

# IMPLEMENTATION OF HOLISTIC LEARNING FOR YOUNG LEARNERS – IS IT POSSIBLE AND WHAT CAN TEACHERS DO TO MAKE IT HAPPEN?

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## ABSTRACT

Christian teachers play a critical role in the implementation of holistic learning as the vision of Christian education is to transform students' lives holistically. However, there seems to be a subtle debate in the implementation of holistic learning to younger students, whether it is possible or not. Arguing that it is not only possible, but it is a must, this study explores the implementation of holistic Christian education for young learners. This study has found that the implementation of holistic learning for younger learners requires Christian teachers to provide authentic and inclusive learning, and to facilitate a learning environment for younger students to build their worldview grounded on biblical truth from an early age.

**Keywords:** Christian education, Christian teachers, holistic development, holistic learning, young learners.

## ABSTRAK

Guru Kristen memiliki peran yang signifikan dalam melaksanakan pembelajaran holistik karena visi pendidikan Kristen adalah mentransformasikan kehidupan siswa secara holistik, termasuk bagi para pembelajar

muda. Namun demikian, peneliti menemukan bahwa masih kurangnya pemahaman guru Kristen tentang pembelajaran holistik khususnya bagi pelajar muda yang tercermin dari bagaimana proses belajar mengajar dilakukan di kelas. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis peran guru Kristen dalam melaksanakan pembelajaran holistik terutama untuk pelajar muda dalam pendidikan Kristen. Studi ini mengungkapkan bahwa pemahaman yang benar dalam menerapkan pembelajaran holistik Kristen bagi pelajar muda sangat penting bagi guru Kristen karena hal itu mempengaruhi praktik mengajar mereka. Guru Kristen harus memahami bahwa peran mereka adalah menyediakan pembelajaran otentik, pembelajaran inklusif, dan memfasilitasi lingkungan belajar bagi pelajar muda untuk membangun pandangan dunia mereka yang didasarkan pada kebenaran alkitabiah sejak usia dini.

**Kata Kunci:** Pendidikan Kristen, guru Kristen, pengembangan holistik, pembelajaran holistik, pelajar muda.

## Introduction

The goal of Christian education is to transform students to become responsive disciples of Christ through holistic education which enable students to understand the world from God's perspective (Knight, 2010). In similar vein, Byrne (2003) argues that transforming students' lives to know, to love and to serve God is the distinctive vision of Christian education. Such goals imply Christian teachers' huge responsibility, that is, to shape students to be mature Christians and thus to become salt and light in society (Wilhoit, 1991).

In the pursuit of those roles, Christian teachers should design and practice the holistic learning environment that shapes the growth of the students (Cairney, 2018). It means that the teachers need to provide a learning approach, assignment, interaction, and content which consider students as a whole being – academic, spiritual, emotional, and social (Cardoza, 2019). To do so, they should firstly understand the

philosophical foundation of Christian education and students' characteristics. The all-truth-is-God's-truth as the philosophical foundation of Christian education and the understanding of students as image of God must be clearly reflected in all educational principles and practices (Luetz et al., 2018).

However, the focus of Christian schools including the teachers' has been shifted. Byrne (2003) claims that globalization, culture, and government are influencing many contemporary Christian schools and teachers from their focus to pursue the primary goal of Christian education. Tung (2013) also argues that many Christian teachers in Christian education might not know whether they are presenting a true and authentic vision and mission of Christian education or simply presenting religious tradition to the students.

In fact, during our short observation in one of the Christian primary schools in Tangerang, Indonesia, we found out that 'dualism' is still in practice. There seems to be a so-called educational practice to separate learning process from school's religious program. In other words, spiritual nurture is viewed as an add-on program, not integrated in learning process taking place in classroom. For example, out of morning devotion and school worship, all learning process is solely directed at developing students' academic performance and achievement. What is interesting from this observation is the very reason behind this implementation of such practice. One main reason is the pre-conceived idea and belief that primary school students are not spiritually mature enough and thus ready to see how God is the center of all knowledge learned through learning process.

However, up to the present day, there is no literature and research papers proving such. In contrast, young learners are the golden stage for Christian teachers to plant the right seed about Christian perspective about of life through their educational experiences. However, it is true that the unique characteristics of young learners in primary school add challenges for Christian teachers thus require them to put on more effort and creativity in practicing holistic learning. Considering such gap, this paper will discuss Christian teachers' role in implementing a holistic learning to young learners. This paper, in particular, will discuss the importance of having the right perspective about holistic learning and the role of Christian teachers as facilitators in implementing holistic learning

to young learners. The method used in this paper is qualitative descriptive.

## **Literature review**

### ***Holistic Learning***

Holistic means wholeness (Brodie, 2018). In education, being holistic in the learning process may mean acknowledging every area of students' life as a unity. Ricci & Pritscher (2015) claim that what makes one learning as holistic is the fact that student's intellectual, mental, social, physical, and spiritual potential are treated as undivided parts of them. In other words, in holistic education, learning is not solely focused on student's intellectual achievement or one part, instead, learning is a process to develop every factor related to students' entity. To say it another way, holistic learning is a process of learning which views and involves students as a whole being, to foster their intellectual, mental, social, physical, and spiritual growth.

There are the three essential components of holistic learning: balance, inclusion, and connection (Miller, 1997). One of the three essential component is balance, and it means that instead of focusing on nurturing one aspect of students, holistic learning focus to grow every aspect of students simultaneously. Holistic learning is, therefore, a divert from subject material focus education to wholeness awareness education (Miller & Nigh, 2017). Another thing that makes holistic learning meaningful is the fact that it views involvement of students' whole extent as primary (Perkins, 2010). It does not mean that teacher's explanation is negated, but it implies that holistic learning provides spacious room for students to explore their self-understanding about a concept, ideas, or problem rather than wholly rely on the teacher's explanation. Therefore, instead of a teacher-centered learning environment, holistic learning is a student-oriented learning environment that assists students' self-exploration to expand their understanding and promote balanced growth.

Inclusion is another significant component of holistic learning. Holistic learning concerns about students' different needs, learning styles, and preferences to ensure that every student is included, and no one gets more attention or less attention that the others (Taylor & MacKenney, 2008). It respects one's uniqueness and individuality;

requiring a balance of learning approach being practiced in the classroom that covers different learning styles to engage every student.

Equally important, holistic learning provides comprehensive worldview about life (Miller et al., 2018) through integration to establish meanings and gain understanding. Through integration, students are nurtured to understand every concept they acquire in the same subject even with the other subject as interconnected knowledge. Holistic learning also connects students and the knowledge gained to the real world for students to understand the relevance of things they learn in the classroom to real-life situations. With regards to this, Beigi (2020) claims that holistic learning provides integration of one concept to another to enable students to develop their personal revealing, respect diversity, and build a connection with the world. Through the space intentionally provided, students can build relationships with other individuals throughout the learning process to enhance their perspective. Finally, an intentionally made integration and connection create space for students develop meanings about the world and life.

In a more specific context of Christian education, holistic learning does not merely function to facilitate meaningful learning and help students grow as a whole being. Holistic learning in Christian education is Christ-Centered and thus directed to make disciples. It equips students with necessary tools and means to understand their identity in Christ and most importantly, to bring them closer to their creator (Dyk, 2013). To reach such aim, all learning experiences should lead students to the understanding that every knowledge and existence in this world is created by God and belongs to God (Bavinck, 2011). It provides learning environment where students can learn about everything with all their extant and enable them to grow closer to God as the resources and the holder of everything.

### ***Teacher as a facilitator***

A facilitator is someone who facilitates a group to collaborate and work effectively to reach inclusive goals (Doyle in Kaner et al., 2007). In fact, Van Brummelen (2009) claims that it is one of teachers' responsibilities. Interestingly, a study by Masek (2019) found that teachers who act as facilitator carry out more effective learning outcomes

of the learner. This finding seems to be true because facilitators assist and involve in the learning process to ensure teaching and learning atmosphere, activities, discussions, and evaluations conducted effectively on behalf of students' advancement (Spratt et al., 2005). Therefore, as facilitators in the classroom teachers are not the center of the attention during the learning process as they share the stage with students to maximize and ensure equal opportunities for sharing opinions and arguments.

Students' personal growth seems to be the goal of a facilitator - teacher (Fenstermacher et al, 2015), requiring them have a good understanding of each student to be able to monitor such growth. Teachers at the same time need to = make sure that the learning process is not only facilitating all students, leaving none. Thus, often time teachers as facilitators use varied teaching approaches and learning media to facilitate fun and easier learning for every student (Safitri, 2019). One of the examples is by providing heterogeneous assignment to allow students to choose their own way to evaluate their understanding of the lesson based on their personal preference. In essence, a teacher who plays a role as facilitator avoids using a single teaching approach to appreciate and assure that every student experience the same right to develop during the learning.

Further, they function as a bridge of the learning process and its relation to real life reality (Abdullah, 2005). For this purpose, they create a learning environment that helps student relate and implement their insight to real life situation. Kaner (2007) argues that teachers who act as facilitators should encourage every student to do the thinking in the learning process to pursue enduring understanding. Accordingly, rather than only giving students theoretical questions which only enable students to memorize everything, they should give rich open-ended question which allow students to enhance their critical thinking and creativity in solving problems.

### ***Christian Teachers' Role in Implementing Holistic Learning***

Holistic learning in the classroom starts with the teacher. What a teacher believes about teaching holistically is reflected in the teacher's teaching practice in the classroom. Miller et al. (2014) claim that holistic

education should engage the whole person of students. Wholeness development is the primary concern of holistic learning. Thus, a teacher who implements holistic learning concerns on students' advancement beyond the academic area. A recent study has revealed that teachers who cultivate students' academic accomplishments without overlooking emotional development, mental development, character development, and other dimensions of students are found more sophisticated in ensuring effective learning (Masek, 2019). A learning atmosphere that is not only focused on intellectual development will help students to feel valued not only because of their intelligence. As a result, it is easier for students to understand and enjoy the learning process without being pressured with academic accomplishment. More than a content provider, teachers' role is to provide adequate room for students to hone critical thinking, expand their self-understanding about things they are learning. In short, teachers who teach holistically are teachers who care and cherish growth in every area of their students since students are valued as a complete being.

Acknowledging different educational needs to optimize equal personal growth of every student is another teacher's role in implementing holistic learning. Carter (2013) found that one of the characteristics of holistic learning being practiced in the classroom is when a creative approach is being applied in the classroom by the teachers. This means that teachers need to know and apply various teaching approaches and strategies to facilitate students' different learning needs and styles. The utilization of a variety of teaching approaches and strategies indicates that teachers' awareness of classroom diversity and that teachers consider the different values that each student may bring to the classroom. Smith (2011) adds that for holistic learning to occur it is of importance to create learning environment where students can expand their intellectual and spiritual side.

In Christian education, teachers are expected to facilitate students' understanding of the world and its essence based on biblical perspective (Cardoza, 2018). Thus, the role of a teacher is to emphasize the truth knowledge to help students understand that all knowledge is part of God's truth. Besides, Graham (2009) argues that Christian teachers have a role in transforming students' life holistically through educating and shepherding students at the same time. In other words,

teachers are expected to not only deliver materials but also to guide students. Estep and Kim (2009) add that Christian teachers are expected to assist students to become an educated person. In similar vein Van Brummelen (2009) states that teachers need to help students grow as mature Christian. Most importantly, they are expected to facilitate a learning environment where students are trained to implement their faith during the learning process and through their learning outcomes. To say it another way, Christian teachers are called to implement holistic learning that is grounded in the truth of God to help students grow as whole beings and mature Christians.

### ***Young Learners In Holistic Learning***

According to Phillips (1993), young learners are students from age five up to twelve years old. In this stage, young learners grow to become an adult. They grow emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually as a human being. However, to grow holistically grounded on the right foundation, experiencing holistic learning is a necessity, if not a must as young learners spend most of productive time at school. A study done by Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2010) shows that teachers who implement holistic learning come out with more compelling student's learning outcomes. This is pretty much in contrast with the assumption that young learners are not yet able to process abstract thinking like adults do, suggesting that implementing holistic learning to young learners is indeed challenging and not impossible.

One of the ways to conduct holistic learning for young learners is by helping them to think holistically (Croll & Hastings, 2013). A tangible practice is by giving students open-ended questions about specific concepts in the lesson to hone their perspective in constructing their self-understanding. By being accustomed to sharpening their self-understanding skill, young learners will be able to experience the importance of the learning process with their life. Another way is to provide contextual learning environment (Copley, 2010) through the utilization of creative learning media, resources, and activities. The functions of such authentic media are more than simply to engage students, but also to help them relate the learning material to real-life situations.



## Discussion

The literature and previous studies discussed in the literature review emphasize that holistic learning is aimed at students' holistic development, to then enable students to become fruitful member of a society. In Indonesia, the government through the law No. 20 year 2003 on the national education system states that education is a conscious and planned effort to create an atmosphere of learning so that students actively develop their personal potential to gain spiritual strength, personality, self-control, intelligent, noble character, and social skills. The government's take on education seems to be aligned with holistic education's which is quite evident in the way the provincial government up to the local administrators mandating teachers of any levels to design their lesson plan in full consideration of student's cognitive, affective, and psychomotor development.

Such holistic learning is even more crucial for young learners as they are growing holistically to become an adult. Folliari (2015) highlights that in this stage, students encounter tremendous development that will never happen in another stage of life. Primary school is the stage where students learn how to brainstorm their thought, solve problems, and build the foundational ground of life, which will bring massive impact to their future life. Holistic learning becomes even more critical with the fact that almost every school in the world is conducting learning through online platform as the impact of pandemic COVID-19 and no one could predict how long this platform will continue to be used.

Online learning is another challenge for the implementation of holistic learning. This is so as online learning provides a limited space for students to experience social interaction with their friends which is needed for young learners to learn social skills. Other things that can exacerbate such already existing challenge is students' technological literacy as well as parental supports which are vital for younger students' whole development. Under those circumstances, if educational institutions fail to recognize the importance of developing students' wholeness and thus fail to provide holistic learning environment for them, students' whole growth and development may be at stake.

However, in hindsight, even before the pandemic, the academic finesse that has been considered as an important milestone of one's worthiness in education and society influences how teaching and learning

process is done at school. In other words, students' academic achievement seems to be much more appreciated than the other achievement and such has been the challenge of holistic learning. The learning process emphasizes more on students' finer academic acquisition at the expense of students' wholeness development. Therefore, instead of assisting students to learn for understanding, students are only drilled to learn for rote learning (Kirimi et al., 2018). Students may not be encouraged to applying their knowledge to a contextual situation, rather, they are only required to memorize theoretical concepts to past the test and go to a higher level. Education's goal is shifted from nurturing students' character, mental, spiritual, and physical development as a part of their learning experience.

There are some differences between the holistic learning approach and the traditional approach; those are connectedness, wholeness, and inclusiveness (Miller, 1997). The traditional approach does not pay much attention to connect the conceptual knowledge to students' real-life situation. Every subject is commonly taught as independent knowledge. On the contrary, the holistic approach views every subject as a closely related knowledge to students' lives. Thus, connecting students to the knowledge they obtain is significant in holistic learning. It is supported by Perkins (2010), who claims that to make learning authentic and meaningful, teachers should make sure to connect the lesson with the learners throughout the learning process. Students are engaged to apply the knowledge to a certain context actively. In short, every learning process in a holistic approach does not stop at the theoretical stage, but students are facilitated to utilize the lesson into contextual situations and enable them to become active users of their knowledge.

Another difference between the holistic approach and the traditional approach is wholeness. Some studies found that thriving for students' understanding about themselves as a whole being (personal belief, values, identity, and intelligent) would help them better for their future goals (Lauricella & MacAskill 2015). Additionally, it also prepares them better to face challenges of life as an independent person (Sobha & Kala, 2015). With this intention, instead of only focusing on students' academic comprehension like what the traditional approach does, holistic learning also pays attention to the other aspect of students' development, such as mental, spiritual, and physical development. In short, holistic learning approach equips students to think critically, make

an autonomous decision, and solve problems as mature and independent individuals without disregard their entities as a whole person.

Furthermore, the emphasis of holistic learning on inclusive learning means that there is equality in terms of viewing, valuing and treating students. It does not mean, however, that students should be treated the same way, they are treated based on their needs. Thomas (2014) argues that an inclusive learning environment will help students build a better understanding of the world they are living based on their personal preferences of learning. Towl & Hemphill (2020) also claims that facilitating decent access for every student to learn will promote a better success of the learning outcomes. It all means that holistic learning embraces every student in the classroom by providing support for different needs and learning styles considering better personal development of the learners.

In the context of school education, more than the headmaster, curriculum team, and other stakeholders, teachers as the closest person who deal with students are gifted an immense responsibility to concern with students' holistic development, especially for young learners. Thus, in holistic learning, teachers function facilitators. As a facilitator, teachers should facilitate fun, more accessible, yet effective for every student. (Safitri, 2019). This, for example, can be done by providing sufficient learning media, applying a teaching approach that covers diverse educational needs in the classroom and more importantly, choosing the right approach that facilitates students' whole development.

However, being a facilitator to make learning easier for students is challenging particularly for young learners (Cadwell, 1997). In fact, their unique characteristics and way of learning from times to times have become a challenge for teachers to implement holistic learning. In spite of such challenges, based on research done by Badjanova & Ilisko (2014), it is possible to implement holistic learning for young learners by providing an authentic and inclusive learning environment.

To conduct an authentic and inclusive learning for young learners, the very first thing that is needed to be understood by the teachers is young learners' characteristics. Ostroff (2012) identifies that young learners tend to disconnect their theoretical learning with the everyday situation because of their thinking development. It means that young children may need to be intentionally directed to connect the learning.

This seems to be in line with the theory of development proposed by Erickson a few decades ago (1993) that argues that young children are learning to deal with and develop complex concept of the reality around them from their learning experiences in primary school. Implicit in these two research findings is the fact that holistic learning can be implemented to young learners given that sufficient support from teachers is intentionally created and provided for students to make connections.

Therefore, authentic learning can occur by helping young learners to articulate conceptual knowledge in the real-life situation. It could be done by providing examples, metaphors, or connect the conceptual knowledge to their previous experiences or real-life situation. For example, when learning about temperature, instead of only telling the students list of substances and its temperature, students are also led to think about their experience when or how can they sense temperature while they are at home. Another example, a teacher can use real uncooked rice, flour, and salt to do an experiment while learning change of matter. Such hands-on activities create learning environment where students can feel excited and ask lots of questions as they are curious about the experiment. Consequently, it is easier for students to sense the importance of their learning process in their daily lives and utilize the learning outcomes to a broader context beyond the classroom.

Moreover, inclusive learning of course could be practiced by accommodating the various needs of the learners. Most of the young learners are visual learners since they perceive knowledge during their infancy and toddlerhood stage by observing things around them (Ostroff, 2012). Hence, inclusive learning for young learners could be implemented by utilizing various learning media, classroom activities, approaches, and assessment that are suitable that satisfy their visual needs and facilitate different learning styles. For example, rather than only depending on the textbooks as the learning media, teachers can use more interesting pictures, interactive slides, or even real aid to engage students.

However, even though almost all young learners are visual learners, every student indeed has a different personal learning preference. Thus, providing various selections of assignments students can choose from is effective to promote independent learning. Doing such, students may feel being appreciated as their feeling and decision on things they prefer to do are taken into account, leading to effective

learning as students own the responsibility to finish something they choose to do.

Taylor & MacKenney (2008) add that teachers could implement a holistic learning approach to young learners through conducting a discussion-rich learning environment. The discussion should be done chiefly with open-ended questions to direct students to think based on their personal experience. This learning environment will enable young learners to foster their understanding of the content, yet at the same time advancing their thinking skills in real-life contexts. Open-ended questions allow thinking time as well as varieties of answers. And when asked open-ended questions, students may be encouraged to have different point of view and personal experience. Such approach assists young learners to hone their critical thinking, perceive personal meaning, contextualize their thought, and respect diversity.

With the understanding of how extensive the impact of holistic learning for students' growth, every teacher therefore should pay attention to this matter seriously, especially for Christian teachers. To fulfill the vision of Christian education in transforming students' lives according to the truth of God is the calling of 'true' Christian teachers (Graham, 2009). In line with this, a holistic approach has been the primary focus of Christian education in pursuing its vision (Lambert, 2010). Thus, Christian teachers should understand that to professionally accomplish their calling in Christian education, Christian teachers should fulfill their role to implement holistic learning.

To fulfill this role, Christian teachers should have the right foundational belief of how they should implement holistic learning in Christian education as teacher's belief about teaching and learning is significant on how the learning process will be done in the classroom (Fives & Gill, 2015). Unless the holistic learning practiced by Christian teachers will be merely reflecting religious humanist philosophy instead of reflecting the biblical philosophy about the learners, having the right biblical understanding about the learners about human is essential as holistic approach focuses on student's holistic development.

On that ground, Christian teachers need to recognize that every student has God's image within them (Erickson, 2013). In addition to that, Christian teachers should understand that every human being is created by God for a specific divine calling (Grudem, 1994) and is prepared to do

good works with what they have (Bavinck, 2011). On account of that, students should therefore be nurtured to grow as a holistic being based on their identity as a Christian and expanding their competences. In consideration that young learners develop most of their traits during this stage, it is required for teachers to plant understanding about themselves and the world based on the biblical perspective (Tong, 1993) which cannot be done without underpinning it on the truth of God as the foundational guidance in holistic learning.

Another thing that Christian teachers need to do is to emphasize and reflect Christian philosophy in the learning process to guide students to grow to be Christlike (Byrne, 2003). They carry the responsibility to ensure that the learning environment in the classroom enables students to develop their philosophy of life based on Christian philosophy. It is needed to explicitly integrate and implement biblical truth and values in the learning process and assist students to experience that all knowledge is part of God's truth. Such integration should happen to make sure that students grow based on the biblical understanding of their identity as disciples of Christ, to love and serve God (Berkhof, 2008) and to transform students' lives according to their identity as believers (Brummelen, 2009) and to find personal strength and gain necessary skills to fulfill their calling (Knight, 2006).

## **Conclusion**

In relation to the significance of learners' holistic development being discussed above, it is important to implement holistic learning for students. Holistic learning is important as it helps to balance students' intellectual, mental, spiritual, and physical growth in every learning experiences. Additionally, holistic learning becomes more vital as schools around the world are shifting from face-to-face classroom learning to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This learning situation causes many learning challenges for students to encounter wholeness growth as a human, especially for young learners, as this is the stage where they encounter significant development in life. If schools do not provide a holistic learning environment, students will struggle to develop as a whole person.

Based on the literature review and previous studies, teachers have a significant role as a facilitator in implanting holistic learning. As a facilitator, teachers must make sure that learning experience promotes balanced development for every student. In young learners' context, although their characteristics become the challenge for teachers to implement holistic learning, it does not mean that it is impossible. Previous studies found that it is possible to implement holistic learning for young learners by conducting an authentic and inclusive learning environment. An authentic environment could be built by providing rich examples and open-ended discussions that connect the lesson with students' real experiences. At the same time, inclusive learning should be done by utilizing adequate teaching approaches, learning media, and assignment that covers the diverse needs of every student.

As a professional Christian teacher, facilitating holistic learning become more crucial as the purpose of Christian education is to transform students' lives. Therefore, it is impossible for Christian teachers to professionally pursuing their calling in as the agent of transformation if they do not implement holistic learning. From this point of view, Christian teachers should have the right foundational understanding of their role to implement holistic learning. What makes holistic learning in Christian education distinctive is the fact that biblical truth is consistently used as foundational philosophy to develop students' intellectual, spiritual, mental, and physical aspects in every learning process to build students as disciples of Christ and to serve God.

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