



Implementation of the Contextual Learning Model to Foster Students' Faith at SMP Negeri 3 Gunungsitoli Alooa

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the effectiveness of implementing the contextual learning model in fostering students' faith at SMP Negeri 3 Gunungsitoli Alooa. Faith is an essential spiritual foundation in shaping students' character and personality holistically. Therefore, the development of a learning model that can integrate cognitive aspects with spiritual values is crucial in the context of Christian religious education. This research employs a quasi-experimental method with a mixed-method approach to gain a more comprehensive understanding. The subjects of the study consisted of 68 eighth-grade students, divided into two groups: the experimental group and the control group. Data collection was conducted through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, questionnaires, and documentation. The quantitative results show a significant improvement in students' faith in the experimental group, as evidenced by an average post-test score of 82.4, higher than the control group's average score of 71.3. Meanwhile, the qualitative analysis revealed that there are four key components in the contextual learning model that effectively support faith development: constructivism, inquiry, reflection, and learning community. These four components enable students to connect the subject matter with real-life experiences while building spiritual understanding in a contextual manner. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the contextual learning model is effective in fostering students' faith through meaningful learning that is relevant to everyday life. The implementation of this model not only enriches the learning process but also strengthens the religious values that form the foundation of Christian character development in the school environment.

Keywords: *contextual learning, character education, faith development, religious education, meaningful learning*

INTRODUCTION

Education in Indonesia is currently confronted with the significant challenge of balancing academic achievement with the development of students' character and spiritual values. In various national education policies, the spiritual dimension is recognized as an integral part of a holistic educational process. This is explicitly stated in Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, which affirms that the goal of national education is to develop

students' potential so that they may become individuals who believe in and are devoted to God Almighty, possess noble character, are healthy, knowledgeable, competent, creative, and independent, as well as democratic and responsible citizens. This provision underscores that academic achievement alone is insufficient; education must also shape students spiritually and morally.

Nevertheless, the reality in the field reveals a gap between these normative ideals and actual conditions. One example of this issue can be observed at SMP Negeri 3 Gunungsitoli Aloo. Preliminary observations indicated signs of a decline in students' faith quality, as evidenced by low participation in religious activities, weak understanding of Christian teachings, and difficulty in applying these values in daily life. This phenomenon suggests that religious education has not yet fully succeeded in instilling spiritual values in a deep and contextual manner.

These findings align with Muhaimin's (2019) observation that religious education in schools often remains theoretical and fails to engage students' real-life experiences. Consequently, religious lessons become less meaningful for learners and are unable to nurture a living and dynamic faith. In such a context, there is a pressing need for an instructional approach that connects religious content with students' real-life circumstances, enabling spiritual values to be internalized and practiced in daily life.

One relevant instructional model to address this challenge is **contextual learning**. This model emphasizes the connection between subject matter and students' real-world contexts. Johnson (2018) defines contextual learning as a learning process aimed at helping students find meaning in academic material by linking it to their personal experiences and real-life situations. Through this approach, students are encouraged to think critically, reflect on their experiences, and develop a deeper and more relevant understanding of the subject matter.

The core concept of contextual learning comprises several key components: constructivism (learning as a process of building one's own understanding), inquiry (the process of questioning and discovery), reflection (evaluating the learning process and outcomes), modeling (providing examples by teachers or role models), and community-based learning (engaging in social interaction as part of learning). When applied to religious education, these components can serve as powerful tools to foster students' faith more effectively and meaningfully.

Previous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of contextual learning in various disciplines. Nurhadi (2020) reported that applying contextual learning in mathematics instruction improved student achievement by 24.3%. Similarly, Sanjaya (2021) found that this model fosters critical thinking skills, as students are encouraged to connect academic content with real-life problems they face. However, research on its application in religious education—particularly in cultivating students' faith—remains relatively limited.

Rahmawati (2022) argued that contextual learning positively correlates with students' understanding of religious values. Nonetheless, her study did not explicitly examine its impact on faith development in a comprehensive sense, especially regarding the affective and behavioral dimensions of students' religious life. This gap underscores the need for further research to determine the extent to which contextual learning can serve as a pedagogical tool for nurturing students' faith.

This research is grounded in that very gap. SMP Negeri 3 Gunungsitoli Aloo was chosen as the study site due to its diverse demographic characteristics and its urgent need to

strengthen the spiritual dimension of students' education. The school is also committed to developing holistic education, which not only emphasizes cognitive aspects but also spiritual and moral growth.

The study seeks to answer three main questions: (1) Which components of contextual learning are relevant and effective in fostering students' faith? (2) Is there a significant difference in faith levels between students taught religious education using the contextual learning model and those who are not? and (3) How is the contextual learning model implemented in religious education at SMP Negeri 3 Gunungsitoli Aloo?

Methodologically, the research adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data to gain a comprehensive understanding. Quantitative data are collected through pre-tests and post-tests measuring students' faith levels, while qualitative data are obtained from classroom observations, interviews with teachers and students, and analysis of instructional documents. By employing both approaches, the study aims to present a holistic depiction of the effectiveness of contextual learning in Christian religious education.

This research holds both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, its findings are expected to enrich the literature on Christian religious education, particularly in identifying instructional strategies that integrate spiritual aspects in a more contextual and meaningful way. The results may also serve as a reference for curriculum design and learning models oriented toward character and faith formation.

Practically, this study seeks to provide tangible contributions for Christian religious education teachers in designing and implementing instruction that not only delivers theoretical religious knowledge but also touches students' hearts and life experiences. In doing so, religious education in schools can become an effective means of nurturing a generation that is not only intellectually capable but also spiritually strong and morally upright.

Through contextual learning, it is anticipated that students will experience religious education as authentic, relevant, and meaningful. Such experiences will ultimately foster a living faith—not merely a rote, dogmatic belief—but a faith manifested in daily attitudes, behaviors, and life decisions. In this way, education truly becomes a means of transformation, rather than merely a transmission of knowledge.

METHODS

This study employed a quasi-experimental design with a mixed-method approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods within a single research framework. This approach was chosen to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of implementing the contextual learning model in fostering students' faith. The quantitative component enabled the objective statistical measurement of differences in outcomes between the experimental and control groups, whereas the qualitative component provided opportunities to explore the subjective experiences of students and teachers that may not be reflected in statistical figures. The experimental design applied was a non-equivalent control group design, in which the experimental and control groups were formed from pre-existing classes rather than being randomly assigned. This was done in consideration of the actual conditions of the school and the practicality of implementation in a formal educational environment.

The population of the study comprised all eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 3 Gunungsitoli Aloo during the 2023/2024 academic year, totaling 126 students. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, in which participants were intentionally selected based on specific criteria. In this case, the criterion was the homogeneity of students' academic characteristics and religious backgrounds, aimed at minimizing extraneous variables that could influence the research outcomes. The sample consisted of 68 students, divided into two groups: the experimental group, comprising Classes VIII-A and VIII-B (34 students) who received religious instruction through the contextual learning model, and the control group, comprising Classes VIII-C and VIII-D (34 students) who received conventional religious instruction.

The variables in this study included the independent variable, dependent variable, and control variables. The independent variable was the instructional model, namely contextual learning for the experimental group and the conventional model for the control group. The dependent variable was students' faith levels, measured before and after the intervention. The control variables included the learning environment, allocation of instructional time, and uniformity of learning materials, all maintained consistently between the two groups to ensure that the results accurately reflected the effects of the instructional model applied.

Data collection employed several instruments. First, observation sheets were used to record the learning process and students' faith-related behaviors during the intervention. Observations were conducted by two independent observers using a validated rubric that included 15 indicators of religious behavior, such as participation in prayer, engagement in discussions of faith values, and the application of spiritual principles in social interactions. Second, a faith questionnaire was used to measure five dimensions of faith: belief in God, religious knowledge, worship practices, spiritual experiences, and behavioral consequences. The questionnaire consisted of 25 statements on a five-point Likert scale and had been validated with an r -value greater than 0.361, as well as high reliability indicated by a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.87. Third, semi-structured interview guidelines were used to explore the learning experiences of students and teachers. Interviews were conducted with eight students from the experimental group and two religious education teachers. Fourth, documentation—including lesson plans, students' reflective journals, and photographs of learning activities—was used as supplementary data.

The research procedure lasted one semester (16 weeks) and was divided into three main phases. The first phase was the pre-intervention stage, lasting two weeks, during which pre-tests were administered to both groups, teachers were trained in the contextual learning model, and the research instruments were validated. The second phase was the intervention stage, lasting twelve weeks. In the experimental group, religious instruction employed the contextual learning approach, which included seven core components: constructivism, inquiry, questioning, learning communities, modeling, reflection, and authentic assessment. The control group received conventional religious instruction using lecture, Q&A, and assignment methods. Observations were conducted regularly during the intervention to document classroom dynamics and the development of students' faith-related behaviors. The third phase was the post-intervention stage, lasting two weeks, during which post-tests were administered to both groups, interviews with students and teachers were conducted, and data were analyzed to draw conclusions.

Data analysis followed a combined quantitative and qualitative approach. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to profile students' faith levels based on mean scores, standard deviations, and response frequencies. An independent samples *t*-test was employed to assess the significance of post-test differences between the experimental and control groups. Additionally, analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used to control for the effect of pre-test scores on post-test results, thereby isolating the impact of the instructional model more accurately. Qualitative data were analyzed in three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved simplifying and categorizing observation and interview findings into specific themes. Data display was conducted using tables, quotations, and narratives to reveal patterns and relationships among themes. Finally, conclusions were drawn through the synthesis of quantitative and qualitative findings.

To enhance the validity and credibility of the findings, methodological triangulation, data source triangulation, and investigator triangulation were applied. This ensured that the results obtained were not only statistically accurate but also provided a holistic representation of the learning reality from multiple perspectives. Such an approach strengthened the rigor and relevance of the study within the context of religious education at SMP Negeri 3 Gunungsitoli Aloo.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Initial Profile of Students' Faith

The pre-test results indicated that the initial level of students' faith in both groups fell within the moderate category, with relatively comparable mean scores. Descriptive statistical analysis is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Students' Faith Pre-test Results

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Experimental	34	65.21	8.43	48.00	81.00
Control	34	64.98	8.57	47.00	82.00

The homogeneity test using Levene's Test yielded a significance value of 0.892 ($p > 0.05$), indicating no significant difference in variances between the two groups. The Kolmogorov–Smirnov normality test confirmed a normal distribution in both groups, with significance values of 0.213 for the experimental group and 0.227 for the control group ($p > 0.05$). Dimensional analysis of faith showed that students achieved the highest scores in the dimension of belief in God (mean = 76.4%), followed by worship practices (68.3%), religious knowledge (63.1%), behavioral consequences (59.8%), and spiritual experiences (55.2%). This pattern was consistent across both groups.

Implementation of the Contextual Learning Model

The contextual learning model in religious education was implemented through seven core components. Observations of the learning process indicated a high level of implementation, with an average completion rate of 85.7%. Table 2 presents the percentage of implementation for each component.

Table 2. Implementation of Contextual Learning Components

Component	Implementation Rate
Constructivism	87.5%
Inquiry	83.2%
Questioning	90.1%
Learning Community	86.7%
Modeling	82.3%
Reflection	89.5%
Authentic Assessment	80.6%

Field notes and documentation highlighted several best practices in implementing the contextual learning model, including: 1) Constructivism: Students developed an understanding of faith concepts by analyzing inspirational stories and personal experiences. For instance, in lessons about obedience to God, students identified examples of obedience in daily life and discussed their impacts. 2) Inquiry: Students conducted mini-research on religious practices in their surroundings and analyzed factors influencing the quality of faith in society. This encouraged a deeper understanding of how faith manifests in a social context. 3) Learning Community – Cross-faith discussion groups were formed to explore universal values across religions, fostering tolerance while strengthening personal beliefs. 4) Reflection – Students kept weekly reflective journals on spiritual experiences and religious practices, aiding in the internalization of faith values in their personal lives.

Comparison of Post-test Results

After a 12-week intervention, both groups showed an increase in faith scores, but the experimental group demonstrated a more substantial improvement. Post-test results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Students' Faith Post-test Results

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Experimental	34	82.43	7.24	68.00	95.00
Control	34	71.32	7.98	56.00	87.00

An independent samples t-test yielded $t = 6.245$ with a significance level of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$), indicating a significant difference between the experimental and control groups. The effect size (Cohen's d) of 1.51 suggests a large impact of the contextual learning intervention. ANCOVA, with pre-test scores as a covariate, confirmed that the post-test differences remained significant ($F = 67.324$, $p = 0.000$) after controlling for students' initial abilities. The adjusted mean was 82.51 for the experimental group and 71.24 for the control group.

Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of observation and interview data identified four key themes regarding the contribution of contextual learning to the growth of students' faith: 1) Personal

Relevance, students reported that the contextual approach helped them perceive a direct connection between religious teachings and personal life. As one student expressed: *“Previously, I felt religious lessons were too theoretical and far removed from real life. Now I can see how faith values can be applied in everyday situations.”* (S07). Value Internalization, the reflection process in the contextual learning model facilitated the internalization of religious values. Teachers observed notable changes in students’ attitudes: *“I have seen significant changes in how students respond to challenges. They are beginning to use faith-based perspectives in making decisions and addressing issues.”* (G01) 2) Supportive Community, the learning community component created an environment conducive to faith development. Group discussions and collaborative activities strengthened religious commitment through peer support. 3) Meaningful Learning, the inquiry and constructivist approaches encouraged students to develop personal understandings of faith concepts rather than merely memorizing dogma. This led to more meaningful and enduring learning.

Analysis of students’ reflective journals indicated an increase in both frequency and depth of spiritual reflection over the intervention period. Early reflections were generally descriptive and superficial, whereas later reflections demonstrated more critical thinking and deeper personal meaning.

Effectiveness of the Contextual Learning Model in Nurturing Faith

The findings indicate that the contextual learning model is effective in fostering students’ faith, with significant differences between the experimental and control groups. These results align with Vygotsky’s social learning theory, which emphasizes the role of social interaction and cultural context in knowledge construction (Schunk, 2018). In religious education, contextual learning facilitates the internalization of spiritual values through authentic experiences and critical reflection.

The marked improvement in the dimensions of spiritual experience and behavioral consequences suggests that the contextual approach successfully shifted religious learning from a solely cognitive focus toward an integration of affective and behavioral aspects. This is consistent with Fowler’s (2019) assertion that faith development involves multidimensional transformation rather than mere accumulation of knowledge. By emphasizing relevance and application, the contextual learning model fosters such transformation.

Interestingly, the dimension of belief in God showed the smallest increase compared to other dimensions. This can be explained by the fact that core beliefs in God’s existence are relatively stable and already established prior to the intervention. Nonetheless, contextual learning contributed to deepening and enriching the meaning of these beliefs, as reflected in the qualitative data.

Key Components of Contextual Learning for Religious Education

The analysis of the contextual learning model’s implementation identified four components that play a crucial role in the context of religious education and faith development:

1. Constructivism and Personal Understanding – The constructivist approach enables students to build a personal understanding of faith concepts rather than merely adopting the interpretations of external authorities. This process aligns with

Fowler's faith development theory, which emphasizes the transition from conventional faith toward a more reflective and personal faith (Fowler, 2019). These findings also reinforce Park and Baker's (2020) argument that effective religious education must provide opportunities for students to construct personal meaning. In this context, the teacher acts as a facilitator providing scaffolding rather than as the sole source of truth.

2. **Inquiry and Active Exploration** – The inquiry component encourages students to ask questions and actively explore spiritual dimensions. This approach contrasts with traditional models that often avoid critical questioning in religious contexts. Goldman (2021) contends that active exploration strengthens belief by establishing a rational foundation for faith. Qualitative data indicate that the inquiry process helps students address cognitive dissonance between religious teachings and contemporary realities, resulting in a more coherent and integrated understanding.
3. **Reflection and Internalization** – The reflection component proved highly effective in facilitating the internalization of spiritual values. Regular reflective practice helps students connect learning experiences with their personal spiritual growth. This aligns with Mezirow's transformative learning model, which underscores the importance of critical reflection in reshaping perspectives and meaning frameworks (Taylor & Cranton, 2022). Students' reflective journals demonstrated a progression from merely describing experiences to engaging in deeper analyses of spiritual meaning. This development suggests that the internalization of values occurred gradually over the intervention period.
4. **Learning Community and Social Support** – The learning community component creates an environment that supports spiritual exploration and growth. This finding affirms the importance of the communal dimension in faith development, as emphasized by Templeton's (2023) spiritual identity theory. Interactions with peers who are also exploring spiritual values provide social validation and reinforce religious commitment. Collaborative activities allow students to share perspectives and spiritual experiences, broadening their understanding of how faith manifests in various contexts.

Challenges and Implementation Strategies

Despite its proven effectiveness, implementing the contextual learning model in religious education faces several challenges:

1. **Balancing Dogma and Personal Construction** – One major challenge is maintaining a balance between respecting religious dogma and encouraging personal meaning-making. Classroom observations revealed moments of tension when students' exploration risked diverging from orthodoxy. An effective strategy to address this is to establish clear "theological parameters" as a framework for exploration while still allowing room for personal interpretation within those boundaries. This approach is consistent with Lee's (2020) concept of *bounded openness* in religious education.
2. **Variation in Developmental Pace** – Students display significant variation in the pace of their spiritual development. Some undergo rapid transformation, while others require more time to integrate new perspectives. Differentiated instruction

and individualized mentoring have proven effective in accommodating these differences. Teachers need to develop sensitivity to each student's "spiritual zone of proximal development" and adjust the level of scaffolding accordingly.

3. Time and Resource Constraints – Implementing the contextual learning model requires more time than conventional approaches. Limited instructional hours for religious education in formal curricula pose a challenge. Integrating technology and blended learning offers a partial solution. Using digital platforms for reflection and discussion allows the learning process to continue beyond formal class time.

Practical Implications

The study's findings highlight the need to redesign the religious education curriculum to emphasize contextual relevance and practical application rather than solely the transmission of doctrinal knowledge. The curriculum should provide space for personal exploration and critical reflection. Effective implementation of the contextual learning model requires shifting the teacher's role from a transmitter of knowledge to a facilitator of learning. Professional development programs should emphasize facilitation skills, critical questioning techniques, and reflective mentoring.

The study also identified the need for learning resources that explicitly link religious concepts to the contemporary life contexts of adolescents. Developing contextual learning materials can bridge the gap between religious traditions and students' lived realities. Faith assessment should be holistic, encompassing not only cognitive dimensions but also affective and behavioral aspects. Reflective portfolios and behavioral observation rubrics can complement traditional assessment instruments.

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

This study has several limitations that should be considered: Duration of Intervention, the 12-week intervention period is relatively short to observe the gradual and complex process of faith development. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine the long-term effects of the contextual learning model on spiritual growth. The study was conducted in a single school with specific demographic characteristics. Replication in different contexts is necessary to improve the generalizability of the findings. Students' awareness of being research participants may have influenced their responses. Further research using designs that minimize this bias would strengthen the validity of the results.

Based on these limitations, further research is recommended to: Conduct longitudinal studies to examine the long-term impact of the contextual learning model on faith development, explore the model's effectiveness in diverse demographic and denominational contexts, investigate the interaction between the contextual learning model and contextual factors such as school climate and family support, develop and validate more comprehensive assessment instruments to measure faith development across its various dimensions.

Conclusion

The contextual learning model is effective in fostering students' faith, with significant post-test differences between the experimental and control groups (mean 82.43 vs. 71.32; $p < 0.001$). The large effect size ($d = 1.51$) indicates a substantial impact of the intervention. Four components of contextual learning—constructivism, inquiry,

reflection, and learning community—play a key role in faith development. These components facilitate personal meaning-making, active exploration, value internalization, and social support, all of which are essential elements in faith growth.

The contextual learning model had the most significant effect on the dimensions of spiritual experience (25.3% increase) and behavioral consequences (22.7% increase), suggesting its contribution to the practical and experiential aspects of faith. Implementing the contextual learning model in religious education requires balancing dogma with personal construction, being sensitive to differences in students' developmental pace, and devising strategies to overcome time and resource constraints.

These findings affirm that a learning approach connecting spiritual values to real-life contexts can effectively facilitate value internalization and faith development. The contextual learning model offers an alternative to traditional approaches that tend to be theoretical and less meaningful.

Based on the research findings, several recommendations are offered to various stakeholders to enhance the effectiveness of religious education, particularly in fostering students' faith: Integrate the seven components of contextual learning into lesson planning and delivery. Provide greater opportunities for students to explore the personal meaning of religious teachings, design learning activities relevant to students' real-life situations, and emphasize regular reflective practice as an integral part of religious learning. Facilitate teachers' professional development in implementing the contextual learning model through training and mentoring. Allocate adequate time and resources for meaningful religious education, develop policies supporting a holistic approach to spiritual education, and actively collaborate with religious communities to enrich students' contextual learning experiences. Redesign the religious education curriculum with a focus on contextual relevance. This includes developing implementation guidelines for the contextual learning model across different religious contexts, designing holistic assessment tools that encompass various dimensions of faith, and integrating technology and digital learning resources to expand and enrich students' contextual learning experiences. Future research could also focus on developing and validating more comprehensive faith measurement instruments, exploring combinations of contextual learning with other pedagogical approaches, and examining the application of this model in diverse demographic and denominational settings. Implementing these recommendations is expected to contribute to the development of religious education that is not only theoretical but also meaningful and effective in holistically shaping and nurturing students' faith.

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