

# STUDENT TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION AND DIGITAL LEARNING IN A CHRISTIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

The main purpose of Christian higher education is to provide a holistic development of students, including spirituality. In order to enhance student's spiritual growth, a Christian private university has been developing a comprehensive approach to educational practices regarding the integration of faith and learning. However, the pandemic COVID-19 has been limiting student's opportunity to experience those practices. The aim of this phenomenological study was to explore the student teachers' experiences of spiritual formation and digital learning in a Christian Teachers' College. The number of participants was 20 and data were collected by conducting interviews and self-reflection reports. The findings were classified in three main themes: personal attachment, support network, and diverse learning applications. The findings and implications are expected to reinforce digital learning in Christian higher education in promoting student's spiritual formation.

**Keywords:** student teachers; spiritual formation; digital learning; Christian higher education

### ABSTRAK

Tujuan utama dari pendidikan tinggi Kristen adalah menyediakan perkembangan naradidik secara holistik, termasuk spiritualitas. Demi meningkatkan pertumbuhan spiritual naradidik, sebuah universitas Kristen telah mengembangkan sebuah pendekatan pendidikan yang komprehensif secara khusus mengenai integrasi antara iman dan ilmu. Akan tetapi, pandemic COVID-19 telah membatasi kesempatan naradidik untuk mengalami praktik-praktik pendidikan tersebut. Tujuan studi fenomenologi ini adalah untuk mengeksplorasi pengalaman mahasiswa guru tentang formasi spiritualitas dan pembelajaran digital di sebuah fakultas keguruan Kristen. Partisipan berjumlah 20 orang dan data diperoleh melalui wawancara dan laporan jurnal refleksi pribadi. Hasil penelitian diklasifikasikan dalam tiga tema utama: keterikatan pribadi (*personal attachment*), jaringan pendukung (*support network*), dan penerapan variasi pembelajaran (*diverse learning applications*). Hasil penelitian dan implikasi diharapkan dapat memperkuat pembelajaran digital serta mendukung formasi spiritualitas nara didik di pendidikan tinggi Kristen.

**Kata Kunci:** mahasiswa guru; formasi spiritualitas; pembelajaran digital; pendidikan tinggi Kristen

### Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 has globally impacted all spheres of human beings, including the educational field. The traditional face-to-face learning which requires the presence of both a teacher and students in a physical classroom has changed to online distance learning in which the meeting is conducted by using online platforms, such as Google Classroom, Zoom and Teams. The challenges are rising since specific school programs are considered more effective when it accomplished as not virtually.

As a faith based institution, Christian higher education has a mandate to facilitate student's spiritual needs during their education, including student teachers. It is crucial for them to experience spiritual formation since they are promoted as the main figures to help students in the future. Their perceptions and experiences of spiritual formation in

a Christian Teachers College are presented in this study. The research questions in this study were: 1) How is student's perception of spiritual growth in a Christian higher education? 2) How are student teachers' experiences on digital learning in order to promote their spirituality?

### **Spiritual Formation**

Spiritual formation is a must for every Christian. Mulholland (2016) defines a spiritual formation as "an intentional and continual commitment to lifelong process of growth toward wholeness in Christ" (p. 29). Spiritual formation requires a wholly self-commitment toward Christlikeness. Christians' commitment refers to self-awareness to participate in the spiritual journey with Christ in order to distance ourselves from sin and have a close relationship with God.

In addition to spiritual journey, Pettit (2008) describes spiritual formation as a dynamic relationship between God and the believers. He points out that spiritual formation is "God's work and man's cooperation" (p. 23). At the very first, God initially plans for salvation, then the Holy Spirit enables sinners to respond to God's effective callings. Here, human ability does not contribute to human salvation; it is only by the grace of God. However, after being converted to Christ, the believers now work mutually with the Holy Spirit to produce all qualities of a sanctification lifelong process. Christians are responsible to participate in the process of spiritual formation. There is no other way to connect with Christ without subduing ourselves through spiritual practices, such as Bible meditation, prayers, worship, and other disciplines.

### **Becoming a Christian Teacher**

In a Christian perspective, being a teacher is not merely a profession, but it is God's calling. It implies that student teachers should be aware and responsible to equip themselves for the ministry of teaching. Yount (1999) explains three elements of maturity and its interrelationship in which student teachers need to develop during their education: thinking, feeling and doing (p. 22). It means that student teachers need to experience the beauty of being transformed during their study, so that they are able to become a good role model for their students. The ultimate goal of being a teacher is "to be examples of godly thinking, godly priorities, and godly behavior, thereby setting the stage for student growth toward excellence" (Yount, 1999, p. 37).

## **Christian Higher Education**

The integration of faith and learning which results in spiritual formation has been a benchmark of the distinctiveness' evangelical universities. Christian colleges and universities are called to shape students to have a biblical worldview in which it affects their actions. Dockery (2018) points out that the main goal of Christian higher education is "to prepare a generation of Christians to think Christianly, to engage the academy and the culture, to serve society, and to renew the connection with the church and its' mission" (p. 12). Christian higher education has special mandate to pass Christian teachings from one generation to another generation.

In line with the calling, Christian higher education needs to incorporate spiritual practices into academic settings. Spiritual discipline is believed to be effective in enhancing students to experience biblical understanding as well as spiritual practices. Foster (2018) proposes the ideas of spiritual discipline -inward, outward, and corporate- as "a means of receiving God's grace" can be considered to foster students' spiritual formation in Christian universities (p. 7).

## **Digital Learning**

Smith, Sevensma, Terpstra, and McMullen (2020) promote spiritual formation through digital learning. By claiming technology as a tool, spiritual formation can be facilitated so that both teachers and students are able to experience growth. In this way, spiritual disciplines can never be replaced by technology. The focus of spiritual discipline still lies on the Bible as the Word of God and digital learning becomes a mode. During this pandemic COVID-19, many communal activities such as worship, prayer meetings, and communal fellowship as well as classrooms have been strengthened by digital technology. Digital learning provides opportunities for human interactions in a community. Even though digital learning has many benefits, the excess also needs to be addressed by giving some regular explanations and directions about safe and ethical boundaries (Smith, Sevensma, Terpstra, & McMullen, 2020, p. 355).

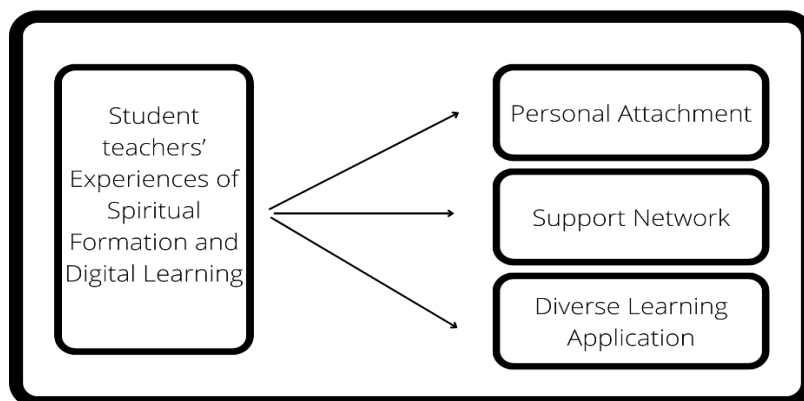
## **Research Method**

This study was designed by using a phenomenological approach. This approach is typically to describe personal experiences under the same phenomenon through their stories (Creswell, 2013; Christensen, Johnson, and Turner, 2011). In this present study, a phenomenological design is to explain student teachers' experiences in a Christian private university in terms of spiritual growth as well as digital learning. The participants were chosen by using a purposive sampling strategy. Specific criteria applied in selecting the participants. This study was conducted at a Christian teachers college located in Tangerang, Indonesia. Related to sample size, there must be at least five participants (Creswell, 2013). The number of participants was 20 students.

By using virtual focus group discussion, the participants were assigned into four groups which depends on their availability. Each interview was recorded by Zoom for 40 minutes to 1 hour in length. Then, the researchers transcribed all interviews and translated them into English. Data were classified into codes and themes, then categorized those themes into main findings. An important note is that all the processes were done manually. Three ethical issued were maintained. First, the participants have filled an informed consent form. Second, neither monetary nor academic benefits were given to participants. Third, the use of pseudonyms and anonymity to keep their identity confidential.

## **Results and Discussion**

Three main themes were constructed from student teachers' experiences: personal attachment, support network, and diverse learning applications. The findings are presented in figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Findings into themes

### **Theme 1: Personal Attachment**

This theme represents the shifting paradigm perceived by the participants through their experiences on spiritual formation provided online by the Christian Teachers College. Being involved in digital spiritual exercises gradually changed their perceptions from required attendance to self-commitment since they have been experiencing the process and benefits. Spiritual formation has improved not only participants' perception, also their motivation and behaviors.

*From mandatory perspective to inner understanding.* Since spiritual formation is the core of teachers' development, many spiritual program designs have been created to support it. Those spiritual activities are finally becoming mandatory in order to facilitate student teachers' growth. At the beginning, the participants, of course, feel burdensome since they think that the mandatory things are usually not attractive and demanding. Then, by the time they are about to taste and digest the spiritual formation, they realize that the good things are about to happen as well. The internalization starts with their inner understanding.

At first, it is mandatory...to attend our chapel and fellowship. However, it comes to my understanding that I am now on the right track to grow in God. (ST 2)

Because I had to fill the attendance file, I joined the chapel. It was kind of the feeling that I was forced to be "there", but finally I understood why. (ST 8)

I become closer to God through mandatory spiritual activities. And I thank the university who provides everything online. (ST 9)

I think it was kind of a struggle to follow all the mandatory programs. It is hard, but I know it is good for me. (ST 11)

I had a lack of self-awareness of the importance of reading the Bible. Then, it is mandatory to read for a class and I realized that it is good to read the Bible for my growth. (ST 20)

Two studies done on religious participation (Lee, 2018; Nichols, 2015). By using qualitative study, Lee (2018) discovered that partaking in spiritual practices regularly has a strong impact on consistent spiritual development. Meanwhile, a quantitative study by Nichlos (2015) identified that there was no significant difference in students' characteristics who attend spiritual activities online and on campus regarding their spiritual growth. It means that the pursuits of spiritual growth can be accomplished whether students access it online or onsite.

Hence, committing to spiritual disciplines regularly contribute to flourish spiritual understanding, including God's image. Based on a case study on Jesuit higher education, Gallagher (2018) reported that daily practices such as Bible meditation, prayer, and reciting verses, seem to lead the richness of inward spiritual journey. However, another study done by Yo (2017) among Korean Christians revealed that misconception about God has a negative relationship to religious behavior. Therefore, it is important to raise awareness of both content and practice. Christian teachings and spiritual disciplines are reciprocal.

*From inner understanding to self-habituation.* The internalization process continues on how participants were identified with the sense of enjoyment while participating in spiritual practices. This condition is reflecting how deep and well they have been engaged in spiritual formation. The emerging enjoyment from within is the result of the greater benefits in which they obtain, not only for personal interest, but also impact to others.

Devotion, chapel time, and sharing are new things for me. By doing that, I feel enjoy and grow in faith. I realized that some changes have happened to me. I become more respectful to others. (ST 2)

Even though I attended all spiritual programs online, I love to do it and feel that I am blessed spiritually by those activities. I became more sensitive to others' needs. (ST 4)

During this online learning, the university provides many services, such as chapel, devotion, bible study, etc. Even during the online class, I can feel that everything I learned is always related to God. I really like it all. (ST 6)

I enjoy devotion, Tuesday and Sunday chapels. I feel that I am growing up spiritually. I am grateful that there is no obstacle when I come to God while it is online. I pray for others that they can experience it as well. (ST 18)

Enjoying spiritual formation is identical with spiritual wellbeing. A study conducted by Francis and Penny (2016) showed that young people who are regular to attend spiritual activities are more likely to have a strong correlation between spiritual wellbeing and positive attitudes. A similar study done by Krause and Ironson (2019) investigated the relationship between spiritual wellbeing and life satisfaction. They found that spiritual perception leads to a greater hope and a sense of contentment. However, Christian spiritual wellbeing needs a paradoxical understanding. A study done by Burns (2020) affirmed that Christians can also grow, even, through bad circumstances such as pain, brokenness and illness.

## **Theme 2: Support Network**

Participants reported that attending class through a digital platform is challenging. They claimed that school elements such as faculty, classmates, and mentors have a powerful impact to make them survive. Encouragement from faculty, positive interaction with classmates, and mentoring relationships have been identified as positive factors in helping them to adapt.

*Encouragement from the faculty.* Interactions with faculty members become a serious challenge since new students sometimes feel nervous and face hardship during early adjustment in class. Moral support from faculty, such as motivation through words, openness, and acceptance will result in reinforcing their spiritual journey in college.

In online class, the faculty encouraged me to ask everything. It makes me feel comfortable because I feel accepted. (ST 1)

I feel amazed because our faculty members were treating me with love. The way they support me gives me motivation to learn. (ST 5)

The faculty members are able to be contacted after class. They are always ready .... I was texting some of them in the evening, and they answered my questions. It helps me a lot in communication. (ST 6)

I really enjoyed the class because the faculty included me in the discussion. Also, they are open with any students' questions and explain it patiently. (ST 13)

The faculty gave me support to explore the lesson. (ST 19)



Satisfaction in the relationship between faculty and students has a strong correlation to students' academic success as well as welfare. Ash and Schreiner (2016) pointed out that some faculty attitudes, such as being sensitive to diverse students' needs and facilitating communication outside of class are the key factors to strengthen mutual trust on students who experience difficulties during their study. A similar study conducted by Sriram and McLevain (2016) proposed that faculty-student interaction is crucial in order to develop a greater benefit for the whole community regarding a holistic-missional education.

*Positive interaction with classmates.* Friendship becomes a major support during study. A close and healthy relationship among students contributes to reducing psychological distress. Acceptance, attention, and help from classmates are crucial to sustain living at campus. Prayers from classmates have been identified as a spiritual force. Student teachers are showing a Christian affection in order to sustain those who are struggling in study and lives.

I feel blessed to have classmates who understand me well. They rebuked me when I was doing wrong. I was happy because I know that I am not left behind. They always direct me in a good way. They have been my family here. (ST 2)

I got support from my classmates.... They cheer me up when I am in trouble. They also pray for my family. (ST 3)

Regarding courses, my classmates are always ready whenever I need more explanations. They help me to understand the class that I missed. (ST 6)

Some studies done in investigating the role of social support in Christian colleges. Dangel and Webb (2017) found that there was a positive connection between psychological wellbeing with the sense of spirituality. The emotional support from the religious community has a significant contribution in developing God's image in individuals. Hence, Sartor et. al (2018) revealed peer and group discussions have been associated with student's beliefs in order to enhance their relationship with God and others. Otherwise, another study explained the lack of community support resulting in self-depression (Klausli & Caudill, 2018).

*Mentoring relationships.* Mentoring has been a great value for transmitting certain understandings, values, and habits. Participants who experience mentoring from the senior would express gratitude since they have been monitored in positive ways. Relationships between mentor

and mentee provide spiritual growth because there are so much love, care and support as well.

My biggest support comes from my mentor. Sometimes, I feel tired because of studying, but I get unending support and motivation. (ST 17)

My mentor supports me by giving a solution when I am in trouble. I learn from her sharing so that I can adjust well in college. (ST 18)

I feel great support from my mentor since she encouraged me to participate in many activities. She sent me words of affirmation as well. (ST 19)

Spiritual mentoring has been associated with college students. A study done by Yoder (2013) indicates that group mentoring has cultivated the sense of community in a Christian college. Faith transmission occurs when mentor-mentee relationships demonstrate commitment and openness to one another. He also reported that a mentoring relationship has improved students' academic achievement. In particular, Harvey (2016) investigated whether spiritual mentoring has an effect on male students or not. The findings showed that spiritual mentoring has a positive impact to student's self-confidence, self-regulation, faith, and academic excellences. Interestingly, a study reported that there was no significant difference impact on student's growth between online and face-to-face mentoring (Mullen, 2012). It seems that electronic devices, such as computers, emails, and (smart) phones have been applied for both one-on-one and group mentoring, even before pandemic Covid-19.

### **Theme 3: Diverse Learning Applications**

This theme concerns how the participants for the first time experienced using a new application and learning management system as well as learning methods during digital learning. The privilege to be exposed to new learning designs and platforms as well as advancing digital skills in person become the key aspects of student teachers in experiencing online learning.

*The privilege to be exposed to new learning designs and platforms.* Since the Christian private university offers a better quality of education, it is a great opportunity for many young people to pursue it, including the participants. By receiving a holistic education, the participants are being educated gradually to be a digital literate generation, while in fact, pandemic COVID-19 has unexpectedly accelerated it more. For the most of the participants are from rural areas, it is a privilege to experience

digital learning under professional faculty. The participants are fascinated by how electronic platforms lead to new experiences of learning.

It's impressive ... to know lots of new digital applications, so that I can use them to develop my skills. (ST 1)

It's my first time being exposed to synchronous and asynchronous methods for learning... I used to learn simply using Zoom meetings. (ST 3)

It is a new experience to use Teams' application (ST 8)

Using Teams' applications is new for me. (ST 14)

I have never been using this digital learning application (ST 15)

What makes me impressed is that I can get my score directly after answering quizzes and tests. (ST 16)

Several studies conducted in different countries during this pandemic COVID-19 pointed out some positive attitudes on digital learning as well as the challenges. Lilian, Ah-Choo, and Soon-Hin (2021) found that college students seem to have a positive image of digital learning in Malaysia. It is understandable since young people have been using technology to gain information. However, it is reported there is poor self-regulated learning among undergraduate students. By using a single case study, Peimani and Kamalipour (2021) explores students' learning experiences during pandemic COVID-19. Regarding learning design, the study points out that a synchronous mode of learning, such as live online lectures, is preferable than asynchronous ones (only watching pre-recorded seminars). However, an asynchronous mode of learning is needed to balance healthy reasons, especially for eyes. The researchers agree that both synchronous and asynchronous modes of learning are useful to assess students' progress in regard to giving and receiving feedback from faculty and classmates.

*Advancing digital skills in person.* One best benefit during digital learning is how to improve self-efficacy relating to digital literacy. Using various technological applications, the participants now proceed to producing educational-content videos for class requirements. Of course, there was no formal guideline and assistance on how to create a video. The participants are about to intensify their ability continually to achieve best results. Eventually, the participants have gained greater benefit from becoming digital citizens through their self-efficacy.

It is a positive way to learn... digital applications such as Teams, Zoom, Google Meet, video editing, etc. I learn how to use a lot for my study. (ST 7)

I got opportunities to explore more digital applications for making video, including editing and adjusting the sound. (ST 12)

I have to learn how to make videos by myself, then edit and upload them.... I came to know how to use Microsoft 365 and I know how to edit video by using other applications. I use many applications as well to create designs. (ST 13)

Akcil and Bastas (2020) found that there is a significant correlation between digital citizenship and digital behaviors. Since there was no other option during pandemic COVID-19, digital learning rapidly spread and was accepted by most educational institutions. Therefore, the more students engaging in digital learning, the more they are familiar with it. Meanwhile, a survey study by Eri, Gudimetla, and Star (2021) examined to what extent students' resilience to digital learning. This survey was actually conducted in five different countries, however, only general findings were presented. According to the study, since the university did not provide any help to students in adjusting to digital learning, mental stress occurred among students. Some suggestions to each country were provided. A comparative study done in several countries by Cranfield, Tick, Venter, Blignaut, and Renaud (2021) also reported the availability of infrastructure and economic discrepancies became main obstacles in conducting digital learning.

## **Conclusion**

During pandemic COVID-19, the focus point of Christian higher education is to incorporate spiritual formation and digital learning. The purpose of this study was to explore student teachers' experience in perceiving their own growth through digital learning in a Christian private university. The findings revealed that spiritual formation can be facilitated by digital learning in which involves personal attachment, and strengthened by the faculty, classmates, and mentors as the support network. Then, student teachers are able to demonstrate the benefits of spiritual formation and digital learning related to diverse learning application in their daily lives.

For implications and recommendations, the Christian university needs to bridge students' experiences into the real world. The social phenomena that exist in society need to be addressed as a part of spiritual responsibility (Christian praxis). Students' teachers are about to have great opportunities to enhance their perspective of spiritual formation through social services. Interaction with social issues, such as

poverty, social justice, children at risk, and ecology will contribute to a greater spectrum of students' spirituality. Despite pandemic COVID-19 is still ongoing, the university can begin to facilitate student teachers with discussion about the social phenomena through digital learning and ended by making digital campaigns as a social project.

### **Acknowledgement**

We would like to thank for the participants for their contribution for this present study.

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