

ADDRESSING *FATHERLESSNESS* IN SCHOOLS: CATHOLIC RELIGIOUS
EDUCATION TEACHERS AT SMA ST. THOMAS 4 BINJAI

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ABSTRAK

Fenomena *fatherlessness* menjadi perhatian dalam dunia pendidikan karena dapat memengaruhi perkembangan emosional, sosial, moral, dan spiritual siswa. Dalam konteks sekolah Katolik, peran Guru Pendidikan Agama Katolik sebagai pendamping pedagogis pastoral menjadi penting untuk memberikan dukungan yang holistik bagi siswa yang mengalami ketiadaan figur ayah. Namun, kajian mengenai peran guru agama dalam menangani *fatherlessness* pada jenjang SMA Katolik masih terbatas. Kajian ini diperlukan untuk memahami bagaimana pendidikan agama dapat menjadi ruang pedagogis pastoral dalam mendukung siswa yang mengalami kehilangan figur ayah tanpa melakukan generalisasi terhadap pengalaman mereka. Penelitian ini penting karena sekolah memerlukan dukungan yang peka terhadap keragaman kebutuhan siswa dengan *fatherlessness*, sementara bukti empiris tentang integrasi pendampingan pedagogis-pastoral oleh Guru Pendidikan Agama Katolik pada jenjang SMA Katolik masih terbatas. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan desain studi kasus dan melibatkan sepuluh informan, yaitu satu Guru Pendidikan Agama Katolik, satu kepala sekolah, dan delapan siswa yang memenuhi kriteria *fatherlessness*. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara, observasi, dan dokumentasi, kemudian dianalisis melalui reduksi data, penyajian data secara tematik, dan penarikan kesimpulan dengan triangulasi sumber dan teknik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa guru menjalankan peran yang saling terhubung sebagai pendidik iman dan moral, pembimbing spiritual, teladan hidup Kristiani, fasilitator kegiatan keagamaan, serta pengembang pembelajaran kontekstual. Temuan yang paling menonjol menunjukkan bahwa pendampingan menjadi lebih bermakna ketika doa dan kegiatan keagamaan tidak berhenti sebagai rutinitas, tetapi dipadukan dengan relasi personal yang empatik, keteladanan, penguatan moral, dan kolaborasi sekolah. Respons siswa juga bersifat heterogen: sebagian mengalami penurunan motivasi, kesulitan regulasi emosi, perilaku agresif, atau persepsi diri negatif, sedangkan sebagian lain tetap termotivasi dan percaya diri. Penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa Pendidikan Agama Katolik dapat berfungsi sebagai ruang pedagogis-pastoral yang melengkapi dukungan sekolah bagi siswa yang mengalami *fatherlessness* tanpa menganggap mereka sebagai kelompok yang homogen.

Kata Kunci: *fatherlessness*; Pendidikan Agama Katolik; peran guru; pendampingan pastoral; dukungan sekolah

ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of fatherlessness has become an important concern in education as it may influence students emotional, social, moral, and spiritual development. In the context of Catholic schools, the role of Catholic Religious Education teachers as pedagogical pastoral companions is essential in providing holistic support for students experiencing the absence of a father figure. However, studies examining the role of religious education teachers in addressing fatherlessness at the Catholic senior high school level remain limited. This study is needed to understand how religious education can serve as a pedagogical pastoral space to support students experiencing the loss of a father figure without generalizing their individual experiences. This research is significant because schools require sensitive and contextual support to address the diverse needs of students experiencing fatherlessness, while empirical evidence regarding the integration of pedagogical-pastoral accompaniment by Catholic Religious Education teachers remains scarce. This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design involving ten informants: one Catholic Religious Education teacher, one school

principal, and eight students identified as experiencing fatherlessness. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentation, and were analyzed through data reduction, thematic data presentation, and conclusion drawing using source and technique triangulation. The findings reveal that teachers perform interconnected roles as educators of faith and morality, spiritual guides, Christian role models, facilitators of religious activities, and developers of contextual learning. The most significant finding indicates that accompaniment becomes more meaningful when prayer and religious activities extend beyond routine practices and are integrated with empathetic personal relationships, role modeling, moral strengthening, and school collaboration. Students' responses to fatherlessness were heterogeneous; some experienced decreased motivation, emotional regulation difficulties, aggressive behavior, or negative self-perception, while others maintained motivation and self-confidence. This study confirms that Catholic Religious Education can function as a pedagogical-pastoral space that complements school support for students experiencing fatherlessness without viewing them as a homogeneous group.

Keywords: *fatherlessness*; Catholic Religious Education; teacher role; pastoral accompaniment; school support

INTRODUCTION

Catholic Religious Education teachers occupy a distinctive position in secondary schools because their work combines instruction with faith formation, moral guidance, character development, and relational accompaniment. Recent studies in Catholic education show that teachers contribute to discipline, moral awareness, solidarity, and the handling of student misconduct through consistent modelling, reflective guidance, and cooperation with the school community (Ginting & Gurning, 2024; Nisam et al., 2026; Ola et al., 2026; Tibo et al., 2023). These roles make Catholic Religious Education relevant not only to students' cognitive understanding of faith but also to the way they interpret personal difficulties and develop responsible behavior. One family-related difficulty that may enter the school context is *fatherlessness*. In this study, *fatherlessness* refers to the persistent absence or markedly limited physical, emotional, or psychological presence of a father figure in a child's everyday life. Indonesian studies describe *fatherlessness* as arising from different circumstances, including death, parental separation or divorce, and limited paternal involvement, and emphasize that its meaning and consequences vary across individuals (Fajriyanti et al., 2024; Jatiningtyas et al., 2024; Nindhita & Pringgadani, 2023). This variation is important because the term should not be treated as a uniform label or as a deterministic explanation for every student difficulty.

Research nevertheless indicates that father absence or weak paternal involvement may be associated with risks in emotional well-being, self-esteem, behavior, and academic adjustment. Longitudinal evidence has linked father absence with less favorable trajectories of depressive symptoms, while parental absence has also been associated with adolescent depressive symptoms (Culpin et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2024). In Indonesia, parental attachment and self-esteem are closely related to emotional and behavioral problems among adolescents, and studies of *fatherlessness* have reported differences in well-being and aggressive behavior (Ismail et al., 2024; Nindhita & Pringgadani, 2023; Sarfika et al., 2023). These findings support the need for careful school-based attention without implying that *fatherlessness* alone causes a particular outcome. Academic outcomes are similarly shaped by multiple interacting factors. A systematic review in Indonesia reported recurring concerns regarding school achievement among adolescents experiencing *fatherlessness*, while a recent review of academic resilience emphasized the role of protective factors and school support (Firdausiyyah, 2025; Nurmallasari et al., 2024). Research on adolescents more broadly also shows that parental involvement is related to academic achievement partly through school adjustment, including engagement,

compliance with school rules, peer relationships, and teacher-student relationships (Park & Kim, 2024). Therefore, students' responses to *fatherlessness* should be understood in relation to personal resilience and the quality of support available at school. Related Indonesian evidence also connects *fatherlessness* and emotion regulation with academic resilience among vocational-school students (Jarman et al., 2025).

The school can function as an important relational environment when students face family vulnerability. A systematic review found that stronger school connectedness generally predicts lower depressive and anxiety symptoms in young people, while longitudinal research shows that sustained teacher support is closely associated with study engagement and lower study-related burnout (Raniti et al., 2022; Ulmanen et al., 2023). Teacher-student relationships can also serve as an emotional base linked to students' behavioral and academic adjustment, and school- and peer-connectedness are relevant to adolescent mental health and well-being (García-Rodríguez et al., 2023; Widnall et al., 2022). School-based resilience interventions further indicate that multi-component support can be useful for adolescents at risk (Llistosella et al., 2023). In Catholic schools, these relational functions may intersect with spiritual and moral accompaniment.

However, the existing literature leaves a specific gap. *Fatherlessness* studies have largely examined psychological, behavioral, well-being, or academic consequences, often using surveys, reviews, or phenomenological descriptions (Firdausiyyah, 2025; Jatiningtyas et al., 2024; Nurmallasari et al., 2024). Conversely, studies of Catholic Religious Education teachers have mainly focused on discipline, character, moral values, and primary deviance rather than on students' family-related vulnerability (Ginting & Gurning, 2024; Igo Lamak & Toron, 2025; Nisam et al., 2026; Tibo et al., 2023). Kause et al. (2024) examined Christian Religious Education teachers in relation to fatherless adolescent girls, but evidence remains limited on how a Catholic Religious Education teacher responds to *fatherlessness* within a Catholic senior high school while integrating the perspectives of the teacher, school leadership, multiple students, and classroom observation. This study addresses that gap through a context-specific qualitative case study.

The gap is particularly relevant at SMA St. Thomas 4 Binjai. Preliminary observation on December 1, 2025, indicated that the school had attempted to support students experiencing *fatherlessness* through teacher relationships and school-based guidance, but the support did not always reach students with the same depth or consistency. Some students still showed learning difficulties, rule violations, conflict, and withdrawal, while coordination with parents or guardians was not always optimal.

Based on this background, the study aims to describe and analyze the role of Catholic Religious Education teachers in addressing *fatherlessness* among students at SMA St. Thomas 4 Binjai. Its intended contribution is to explain how pedagogical, spiritual, moral, relational, and collaborative forms of support interact in everyday school practice and how they can be tailored to heterogeneous student needs.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative descriptive case study approach to gain contextual understanding of how Catholic Religious Education teachers handle the absence of fathers at SMA St. Thomas 4 Binjai. This design was chosen because the research focuses on the experiences, perceptions, actions, and meanings of the participants rather than on statistical estimates or causal testing. The research process documented in this article began in April-May 2026. The study involved ten purposively selected informants: one Catholic Religious

Education teacher, one school principal, and eight students experiencing *fatherlessness*. For participant selection, *fatherlessness* was operationalized as the persistent absence or markedly limited physical, emotional, or psychological presence of a father figure in the students daily caregiving and development. This operational definition encompassed circumstances such as a father's death, parental separation or divorce, or sustained paternal non-involvement. The eight student informants were included because their circumstances matched this definition and because they were able and willing to describe their school experiences; no distribution by cause of *fatherlessness* is claimed in this article because such a breakdown was not part of the reported dataset. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observation, and documentation. Interviews with the Catholic Religious Education teacher explored pedagogical practice, spiritual guidance, moral direction, emotional support, motivation, and personal accompaniment. Interviews with the principal focused on school policy, student guidance, and collaboration among school actors, while interviews with students explored their experiences, challenges, needs, and perceptions of teacher support. Observation was used to examine teacher-student interaction and classroom behavior, and documentation was used to corroborate information obtained from interviews and observation.

Data analysis followed three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. During reduction, data relevant to the research focus were selected, organized, and coded around patterns of teacher roles, student responses, and school-based support. The data were then displayed thematically so that similarities, variations, and relationships among findings could be identified. Conclusions were developed iteratively by interpreting the themes in relation to the research objective and the context of Catholic education at SMA St. Thomas 4 Binjai. All participants were anonymized in reporting using the codes I1 to I10. Credibility was strengthened through source and technique triangulation. Source triangulation compared information from the Catholic Religious Education teacher, the school principal, and students, while technique triangulation compared interview findings with observation and documentation. Ethical considerations were maintained by informing participants about the purpose of the study, obtaining voluntary consent, protecting student identities, and using respectful language when discussing sensitive family experiences. Questions that could unnecessarily intensify psychological discomfort were avoided.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings reveal two interrelated dimensions: the multidimensional role of the Catholic Religious Education teacher and the heterogeneous responses of students experiencing *fatherlessness*. Empirical data from interviews, observation, and documentation were organized into three themes: (1) pedagogical, moral, spiritual, and relational teacher roles; (2) variation in student motivation, emotional regulation, behavior, and self-perception; and (3) school-based intervention, collaboration, and implementation constraints.

1. Pedagogical, Moral, Spiritual, and Relational Teacher Roles

The Catholic Religious Education teacher functioned first as a faith and moral educator. Classroom instruction used textbooks, teacher explanation, discussion, question-and-answer activities, individual and group assignments, Scripture-based materials, and selected video media. I1 emphasized that the learning process was directed not only toward understanding doctrine but also toward the formation of attitudes and behavior. I3 to I10 consistently identified values such as love, forgiveness, honesty, responsibility, tolerance, care, and mutual respect as recurring elements in the teacher's instruction and daily moral reinforcement. The teacher also

acted as a spiritual guide. Prayer before and after lessons, religious reflection, worship activities, Scripture reading, religious songs, and faith sharing were integrated into learning. Most informants associated prayer with greater calmness, focus, and readiness to learn. However, I6 reported that prayer could sometimes be experienced as a routine with limited influence on the learning atmosphere. This divergent response indicates that the same religious practice was not experienced in an identical way by all students.

A third role was Christian modelling through empathy, tolerance, care, fairness, and respect for differences. Observation showed the teacher encouraging students to help classmates who had difficulty learning, care for injured friends, share food, respect friends who were fasting, and maintain harmony across religious and cultural differences. The school environment supported this orientation by allowing students to worship according to their respective beliefs. The teacher further served as a facilitator and developer of Catholic Religious Education. Morning worship, prayer, Scripture reading, faith sharing, and reflective discussion were used as spaces for participation and character formation. Learning resources included textbooks, Scripture, PowerPoint or projector-based media, YouTube, Google, and home assignments requiring additional information searches. Digital media were used selectively rather than in every meeting because facilities and learning conditions were limited.

2. Variation in Motivation, Emotional Regulation, Behavior, and Self-Perception

Students experiencing *fatherlessness* did not show a uniform pattern of learning motivation. Some described sadness, emotional pain, jealousy toward peers with complete families, declining enthusiasm, limited focus, or weaker motivation to pursue goals. In contrast, several students remained motivated by future aspirations and a desire to demonstrate their abilities; some became more determined as graduation approached. Observation reflected the same variation: some students participated actively and followed explanations well, whereas others made noise, talked with friends, threw paper, slept during class, or showed low attention. Difficulties in self-control and emotional regulation appeared in different forms. Some students became quiet, withdrew, avoided conflict, or left the classroom when emotionally unstable. Others expressed anger, spoke in a high tone, disturbed friends, or hit objects. Observation also recorded classroom disruption, mocking related to ethnicity or skin color, and an incident of hitting a seatmate. The teacher responded with advice, behavioral correction, teaching about tolerance and respect, prayer-related responsibilities, and other educational tasks intended to reinforce accountability.

Aggressive behavior and rule violations included disturbing classmates, conflict, bullying, mocking physical appearance or family background, frequent absence, sleeping in class, and leaving the classroom during learning. These behaviors were handled through guidance from the Catholic Religious Education teacher together with homeroom teachers, counseling teachers, and the principal. Students were called, advised, monitored, and guided to understand the consequences of their actions. Parents or guardians were invited when necessary, although their involvement was not always optimal. Self-perception also varied. Some students reported feeling less confident, more sensitive, different from peers, or uncomfortable in larger social situations. Feelings of sadness, disappointment, hurt, or jealousy could reappear when they saw peers accompanied by their fathers. Other students, however, remained confident in class and in activities outside school. During Catholic Religious Education activities, some students were active and answered questions correctly, while others participated minimally, did not bring learning materials, or had difficulty responding to questions.

3. School-Based Intervention and Implementation Constraints

The school's response was collaborative rather than centered on a single teacher. The principal, Catholic Religious Education teacher, homeroom teachers, counseling teachers, and, when possible, parents or guardians were involved in guidance. The school also encouraged a more personal approach for students needing special attention, both inside and outside the classroom. This pattern positioned Catholic Religious Education as one component of a broader support network rather than as a substitute for counseling or family involvement. Two implementation constraints were evident. First, parental or guardian participation could not always be secured when behavioral or academic problems were discussed. Second, some instructional resources, particularly digital media, could not be used consistently because of facility and learning-condition limitations. In addition, the different response to routine prayer reported by I6 showed that formal religious practices alone did not guarantee personal meaning. Across the empirical data, the strongest pattern was the integration of religious practice with personal attention, moral guidance, teacher modelling, and collaboration.

Discussion

1. Catholic Religious Education as Integrated Pedagogical-Pastoral Support

The findings extend previous Catholic Religious Education research by showing that teaching, moral formation, spiritual guidance, role modelling, and relational accompaniment operated as an integrated pattern rather than as isolated teacher functions. Studies by Tibo et al. (2023), Ginting and Gurning (2024), Igo Lamak and Toron (2025), Nisam et al. (2026), and Ola et al. (2026) similarly position Catholic Religious Education teachers as educators, guides, role models, and character-forming actors. The present study adds a more specific family-vulnerability context: these roles were mobilized in response to students experiencing *fatherlessness* and were linked to both classroom interaction and pastoral forms of accompaniment. Kause et al. (2024) also identified an important role for Christian Religious Education teachers in supporting fatherless adolescent girls; the present case adds evidence from a Catholic senior high school and incorporates perspectives from school leadership, multiple students, and observation.

A particularly important empirical nuance is that religious activities were not automatically meaningful for every student. I6 perception of prayer as routine indicates that the pedagogical value of spiritual practice depends on explanation, reflection, relational presence, and relevance to lived experience. This finding helps refine a purely activity-based view of religious support. Prayer, worship, and faith sharing appeared most valuable when they were embedded in a caring teacher-student relationship and connected to moral reflection and personal guidance.

2. Heterogeneous Student Responses and the Need to Avoid Deterministic Labelling

The study also reinforces the need to treat *fatherlessness* as a heterogeneous condition rather than a single causal explanation. Some students showed lower motivation, emotional instability, aggression, or negative self-perception, while others remained motivated and confident. This pattern is compatible with research showing associations between father absence or parental absence and depressive symptoms, emotional-behavioral difficulties, well-being, aggression, and academic vulnerability (Culpin et al., 2022; Ismail et al., 2024; Nindhita & Pringgadani, 2023; Nurmallasari et al., 2024; Sarfika et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2024). At the same time, these studies do not justify assuming identical effects for every adolescent, and the current qualitative data likewise do not establish *fatherlessness* as the sole cause of the behaviors observed.

The persistence of motivation and confidence among several students points to protective processes. Firdausiyyah (2025) emphasizes academic resilience and protective factors in the school environment, while Park and Kim (2024) show that school adjustment, including engagement and positive teacher-student relationships, mediates part of the relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement. The present findings are consistent with this broader view: personal aspirations, teacher attention, school relationships, and available social support may help explain why students respond differently to similar family vulnerabilities.

3. Relational School Support as a Protective Context

The collaborative school response is consistent with evidence that school connectedness and teacher support can function as protective relational resources. Raniti et al. (2022) found that higher school connectedness generally predicted lower depressive and anxiety symptoms, and Ulmanen et al. (2023) showed that trajectories of teacher support were strongly associated with study engagement and study-related burnout. García-Rodríguez et al. (2023) further describe the teacher-student relationship as relevant to behavioral and academic adjustment, while Widnall et al. (2022) demonstrate the importance of school and peer connectedness for adolescent well-being. These findings help explain why the teacher's empathic presence, fair treatment, and personal attention in the present study may matter alongside formal religious content.

The evidence also suggests that the appropriate response is multi-component. Llistosella et al. (2023) report that school-based resilience interventions can be beneficial, especially for adolescents at risk, and the present case similarly indicates that no single practice was sufficient. Moral guidance without empathy risked becoming merely disciplinary; prayer without reflection could become routine; and teacher support without collaboration was limited by the complexity of students' needs. A more coherent approach combines meaningful religious practice, relational support, individualized guidance, school counseling, and family or guardian involvement where feasible.

4. Contribution, Practical Implications, and Limitations

The specific contribution of this study is a school-based pedagogical-pastoral explanation of how Catholic Religious Education can complement broader support for students experiencing *fatherlessness*. The findings suggest four practical principles: recognize heterogeneous needs; connect spiritual practices to reflection and personal meaning; use teacher modelling and empathic relationships as part of moral formation; and coordinate support with homeroom teachers, counselors, school leaders, and families or guardians. Catholic Religious Education teachers should therefore be understood as complementary support actors, not as replacements for parents, professional counselors, or mental-health services when these are required.

This study has limitations. It is a single-site qualitative case involving one Catholic Religious Education teacher, one principal, and eight student informants, so the findings are context-specific and are not statistically generalizable. The study also relies partly on participants' accounts and classroom observation, which may be influenced by social desirability and by the situations observed. In addition, the reported dataset does not provide a cause-by-cause distribution of *fatherlessness* among student informants. Future research should compare multiple Catholic schools, document the specific forms and duration of paternal absence more systematically, include parents or guardians and counseling personnel, and examine how school-based pastoral support interacts with academic, emotional, and behavioral outcomes over time.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Catholic Religious Education teachers at SMA St. Thomas 4 Binjai contribute to supporting students experiencing *fatherlessness* through interconnected pedagogical and pastoral roles: faith and moral education, spiritual guidance, Christian modelling, facilitation of religious activities, contextual learning, and personal accompaniment. The central finding is that support is more meaningful when religious practices are connected to empathic relationships, moral reflection, teacher example, and school collaboration rather than implemented as routine activities alone. Students' responses to *fatherlessness* were heterogeneous; some experienced difficulties in motivation, emotional regulation, behavior, or self-perception, while others remained motivated and confident. Therefore, *fatherlessness* should not be used as a deterministic label. The practical implication is the need for individualized and collaborative support involving Catholic Religious Education teachers, homeroom teachers, counseling teachers, school leaders, and parents or guardians where possible. Within these limits, Catholic Religious Education can serve as a complementary pedagogical-pastoral space that helps students feel accepted, guided, and supported while the school responds to family-related vulnerability in a more holistic manner.

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