Teachers' Pedagogical Competence and Students' Learning Interest: A Socio-Legal Study of Religious Education in Indonesian Public Schools

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Abstract. Teachers' pedagogical competence is commonly discussed within educational discourse; however, its legal and institutional dimensions remain underexplored, particularly in relation to students' learning interest. This socio-legal qualitative study examines how pedagogical competence, as part of teachers' professional obligations in public schools, is enacted in religious education classrooms and how it influences students' learning interest. The study was conducted in Indonesian public secondary schools using in-depth interviews with teachers and students, classroom observations, and document analysis. Thematic analysis revealed four interconnected pedagogical practices that significantly shape students' learning interest: contextualization of learning content, dialogic interaction, effective classroom management, and constructive feedback. The findings indicate that pedagogical competence functions not only as an instructional skill but also as a normative professional obligation that supports students' right to meaningful and engaging education. By highlighting the affective dimension of pedagogical competence from a socio-legal perspective, this study contributes to discussions on educational governance, teacher professionalism, and the realization of quality education within public schooling systems.

1. INTRODUCTION

Pedagogical competence is widely recognized as a core element of effective teaching and teacher professionalism(Masdin, 2025). In educational literature, it is commonly understood as teachers' capacity to design instruction, manage classrooms, and facilitate learning in ways that respond to students' characteristics and needs(Dewi & Oktapiani, 2024). From a legal and institutional perspective, pedagogical competence also constitutes a professional obligation embedded within regulatory frameworks governing public education(Mincu, 2022). In this sense, pedagogical competence is closely linked to the state's responsibility to ensure the fulfillment of students' right to quality education.

Within public schooling systems, teachers operate not only as educators but also as professionals bound by legal and normative standards(Fikri et al., 2024). In Indonesia, religious education is a compulsory subject in public schools and forms part of the state's mandate to provide holistic education integrating knowledge, values, and moral development(Nasri & Mulyohadi, 2023). This institutional mandate places religious education teachers in a unique position, requiring them to translate normative educational objectives into meaningful classroom practices while engaging students from diverse social and cultural backgrounds(Mustamin, 2023).

Despite the legal recognition of teacher professionalism, challenges related to students' learning interest persist, particularly in subjects often perceived as abstract or normative(Bucky Wibawa Karya Guna et al, 2024). Learning interest plays a critical role in shaping students' engagement, participation, and motivation(Siregar et al., 2023). When learning is perceived as irrelevant or disconnected from students' lived experiences, interest tends to decline, potentially undermining the broader objectives of public education(Zuhra Fadlulla Zain, Nono Hery Yoenanto, 2021). From a socio-legal standpoint, this condition raises important questions regarding the effectiveness of pedagogical practices in fulfilling educational obligations.

Existing studies on pedagogical competence have largely emphasized cognitive outcomes and academic achievement, frequently relying on quantitative approaches(Lestari et al., 2024). While valuable, such studies often overlook the affective dimensions of learning and the everyday practices through which pedagogical competence is enacted. Moreover, limited attention has been given to how pedagogical competence operates within legal and institutional contexts, particularly in relation to students' learning interest as an indicator of educational quality.

This study addresses these gaps by examining teachers' pedagogical competence through a socio-legal lens, focusing on religious education in Indonesian public schools. Specifically, the study explores how pedagogical competence is enacted by teachers as a professional and legal obligation, how students perceive the influence of these practices on their learning interest, and which pedagogical strategies are most effective in fostering students' engagement within the institutional context of public schooling.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative socio-legal research approach to examine how pedagogical competence, as a legally and professionally mandated standard, is enacted in everyday teaching practices and how it affects students' learning interest(Budianto, 2020). A socio-legal approach is appropriate because it allows analysis of the interaction between normative frameworks governing teacher professionalism and their practical implementation in classroom settings(Gunawan, 2023).

The research was conducted in selected Indonesian public secondary schools where religious education is a compulsory

subject. Participants consisted of religious education teachers and students, selected through purposive sampling to capture diverse experiences and perspectives. Teachers were selected based on their teaching experience and professional background, while students were selected to reflect varying levels of learning engagement.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Interviews explored teachers' understanding of pedagogical responsibilities and students' perceptions of learning experiences(Taherdoost, 2021). Classroom observations focused on instructional strategies, interaction patterns, and classroom management practices. Document analysis included lesson plans and instructional materials to contextualize observed practices within formal pedagogical requirements(Busetto et al., 2020). Data analysis followed a thematic analysis procedure involving data familiarization, coding, theme development, and interpretation(Bingham, 2023). To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, data triangulation was applied across methods and participants. Member checking and reflective field notes were also used to ensure credibility and analytical rigor.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study examines how teachers' pedagogical competence, understood as both an instructional skill and a legally mandated professional obligation, influences students' learning interest in religious education in Indonesian public schools(Maliki et al., 2021). The analysis of interviews, classroom observations, and document review revealed four main interconnected pedagogical practices that shape students' engagement and affective response to learning:

3.1. Contextualization of Learning Content

The contextualization of abstract religious concepts within students' everyday experiences, such as social interactions, family life, and contemporary adolescent issues including peer relationships, ethical dilemmas, and civic responsibilities, reflects the enactment of pedagogical competence in public schooling contexts(Saleh et al., 2025). This approach transformed what might otherwise be perceived as abstract or normative content into concrete, relatable scenarios, allowing students to see the relevance of religious teachings to their personal and social lives(Muchtar, 2017). By embedding lessons within familiar contexts, teachers not only enhanced cognitive understanding but also facilitated affective engagement, which is central to fostering sustained learning interest.

Within the institutional framework of public education, such contextualization reflects the enactment of pedagogical competence as a professional obligation. Educational regulations and teacher professional standards in Indonesia require instructional practices that are responsive to learners' social realities and developmental needs(Saumantri, 2025). By embedding religious instruction within familiar contexts, teachers fulfill normative expectations while simultaneously upholding students' right to relevant and meaningful education(Alawiyah, 2025).

Furthermore, contextualized instruction encourages critical thinking and reflective learning. When teachers integrate real-life examples, students are prompted to analyze, compare, and apply principles in scenarios that mirror their lived experiences(Firdaus et al., 2024). This active cognitive engagement complements affective interest, creating a holistic learning process that is both legally and pedagogically sound. Additionally, contextualization supports inclusivity by recognizing the diversity of students' backgrounds, cultures, and experiences, thereby fostering a classroom environment that respects pluralism and encourages equitable participation(Muchtar, 2025).

In practice, teachers employed a variety of techniques to contextualize content, such as storytelling, case studies, role-playing, and discussion of current social events. Students reported that such methods made lessons more engaging and easier to relate to, increasing their motivation to participate and internalize learning outcomes. By connecting the curriculum to students' lives, teachers effectively operationalized pedagogical competence as a socio-legal obligation, bridging the gap between regulatory expectations and practical classroom realities.

3.2. Dialogic Interaction and Active Engagement

Dialogic interaction functioned as a key mechanism through which learning interest was cultivated in the classroom. Interactive discussions, questioning, and opportunities for student expression transformed learning from a unidirectional process into a participatory educational experience.(Shim et al., 2023). This approach not only facilitated deeper cognitive engagement but also nurtured affective involvement, as students felt their voices were heard and valued within the classroom community, so students reported higher levels of engagement when their perspectives were acknowledged and incorporated into classroom discourse(Nimasari et al., 2023).

Such dialogic practices align with professional standards that emphasize inclusive and student-centered learning, particularly within public schooling contexts. Through dialogue-based instruction, pedagogical competence is operationalized in a manner that respects students' rights to participation and recognition. From a socio-legal standpoint, dialogic engagement thus represents the practical realization of normative commitments to democratic and participatory education(Cholik & Pristiwaluyo, 2018). Through dialog-based engagement, teachers translate these standards into practice, ensuring that instructional processes uphold students' rights to active participation and acknowledgment in the learning process.

Dialogic pedagogy also strengthens critical thinking and ethical reasoning(Fitrianto & Hidayat, 2024). When students are encouraged to discuss diverse perspectives, analyze dilemmas, and reflect on their own experiences, they develop higher-order thinking skills that extend beyond rote memorization. This aligns with the socio-legal aim of fostering responsible, reflective citizens capable of understanding and navigating normative and social expectations in broader society.

Practically, teachers applied dialogic strategies through structured question-and-answer sessions, guided debates, group discussions, and problem-based scenarios that invited multiple viewpoints. Students reported increased motivation and engagement when their contributions were acknowledged and integrated into the flow of the lesson(Baety, 2021). The acknowledgment of student perspectives reinforced a sense of agency and accountability, demonstrating that pedagogical competence encompasses both educational effectiveness and adherence to professional and ethical standards.

In essence, dialogic interaction represents a nexus between pedagogical practice and socio-legal responsibility. It transforms classrooms into interactive spaces where students' learning interest is cultivated, professional obligations are enacted, and inclusive, participatory educational principles are realized. Through this practice, teachers bridge the gap between regulatory expectations and tangible classroom experiences, ensuring that education is both legally accountable and pedagogically effective.

3.3. Classroom Management and Supportive Learning Atmosphere

A supportive learning atmosphere was sustained through classroom management practices that balanced structure with relational sensitivity.(Hasnanto, 2024). By establishing clear rules and expectations while simultaneously fostering a respectful and caring environment, teachers created classrooms in which students felt safe, valued, and motivated to participate. This supportive learning atmosphere enabled students to focus on learning without fear of negative evaluation or marginalization, thereby enhancing both cognitive and affective engagement.

In public education settings, classroom management constitutes not only a pedagogical skill but also a normative responsibility. Regulatory frameworks governing teacher conduct emphasize the provision of safe, inclusive, and non-discriminatory learning environments. By fostering respectful classroom dynamics, teachers fulfill these obligations while reinforcing the ethical and social dimensions of religious education.

The supportive learning atmosphere also facilitates social and moral development, particularly within the context of religious education. Teachers who model respect, patience, and fairness provide students with a framework for ethical interaction, conflict resolution, and collaborative learning(Fathi & Sidgi, 2022). Such practices align with the socio-legal principle that education should nurture not only knowledge acquisition but also character formation and civic responsibility.

Practically, teachers employed a variety of strategies to maintain classroom order while promoting engagement, including structured routines, positive reinforcement, participatory activities, and consistent monitoring of student behavior(Hardiansyah, 2023). Students reported feeling more confident and willing to participate when they perceived that their contributions were respected and that the classroom was a safe space for learning. These experiences demonstrate that effective classroom management simultaneously achieves pedagogical objectives and complies with professional and legal standards governing teacher conduct.

To summarize, classroom management and the creation of a supportive learning atmosphere represent critical dimensions of pedagogical competence. They ensure that learning environments are both legally accountable and pedagogically effective, allowing students' learning interest to flourish within a context that respects their rights and promotes equitable educational experiences. This practice exemplifies how socio-legal obligations are operationalized in the everyday dynamics of the classroom.

3.4. Constructive Feedback and Recognition

Constructive feedback emerged as an important pedagogical strategy for sustaining students' motivation and learning interest. Recognition of effort, participation, and progress rather than an exclusive focus on correctness, encouraged students to remain engaged and confident in the learning process. Feedback practices that emphasized growth helped normalize mistakes as part of learning rather than as indicators of failure(Nyuhuan, 2024). By recognizing and valuing students' contributions, teachers created an environment where mistakes were treated as opportunities for learning, thereby sustaining students' interest and commitment to the subject matter.

From a socio-legal perspective, constructive feedback represents a professional and normative obligation. Teacher professional standards in Indonesia mandate that educators not only deliver content effectively but also support students' affective and social development, ensuring that all students have equitable opportunities to succeed. Providing feedback that is both supportive and instructive operationalizes these obligations, aligning classroom practices with the legal framework governing teacher responsibilities and students' rights to quality education(Dwidvedi & Kumar, 2023).

Furthermore, constructive feedback fosters self-regulated learning and critical thinking. When students receive timely, meaningful, and specific feedback, they are able to assess their own understanding, reflect on their learning strategies, and make adjustments to improve performance(Soraya, 2018). This process promotes autonomy, resilience, and lifelong learning skills, which are central to both pedagogical effectiveness and socio-legal mandates for holistic education.

Practically, teachers applied a variety of techniques to deliver feedback, including verbal acknowledgment during discussions, written comments on assignments, and recognition of collaborative efforts in group activities. Students reported that feedback that acknowledged their effort and contribution increased their motivation and engagement, demonstrating that the quality of teacher-student interaction directly affects learning interest. These practices highlight how pedagogical competence serves a dual function: ensuring adherence to professional and legal standards while simultaneously enhancing educational outcomes.

In summary, constructive feedback and recognition represent a vital dimension of pedagogical competence that bridges professional obligations with students' lived experiences. By providing feedback that is both instructive and supportive, teachers fulfill socio-legal responsibilities and foster an environment in which students' learning interest and overall educational engagement can thrive. This practice exemplifies the integration of pedagogical skill, legal compliance, and ethical responsibility within the classroom.

4. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study concludes that teachers' pedagogical competence plays a crucial role in shaping students' learning interest in religious education within Indonesian public schools. Pedagogical competence should be understood not merely as an instructional skill but as a professional and normative obligation embedded within public education systems. The four key practices identified -contextualization of learning content, dialogic interaction, effective classroom management, and constructive feedback- demonstrate how teachers operationalize their professional responsibilities while promoting meaningful and engaging learning experiences for students.

These pedagogical practices function as a connective framework linking the legal norms of teacher professionalism with the realization of students' educational rights. Through contextualized instruction, participatory dialogue, supportive classroom management, and constructive feedback, learning becomes both relevant and inclusive, fostering motivation and sustained engagement. Taken together, these dimensions satisfy pedagogical goals while simultaneously meeting regulatory expectations, demonstrating the close interrelation between effective teaching, legal accountability, and ethical responsibility.

Theoretically, this study contributes to socio-legal scholarship by integrating educational research with legal analysis of teacher accountability and governance. By positioning students' learning interest as an indicator of quality education, the study extends discussions on professional compliance beyond formal procedural standards to substantive educational outcomes.

Practically, the findings have implications for policy and teacher professional development. Educational authorities should emphasize pedagogical competence as a measurable and enforceable standard, and teacher training programs should

incorporate reflective, practice-based strategies to strengthen teachers' capacity to enact their obligations effectively. Schools should integrate mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the affective dimensions of student learning, ensuring that pedagogical competence translates into real engagement and meaningful learning experiences.

This study is limited by its qualitative scope and focus on religious education in Indonesian public schools. Future research may adopt comparative or mixed-methods approaches to examine how pedagogical competence operates across different subjects, educational levels, and legal frameworks, further exploring its role as both a pedagogical and socio-legal construct.

Overall, pedagogical competence represents a socio-legal construct that connects professional norms, classroom practices, and students' rights. By operationalizing these competencies through contextualization, dialogue, supportive management, and constructive feedback, teachers fulfill both their educational and legal obligations, thereby promoting equitable and meaningful public education.

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