian pada komunitas marjinal melalui prinsip *preferential option for the poor*. Simpulan dari studi ini adalah bahwa pendidikan Kristen yang berbasis shalom tidak hanya membentuk pribadi yang ber karakter, tetapi juga menghasilkan pelaku perubahan yang aktif dalam masyarakat. Penelitian ini merekomendasikan bahwa perlu ada ketegasan pada pentingnya peran guru, kurikulum kontekstual, dan kesaksian publik sebagai wujud nyata panggilan iman.

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## Introduction

Christian education has long played a key role in shaping character, deepening faith, and encouraging a sense of responsibility to others. It's grounded in a biblical vision that sees learning not just as gaining knowledge, but as a way to grow into the people God calls us to be, whole and purpose-driven (Benson, 2018). Today, in a world marked by growing inequality, cultural diversity, and sharp divides in belief, Christian education needs to re-center its focus on justice, fairness, and showing up as a faithful presence in the public square (Luna De La Rosa et al., 2019).

A growing body of scholarship suggests that Christian education possesses untapped potential to engage public issues and contribute meaningfully to societal well-being (Pirner, 2017; Alexander et al., 2021). But in reality, many Christian schools and universities wrestle with how to connect spiritual growth with active involvement in the world. It's not always easy to turn big theological ideas like justice, compassion, and reconciliation into everyday teaching practices that actually make a difference. On top of that, the strong influence of today's education systems, focused on things like test scores, competition, and privatization, has made it even harder for Christian education to fully live out its public mission (Grech & Mayo, 2014; Bobbert, 2017).

Shalom, a central theme in biblical theology, offers a robust framework for reimagining Christian education as a transformative journey toward justice, peace, and human flourishing (Shortt, 2017; Benson, 2018). Yet, a theoretical gap remains in how this theological vision is practically embedded in pedagogical models, curriculum design, and institutional mission. Additionally, while some studies have explored Christian education and social justice separately, comprehensive syntheses that bridge these domains are still limited.

Sianturi et al. (2022) discuss how Christian education can proactively respond to social inequalities by fostering inclusivity and empowering marginalized communities. These studies collectively affirm the subject matter's significance, yet also reveal a gap in operationalizing theological ideals such as justice and shalom into educational practice. Despite this growing interest, many Christian schools and universities still grapple with effectively connecting spiritual formation with public responsibility. Translating profound theological themes, such as justice, compassion, reconciliation, and the kingdom of God into curricular structures, classroom practices, or institutional missions that address real-world injustices remains a challenge. Moreover, dominant educational paradigms often prioritize metrics like test scores, competitiveness, and privatization (Grech & Mayo, 2014; Bobbert, 2017), which can undermine efforts to cultivate a more holistic and justice-centered educational vision (Gultom, 2024).

This study, therefore, focuses on bridging the gap between Christian education and social justice by exploring how the biblical concept of shalom can offer a transformative framework for educational theory and practice in the public sphere. Utilizing a systematic literature review methodology, the research synthesizes theological, educational, and ethical perspectives to identify key pedagogical models, curricular themes, and institutional strategies that pursue justice as integral to Christian education. By doing so, it contributes to the ongoing conversation about how Christian education can function not only as a site of personal faith development but also as a faithful and critical presence in society.

This article addresses these research and practice gaps by examining the integration of social justice within Christian education through the theological lens of shalom. The central problem it seeks to address is: How can Christian education meaningfully advance social justice in a fragmented and unjust world? This study aims to critically analyze the frameworks, practices, and implications of Christian education in promoting shalom and justice in the public sphere, drawing from theological, ethical, and educational scholarship.

## Method

This study uses a systematic literature review to explore how Christian education engages with social justice. Drawing from the Scopus database, the review included a wide-ranging keyword search with terms such as “Christian education,” “social justice,” “curriculum,” “community engagement,” and “values,” along with related phrases. Only peer-reviewed journal articles published in English within theology, education, and ethics were considered. The selected literature focused on shalom, justice-oriented teaching, institutional practices, and public theology. Key frameworks such as relational pedagogy, educational justice, and the preferential option for the poor were applied to guide the analysis. Thematic analysis was employed as the main data analysis technique to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within the literature. Themes were organized using a concept map to show how ideas connect and overlap. This method offered a structured way to examine Christian education's theory and practice in relation to justice, highlighting its potential to be a transformative force in diverse cultural and institutional settings.

## Results and discussion

The results of this study reveal that Christian education holds significant potential to advance social justice when rooted in a holistic theological vision. By drawing on the concept of *shalom*, educators are invited to see their role not just as instructors but as participants in God's work of reconciliation and transformation. The study shows that when Christian education takes its call to seek justice earnestly, it becomes a powerful force for healing, inclusion, and cultivating moral and civic responsibility. The literature emphasizes that teaching practices, institutional culture, and theological reflection must align to foster learning environments that are just, compassionate, and deeply engaged with the world's brokenness.

*At the heart of Christian education lies the powerful biblical vision of shalom, which calls us to see learning as part of God's work of restoration and peace in the world.* Shalom is not simply the absence of conflict. It is a profound biblical vision of harmony, justice, and flourishing in every part of life. Deeply rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures, shalom describes a world where relationships, with God, with one another, and with creation, are whole, healthy, and rightly ordered (Benson, 2018). Shalom is a theological compass guiding educational goals toward reconciliation, restoration, and communal flourishing within Christian education.

As a foundational concept, shalom challenges educators to reframe education as knowledge transmission and a journey toward spiritual and societal transformation. Shortt (2017) argues that Christian education rooted in shalom must cultivate intellectual growth and moral, emotional, and relational development. This requires attention to the whole person and cultivating peace and justice communities.

As discussed by Alexander et al. (2021), the pedagogy of shalom emphasizes reconciliation and holistic transformation. It calls for educational practices that are relational, participatory, and contextual (Hickey & Riddle, 2024; Hickey & Riddle, 2022), taking into account students' lived experiences and aiming to prepare them as agents of shalom in the world (Alexander et al., 2021). Such an approach resists reductionist or utilitarian education models and instead fosters a vision of learning as a transformative pilgrimage toward God's purposes for creation. Shalom isn't just a theological idea; it's the heartbeat of what Christian education is meant to be (Alexander et al., 2021). It challenges teachers to see their work as part of God's greater plan to heal and restore the world. In every classroom, in every lesson, they have the chance to build spaces where peace is lived out, fairness is practiced, and hope is kept alive, not just for individuals, but for entire communities (Lo, 2022; Kits, 2019).

*Living out justice in Christian education requires us to rethink how we teach, ensuring that our classrooms reflect compassion, fairness, and a deep concern for those often left on the margins.* If Christian education is serious about social justice, it has to start by rethinking how we teach. Our

classrooms should reflect the values we believe in, compassion, fairness, and the hope that real change is possible. The truth is, traditional methods often miss the mark when it comes to connecting with the real-life challenges faced by students and communities who are too often pushed to the margins. To overcome this, Christian education must adopt critical and inclusive pedagogies that challenge dominant ideologies and empower learners to become agents of change (Grech & Mayo, 2014).

A down-to-earth way to live out justice in the classroom is by embracing a transformative approach to teaching, one that invites students to think deeply, learn together, and connect what they're learning to real-life situations. Alexander et al. (2021) talk about things like discovery learning, working in groups, and reflective conversations as tools that line up well with Christian values of justice and whole-person growth. Instead of just sitting back and absorbing information, students are challenged to take part in something bigger, God's work of making the world more just and whole. Moreover, the role of the teacher in this context is reimagined not as a transmitter of knowledge but as a spiritual guide and missional leader (Alexander et al., 2021). Teachers are called to model Christ-like character and serve as witnesses who mentor students to become discerning, compassionate, and justice-oriented individuals. This kind of approach helps create a classroom where the gospel isn't just talked about, it's lived out.

Luna De La Rosa et al. (2019) emphasize the importance of institutional support for these pedagogical shifts. Christian higher education must develop structural and cultural frameworks that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. That means rethinking what we teach, how we train our faculty, and how we connect with the communities around us. All of this should grow out of the values at the heart of God's Kingdom. Teaching for justice in Christian education isn't just about changing content, it's about changing the way we teach. It should be grounded in the gospel, shaped by real participation, and open to transformation. When we approach education this way, we're not just filling students' minds, we're helping form people who can step into the world as peacemakers, bridge-builders, and voices for those who are too often unheard.

*Bringing faith into the public sphere, Christian education plays a vital role in shaping learners who can thoughtfully engage in civic life with humility, wisdom, and justice.* Public religious pedagogy represents a significant shift in how Christian education is understood and practiced in broader society. Pirner (2017) introduced the term to bring together ideas from both public theology and education. The goal is to highlight how religious education can help shape things like civic responsibility, democratic values, and the pursuit of the common good. This way of thinking challenges us not to keep faith tucked away in our personal lives or limited to church walls. Instead, it invites Christian education to step into the public conversation, with humility, wisdom, and a real heart for justice.

Central to public religious pedagogy is the conviction that education is inherently political and value-laden. As such, Christian education must be critically aware of its social context and seek to influence public discourse on equity, human dignity, and the ethical foundations of community life. It means creating space for honest conversations across differences, standing up for those on the margins, and helping students learn how to take part in public life with their faith as a guiding compass (Pirner, 2017; Power & Taylor, 2013).

Christian institutions, particularly schools and universities, are well-positioned to serve as catalysts for civic engagement. Through curriculum, service-learning programs, and public forums, they can encourage students to address real-world issues, such as poverty, racial injustice, ecological degradation, and political polarization, through biblical justice. Pirner (2017) reminds us that this approach to teaching doesn't push religion on people. It simply brings a moral and spiritual lens that can add something meaningful to life in a diverse, democratic society.

Public religious teaching also invites us to make education more about relationships and real conversations (Pirner, 2018). It's a way of honoring each person's worth, recognizing that every individual is made in the image of God. Promoting respectful discourse and ethical reflection prepares



learners to navigate complex societal challenges while remaining rooted in Christian convictions. Public religious pedagogy bridges the gap between faith and public life (Platow, 2018). It challenges Christian educators to cultivate spiritually mature and civically engaged students who seek shalom not only in their personal lives but also in their communities and nations (Pirner, 2015).

*Relationships are central to Christian education, not just in theory but in daily practice. Trust, care, and moral integrity shape both the teaching and the community itself.* Christian education is really about helping people grow through relationships. It's not just about what we teach, but how we treat one another, with trust, care, and respect. That's what relational teaching is all about, and it beautifully reflects the Christian belief that every person is created in God's image (Nuttall & Gerard McEvoy, 2020). This pedagogical orientation prioritizes what is taught and how it is taught and lived out in the community.

Table 1. Thematic Matrix: The Relationship between Christian Education, Social Justice, and Shalom in the Public Sphere

Thematic Area	Christian Education	Social Justice	Shalom in the Public Sphere
Theological Foundation	Grounded in a biblical vision of human dignity and relational wholeness (Benson, 2018)	Rooted in prophetic traditions emphasizing equity, compassion, and advocacy for the marginalized	Emphasizes peace, harmony, and restored relationships (Shortt, 2017)
Pedagogical Orientation	Holistic, participatory, and formational approaches to learning (Alexander et al., 2021)	Inclusive, critical pedagogy that empowers agency and challenges oppression (Grech & Mayo, 2014)	Education as transformative pilgrimage toward God's justice and peace (Lo, 2022)
Teacher's Role	Spiritual mentor and missional leader modeling Christ-like character (Alexander et al., 2021)	Advocate for justice, facilitator of critical reflection	Mediator of reconciliation, builder of peace-filled learning spaces (Hickey & Riddle, 2024)
Curriculum Content	Integration of faith, ethics, and social issues within academic disciplines	Addressing systemic injustice, cultural diversity, and civic responsibility	Promotes human flourishing, ecological stewardship, and public theology (Pirner, 2017)
Classroom Community	Built on trust, care, and relational teaching (Nuttall & McEvoy, 2020)	Encourages voice, inclusion, and communal responsibility	A microcosm of God's Kingdom marked by justice, compassion, and hope
Public Engagement	Calls learners to witness and serve in diverse social contexts	Develops civic consciousness and critical social participation	Active participation in public life as peacemakers and bridge-builders (Pirner, 2015; Platow, 2018)

Christian education, when grounded in the theological vision of *shalom*, based on table, offers a transformative paradigm that integrates spiritual formation, justice-oriented pedagogy, and public engagement. It challenges educators and institutions to form communities of learning that are both deeply faithful and courageously public, nurturing learners to become peacemakers, bridge-builders, and agents of hope in a fractured world.

Bobbert (2017) argues that religious education rooted in justice must focus on moral reasoning that is both personal and communal, promoting values such as love for God, neighbor, and even enemy. In these spaces, educators lead by example. Teachers in these environments lead by how they live. They

show what it means to care, to be fair, and to stand for what's right, reflecting the heart of the gospel in everyday ways. Christian education isn't limited to the classroom; it shows up in hallway conversations, how the school feels, and the kind of leadership that's practiced day to day.

Cettolin (2024) shows that everyday things, like sharing meals, practicing hospitality, and learning through honest conversation, can beautifully express Christian values. These simple acts help create meaningful spaces in schools where people feel safe to be real, take responsibility, and grow. When Christian educators weave their faith into how they teach, they're not just passing on knowledge, they're helping students wrestle with big ethical questions and grow into people who live out justice in their own communities.

Furthermore, relational pedagogy contributes to a just learning environment by addressing power dynamics and promoting mutual learning. It pushes back against top-down structures and instead invites a learning journey where teachers and students grow side by side, seeking truth and doing what's right together. In that kind of space, the classroom starts to look a little like the Kingdom of God, marked by welcome, grace, and a shared sense of purpose. In Christian education, relationships and ethics aren't just nice extras, they're the foundation. They're what hold everything together, creating the kind of environment where justice-centered learning can take root and shape students to become people who work for peace and goodness in both the church and the wider world.

*Pursuing justice means facing the complex realities of exclusion and inequality many marginalized communities experience and responding with courage, honesty, and hope.* Christian education can't truly seek justice without facing the real inequalities that many marginalized communities deal with every day (Power, 2008; Bobbert, 2017). Whether it's because of race, background, income, disability, or faith, these groups often run into systems that make it harder for them to get a fair shot at quality education or feel fully included in the classroom. If we're serious about justice, we have to be honest about these barriers, and work to change them. Christian education, emphasizing dignity and inclusivity, is uniquely positioned to confront these injustices (Mernissi, 2024).

Grümme (2021) emphasizes that religious education must acknowledge its role within broader socio-political structures perpetuating inequality. In this context, pursuing educational justice means challenging the dominant stories we've always told, and making room for a wider range of voices and experiences in what we teach and how we teach it. It also means taking a hard look at some of the theological and historical assumptions we've taken for granted, especially when they might leave certain students, often those from less represented backgrounds, feeling unseen or left out.

Todd & Rufa (2013) argue that Christian communities often express a moral commitment to social justice but lack practical engagement. Churches and schools need to go beyond simply helping from a distance, they're called to walk alongside marginalized communities in real, meaningful ways. That starts with listening, really listening, to the voices and stories of those who've often been overlooked. It also means taking action to close the gaps in opportunity and achievement, and creating space where these individuals can grow, lead, and thrive.

Kimanen (2023) further contributes by proposing a multi-level approach to justice in religious education, including teaching about, into, and with justice. This approach isn't just about big-picture changes, it's also about the everyday ways we help people feel known, included, and valued. It's about creating spaces that honor each person's identity, build a real sense of belonging, and aren't afraid to confront injustice. It also means paying close attention to the specific context we're working in, especially in diverse or postcolonial settings, and being flexible in how we teach so that every student feels supported and understood. Pursuing educational justice in Christian contexts requires repentance from past exclusions, a theological re-visioning of equity, and sustained institutional commitment. When Christian education centers on the experiences of the oppressed and marginalized, it participates in God's work of redemption and models the inclusive love of Christ.

*Christian education is called to advocate for the poor and vulnerable, not just in words but also through its curriculum, policies, and daily witness.* The preferential option for the poor is a foundational principle in Christian social teaching that prioritizes the most vulnerable's needs, voices, and dignity. This theological commitment challenges Christian educators and institutions to structure their practices to reflect solidarity with the economically, socially, and politically marginalized (McKinney, 2023). Articulated initially in the context of liberation theology by figures such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, the preferential option for the poor emphasizes that poverty is not merely an economic condition but a theological concern. Christian education, therefore, is not neutral, it must take a deliberate stance in advocating for justice and resisting systems that perpetuate exclusion and oppression (Caspers & Counet, 2013). This option requires re-evaluating curriculum, pedagogy, resource allocation, and institutional culture. Schools and universities must ask whose knowledge is prioritized, whose experiences are validated, and whose futures are being prepared. McKinney (2018) highlights how Catholic schools have historically advanced this vision by aligning their missions with the needs of underserved and marginalized communities.

In practical terms, implementing this principle in Christian education involves scholarships and financial aid, inclusive curricula reflecting poverty and systemic injustice, and outreach initiatives that build reciprocal relationships with underserved communities. It also includes cultivating a prophetic voice among students, encouraging them to question unjust systems and envision alternatives grounded in the gospel. As Sedmak (2016) argues, educational institutions must teach about justice and become institutions of justice. When Christian education embraces the preferential option for the poor, it becomes a powerful witness to God's concern for the oppressed and a catalyst for societal change.

*In a divided world, Christian education can become a space where peace is taught and practiced, through reconciliation, honest dialogue, and restorative leadership.* Christian education plays an important role in helping build a culture of peace and teaching students how to handle conflict in healthy, constructive ways. Grounded in the gospel's message of reconciliation, it's not just about talking about peace as an ideal, it's about making it part of everyday life, both inside the classroom and out (Shore, 2016).

Schools and universities often mirror the tensions we see in the world, whether those are around race, politics, religion, or beliefs. That's why they can be such powerful places for healing, honest conversation, and learning to bridge our differences. Neustaeter & Senehi (2023) argue that peace education within Christian contexts must involve informal and non-formal learning structures that engage students' lived experiences and promote a commitment to nonviolence, justice, and truth-telling.

Christian education can integrate restorative circles, interfaith dialogues, and narrative approaches that allow students to share stories, listen actively, and engage in constructive conflict transformation. When grounded in a theology of forgiveness and justice, these strategies help students move from cycles of violence and blame toward healing and collaborative action.

Theological education has the potential to shape leaders who can thoughtfully navigate the complicated challenges of today's world. Norris (2020) points to Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a powerful example, someone who modeled a kind of faith formation that builds inner strength, sharpens ethical judgment, and encourages active public engagement. This kind of training is especially important for Christian institutions working in places where conflict has left deep scars or where tensions still run high.

Christianity's role in past conflicts is complex and sometimes troubling, which makes honest reflection essential. Shore (2013) looks at how Christian language and imagery were used in South Africa, both to fuel violence and to promote healing through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. That history challenges Christian educators to take a hard look at their own traditions: to acknowledge where the Church has fallen short, and to lean into the parts of the faith that can bring healing, hope, and real peace.

## Conclusion

This study concludes that Christian education holds the transformative potential to advance social justice when grounded in the holistic theological vision of shalom. The findings reveal that Christian education plays a dual role: forming spiritual character and equipping learners as agents of social change through relational pedagogy, a commitment to marginalized communities, and meaningful public engagement. The novelty of this study lies in its integration of shalom with critical and contextual pedagogical approaches, offering a more comprehensive framework rarely explored in current literature. This calls for renewed attention to curriculum design, teacher formation, and institutional reform that reflect the values of justice, reconciliation, and inclusivity. Future research is encouraged to explore how this framework can be applied and evaluated in local educational contexts to strengthen further Christian education's role in shaping a more just and compassionate society.

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