

Becoming Teachers: Alumni Experiences of Faith Learning Integration in a Christian Teacher Education Institution

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore how alumni, now teachers, describe their experiences of faith learning integration in a teacher education institution. Qualitative research is chosen to provide a rich description of this study. The data was collected from interviews with six alumni of a Christian teacher education institution. The interview provides more in-depth information about the participants' experiences and offers insight into how individual experiences shape their understanding of faith and learning integration. The alumni described the integration of faith and learning throughout their study experiences. Their understanding of faith and learning integration was articulated using common terminology, capturing the essence of God's Word as truth and source, and reflecting a holistic approach to education in their past studies. They shared how this integration was experienced across the curriculum and courses, teaching methodologies, institutional programs, and student activities, as well as teacher–student relationships. The analysis revealed several emerging themes including spiritual and identity formation, student learning experiences, Christian teacher capacity building, and central role of teachers. Future research should use longitudinal studies tracking teacher education students into their careers to examine how faith-learning integration evolves over time.

INTRODUCTION

There is no “neutral value” in education (Van Brummelen, 2009). Educational institutions convey the fundamental beliefs about the purpose and meaning of life, establishing an overall educational direction. All educational institutions, whether public or private schools, operate under a mission statement that articulates their central purpose and values. Educational institutions that are labeled Christian have proclaimed their identity as followers of Christ. The mission of Christian schools, as stated by the association, is to teach students to be devoted followers of Christ.

Commonly, these Christian schools or universities are identified with religious activities. In a Christian school, students participate in daily prayer or devotion, school chapel, spiritual retreat, and Christmas celebrations. The school or university provides Bible classes and Christian counseling. Some Christian education institutions would only hire Christian teachers and staff. Badley (2009) added that another characteristic of the Christian school is its selection of books, including textbooks and library books, that are contrary to or offensive to Christian belief.

In his articles, Grudem (1983) shared the biblical reasons for sending children to a Christian school. He believed that all of a child's education should be Bible-centred and God-centred. Education should be positive and truthful, as Proverb 22:6 says, “Train up a child in the way he should go.” A Christian school is expected to provide a Christian environment with positive, Christ-like peer influence for students. In a Christian school, Christian teachers have a tremendous impact on students through their patterns and modeling. Christian education is expected to teach God-centered wisdom through the teaching of the Bible, which can guide in all areas of life. According to Grudem, Christian schooling is the best hope for transforming society.

Many Christian educational institutions use the slogan of integrating faith and learning to distinguish themselves from other educational institutions. The integration of faith and learning is regarded as the primary distinction of Christian schools. The integration of faith and learning is the essential ingredient for achieving the purpose of Christian education: helping students become faithful disciples of Christ. However, Arthur F. Holmes emphasizes that the distinctiveness of Christian education lies not merely in

adding religious components, but in allowing faith to shape the entirety of the learning process (Holmes, 1987).

Previous studies on the integration of faith and learning within teacher education institutions have often limited current students as participants. This study focuses on alumni, drawing on their accounts of their study experiences. It examines how these past experiences have shaped their perception and how such integration is presently enacted in their teaching profession. Therefore, this study investigates the following question, "How do alumni of a Christian teacher education program experience the integration of faith and learning, and in what ways do these experiences remain meaningful in their work as teachers?"

Integration of Faith and Learning

The integration of faith and learning is not unusual in Christianity. Integration knowledge itself is an activity of fitting new knowledge into existing knowledge. In integrating faith and learning, Christians incorporate learning with the crucial addition of Christian knowledge grounded in Biblical authority (Harris, 2004). Harris proposed the five assumptions behind the integration of faith and learning. "All truth is God's truth." This powerful statement declared that Christian knowledge should not be considered a separate realm of truth. There is no conflict between God's truth and other truths; the problem that might happen is the false interpretation and worldview conflict. Secular learning is incomplete and often distorted; the Christian worldview provides, at best, a complete, objective, and rational explanation. The integration of Christianity is based on a Biblical framework of reality. Lastly, the purpose of integrating faith and learning is to preserve a coherent, unified system of understanding all truth. With these basic assumptions, Christians are expected to have the mindset that God is the source of all knowledge. The truth of all knowledge should be traced back to God as its source.

Gaebelein (1954) explained the practice of Christian educators in integrating faith and learning as the holistic and living unity of all aspects of education under the truth of God. Rather than combining two realms of knowledge, integrating faith and knowledge is a matter of filtering the worldview through Biblical truth. Academic discipline must be understood from the truth of God. He cautioned against superficial faith and learning integration, stating that it is beyond chocolate covering Christianity.

The implementation of integration of faith and learning in a Christian school cannot be separated from the concept of teaching a biblical worldview. Biblical worldview is woven into the subject matter and the lives of students through the process of biblical integration (Erdvig, 2020). The term "weaving" describes the complex activity of integrating subjects and biblical content. The biblical integration lesson aims to help the students understand God. All subjects in the curriculum in Christian schools are expected to be taught with biblical integration. One approach to understanding a biblical worldview is through the biblical narrative. The bible narrative presents a solid foundation for a comprehensive worldview (Esqueda, 2014). The biblical narrative, also called the metanarrative, explains the four essential acts in the Bible: Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration. Van Brummelen (2009) suggests that the biblical narrative should be incorporated into the school curriculum. The school curriculum, which integrates this biblical narrative, will engage students in seeing things the way they are in this world. Through every subject, the students are challenged to think biblically and critically. Students learn to understand certain situations from a biblical perspective. In biblical integration, the students will learn more about God's character and his will upon them.

A study by Fisher (2021) proposed an approach to integrating faith and learning that is both incidental and intentional. In the incidental approach, the integration of faith and learning occurs through unplanned, spontaneous discussions inside and outside Bible class, including questions, comments, and observations about faith, values, and beliefs. Teachers will need to be ready at all times, since they do not plan. They have to wait for students to create the moments. This process is supposed to come naturally. Meanwhile, in an intentional strategy of integrating faith and learning, the teachers must plan for the moment. The intentional strategy can be applied in two ways: through the formal curriculum and the hidden curriculum. A formal curriculum is planned to facilitate classroom deliberation among teachers and students. The intentional integration can be extended to out-of-classroom activities as well, for example, through extracurricular activities or field trips. Fisher concluded that a Christian worldview becomes operative only as teachers integrate this principle into practice at the classroom level and promote their integration in the student's life. What Christian schools need is a curriculum that teaches students a biblical worldview grounded in Scripture so that they can discern it. A study by Harefa and Santoso (2025) concludes that one

of the most appropriate strategies for integrating faith and learning into incorporating school policy and lesson plans is with a CFRC (Creation, Fall, Redemption, Consummation) perspective. This strategy ensures that the integration of the Christian faith is not merely the initiative of a few teachers but becomes the school's official, directed framework that guides the entire learning process.

Research by Sherr, Huff, and Curran (2007) examined students' perceptions of biblical integration at seven Christian universities. The most common integration of faith and learning were observed and reported by the students in six ways: the faculty used the Scripture as a primary reference in the teaching content, they assisted students in their faith application, they shared personal faith integration experiences with students, they used the Scripture as decision guidance and emphasized a holistic approach in the various knowledge and lastly, they educated and confirmed their beliefs in certain absolute truths. This research has shown the implementation of faith and learning through teaching lessons, role modeling, and their relationship with students inside and outside the classroom.

Previous studies on the integration of faith and learning have often been limited to teacher and classroom practices, or to implementation in Christian schools and higher education. Meanwhile, the study on faith and learning in teacher education Institutions is still limited to current students as participants. This study focused on alumni of a Christian education institution, drawing on their accounts of their study experiences. Studies of alumni of higher education institutions provide a central pillar of the quality process, offering valuable insights into their study experiences, including academic programs and services (Bansiong & Alawas, 2024).

METHODOLOGY

This study uses qualitative research to provide a rich description. A purposive sample of six alumni participated in this case study. Alumni were chosen from a Christian education institution founded 10 years ago, with majors in elementary teacher education and early childhood education. Its vision is to prepare Christian teachers who are called to transform Indonesian society. The researcher contacted prospective participants, explained the study's purpose, and invited them to participate. Four female and two male alumni agreed to participate. They are from different regions of Indonesia and currently teach at various schools. All participants came from the same teacher education institution with different years of entry. All participants have experience in teaching for a minimum of 2 years. The data collection was conducted in April 2026. The interviews were conducted separately, both online and in person. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews, focusing on the main question to explore participants' experiences. This research examined their experiences during their studies. The teacher expressed what they experience, particularly in integrating faith and learning. The participants were also asked to share their reflections as Christian teachers. Besides the interview, data collection was also conducted through the faculty curriculum and student handbook during their time. The researcher analyzed data by systematically organizing and interpreting data sources to identify patterns and themes within the specific context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Six verbatim transcripts were studied after the interviews. Significant statements were obtained to bring to the theme cluster the overall study experiences as alumni expressed, the faith-learning integration as they explained, and the practices as they experienced. The overall study experience in this teacher education program was described as a fun, deeply moving, and beautiful experience. They described their four years of study experience, both inside and outside the classroom, in their faculty of education, their university activities, and their dormitory experience. Participants were asked to share their experiences of the integration of faith and learning throughout their studies, which were linked to their understanding of this integration.

The alumni explain faith-learning integration by recalling memories through illustration and by describing it using common terminology. An alumnus recalled an illustration she remembered about the integration of faith and learning, a picture of the Bible in the center, which was explained by a teacher. The common terminology was used fluently in these interviews, indicating that integrating faith and learning was not a new concept for them. They mentioned and repeated words of the Christian worldview, dichotomy, biblical integration, biblical narrative, and CFRC (Creation, Fall, Redemption, Consummation). In their explanations, they all captured the essence of God's Word as truth and as the source.

The participants experienced integration of faith and learning not as a lesson but as a reflection of a holistic approach to education in their past studies. Different explanations mentioned faith and learning

integration in practice, including curriculum and courses, student activities across the whole university and the faculty, and the student-teacher relationship. They shared how this integration was experienced across the curriculum and courses by mentioning some Bible course titles. The first-year curriculum includes a biblical foundation in education, a Christian worldview, a philosophy of Christian education, and Christian ethics. Some said those classes shaped their ideas of Christian education. An alumnus said those courses shaped her to be a Christian teacher. The curriculum for the second year and beyond was practical for teacher education. Alumni mentioned different names of teachers who taught the course with faith and learning integration. The teachers always refer knowledge back to the truth of the Bible. They also mentioned that, during their study, they integrate faith and learning by completing an internship at a Christian school in their final year. An alumnus mentioned that the thesis is on the integration of faith and learning, exploring his understanding and current practice as an elementary teacher. The curriculum holds the journey of preparing future Christian teachers during the study.

In the description of student activities experience, an alumnus was impressed by the orientation program in the faculty, which prepared all new students from different regions to begin university. Another alumnus mentioned that this starting program includes personal reflection and trauma healing with their past. She expressed that she had healed from her trauma, which helped her to understand her identity. In the student orientation program, they experienced how faculty care for them holistically in preparation for learning. The following year, they experienced becoming mentees in their first year and mentoring in their next year in the university student mentoring program.

Lastly, the participant also highlighted the teacher–student relationships. All mention various teachers’ names, indicating that all have experienced this with different instructors. Instructors were helpful outside the classroom. The curriculum mentions that teachers are servant-leaders, role models, and mentors. It includes small group discipleship programs as an integral part of student development, where students experience mentor-mentee relationship/mentoring relationships. An alumna shared that, even now, in her teaching profession, when she still faces problems, she contacts her mentor teacher and there are still alumni fellowship ministries as well.

Spiritual and Identity Formation

The students came to the university from diverse backgrounds. To be prepared as future Christian teachers, students must first experience Christ personally. In the beginning of the study journey, the students are welcomed through a new student program that helps them understand their identity, life purpose, and calling. Faith and learning integration involves receiving the Gospel and fostering their spiritual formation. As mentioned by Cooling (2021), Christian education refers to the systematic approach through which individuals are exposed to and influenced by the teachings of the Christian gospel. As part of the new student program, there are dedicated sessions for students with past trauma to begin a healing process, pointing to the deeper reality of human brokenness. The integration of faith and learning acknowledges this condition and is therefore rooted in Jesus Christ as the source of restoration (Dockery, 2024). The integration of faith and learning has helped them understand the faith itself. Building on the new student program, the curriculum and campus activities are intentionally designed to reinforce students’ sense of purpose and calling, strengthening the importance of a personal relationship with Jesus, including through a discipleship program. Wallace (2021) suggests a comprehensive approach to integrating faith learning throughout the student’s entire college experience, with intentional attention to students’ formation by the time they graduate.

Student Learning Experiences

The alums share how they experience things in many different ways, not limited to the classroom or certain course content. This finding differs from a similar study on students’ perceptions of the integration of faith and the learning process in a university class by Burton and Nwosu (2003). The result showed that students were able to describe the integration of faith and learning through the course’s content and the teaching methods. Interestingly, Burton and Nwosu reported that the student’s description of the integration of faith was on the teaching rather than the learning. The study raised concerns about whether integration occurred during the students’ learning process. In this study, the integration of faith and learning has involved students’ personal experiences. According to Esqueda (2014), when Christian faculty in higher education institutions integrate faith and learning, they impart values and ideas to students, thereby

influencing their behavior. This perspective is essential because it shapes the moral and ethical framework within which students operate.

The integration, which extends beyond subjects, aims to develop individuals who embody Christian values and a deep understanding of their faith (MacCullough, 2013). In this study, the participants shared how they experienced faith learning integration in and outside the classroom. This includes practices in internship, mentoring, and thesis writing. Training and mentoring are among the strategies that can support the integration of faith within holistic student engagement. Faith learning integration can be incorporated into both theoretical frameworks and practical disciplines (Hasker, 1992). Although the classroom experience specifically on teaching methodologies was not mentioned in the participants' experience, they could recall some of what they learned in class. To support this, Bailey (2012) proposed an active, critical-thinking skills model for the conduct of faith-learning integration that may guide teachers in developing courses that support students in developing the skills needed for independent faith-learning integration.

Christian Teacher Capacity Building

In this teacher-training institution, students are invited and equipped to become teachers. What they experience in the integration of faith and learning is that their curriculum is designed to develop them as future Christian teachers. The alumni shared that those experiences have shaped them to be current teachers. An alumnus mentioned that she felt supported and facilitated to develop in a healthy environment where the teachers care. For example, she was encouraged by the faculty to develop her abilities in English or in teaching. The support in developing them to become teachers was also mentioned by an alumnus, who mentioned that she was treated as special and full of love by her teachers. Those experiences have in the past made her treat students the same way. She said that she wanted to love her students as her teacher loved her. Other alumni said she is trained to be a shepherd teacher, just as her teacher was. Participants shared that holistic education equipped them to become Christian teachers.

Central Role of Teachers

The experience of faith-and-learning integration described by alumni cannot be separated from the teachers who implemented it. Faith-and-learning integration was experienced by alumni in various ways through the presence of their teachers during their years of study. The study found that teachers demonstrated an understanding of the Christian worldview and could provide examples of how faith and learning can be integrated through it. This finding is aligned with Prior (2021) who argued that Christian teachers integrate faith and learning through a worldview framework. This perspective also connects with Nelly et al. (2024), who propose three approaches to teaching commitment: teaching for, about, and from commitment, through which Christian education aims to understand God's divine will within the Christian worldview.

Korniejczuk (1994) mapped the implementation of faith-and-learning integration of faculty and its association with personal, disciplinary, environmental, and institutional circumstances and characteristics. He differentiated the level of faculty faith and learning integration from nonexistent to dynamic. This study indicated the teachers' readiness within the educational institution to implement faith-and-learning integration. Lastly, Gaebelein (1954) emphasized that there is no Christian education without Christian teachers. Christian educational institutions need a devoted Christian teacher with a genuinely Christian worldview. Christian teachers are God's so-called instruments for bringing students to their full potential in Christ.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

This study examines alumni experiences of faith and learning integration during their studies. The findings indicate that alumni experienced faith-learning integration as a holistic and formative aspect throughout their study time, grounded in a biblical worldview. The integration of faith and learning was evident across multiple dimensions, including curriculum and courses, student activities, and teacher–student relationships. The emerging themes highlight the significance of spiritual and identity formation, student meaningful learning experiences, and the development of Christian teacher capacity. Teachers' central role is important in embodying and facilitating faith–learning integration. Furthermore, their past experiences have formed their perceptions and how they currently enact this integration in their teaching profession.

As an implication of the study, programs within Christian institutions need to demonstrate a strong commitment to the integration of faith and learning, while also cultivating an environment that fosters spiritual growth among both students and teachers.

The study is currently limited in its data collection, relying primarily on participant interviews, with additional data to be collected to support triangulation. The recommendation of future research is a longitudinal study following students from their study time in the program of teacher education into their teaching careers to better understand how the integration of faith and learning develops and is maintained over time.

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