

Narrative-Based Curriculum Design for Christian Religious Education among Generation Z: A Strategy for Spiritual Value Internalization

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Abstract

Digital transformation has significantly reshaped the learning characteristics of Generation Z, directly impacting the effectiveness of Christian Religious Education (CRE). This study aims to develop a narrative-based CRE curriculum model integrated with digital media to support holistic faith formation. The research employs a qualitative approach with a case study design conducted at the Youth Fellowship of the Indonesian Baptist Church of Helvetia, involving 10 respondents. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observation, and documentation, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal four key themes: (1) mismatch of conventional teaching methods, (2) dominance of visual and digital learning preferences, (3) gap between doctrinal content and lived experience, and (4) effectiveness of narrative approaches in enhancing reflection and value internalization. This study proposes a narrative-based CRE curriculum model integrating cognitive, affective, and experiential dimensions. The novelty lies in the simultaneous integration of narrative pedagogy, digital culture, and spiritual formation within a unified pedagogical framework.

Introduction

Digital transformation has fundamentally reconfigured the global educational landscape, not only in terms of access to information but also in how knowledge is constructed, interpreted, and internalized by learners (Mohamed Hashim et al., 2022; Connolly et al., 2026; Tang et al., 2025). Generation Z digital natives exhibits unique learning characteristics, marked by preferences for interactive, visual, fast-paced, and experience-based learning environments. Recent studies indicate that digital technologies shape nonlinear cognitive patterns and increase expectations for personalized and participatory learning environments. Thus, technology functions not merely as a tool but as an epistemological space that shapes meaning-making and identity formation (Espinoza, 2013; Jagerson, 2014).

Theoretically, this shift aligns with transformative learning theory, which emphasizes that meaningful learning occurs through disorienting dilemmas, critical reflection, and perspective transformation (Chasokela, 2025; Olteanu, 2025; Musonif & Misbah, 2026). Learning is therefore not a linear transmission of knowledge but a meaning-making process involving cognitive, affective, and existential dimensions simultaneously. This is particularly relevant in religious education, where the goal extends beyond conceptual understanding toward the formation of faith identity manifested in lived practice (Francis, 2005).

However, there is a persistent tension between Generation Z learning characteristics and pedagogical practices in Christian Religious Education (CRE) (Papakostas, 2026; Roesmijati, 2026; Sutrisno, 2025). Studies indicate that CRE remains largely teacher-centered, one-directional, and focused on doctrinal memorization (Franck & Thalén, 2021). This creates a

disconnect between religious knowledge and lived experience, resulting in reduced existential relevance and weak value internalization (Young et al., 2026; Falewicz et al., 2026; Herawati et al., 2026).

Empirical evidence suggests that Generation Z learns more effectively through experiential, reflective, and visually mediated digital environments (Rylance-Graham & Ismail, 2026; Malik, 2026; Humaida et al., 2026). They are not only consumers but also producers of meaning through digital interaction. Therefore, abstract and decontextualized pedagogies are insufficient to engage their learning realities (Youngs, 2021; Mumu et al., 2026; Apriyanto et al., 2026).

Narrative pedagogy offers a promising alternative. Narrative functions as an epistemological medium through which learners construct meaning by integrating experience and reflection (Alterio & McDrury, 2003; Hasan et al., 2026; Susilowati et al., 2026). Digital storytelling further enhances this by enabling multimodal, interactive, and reflective learning aligned with Generation Z characteristics (Rodríguez et al., 2021). However, existing studies tend to examine digital learning, narrative pedagogy, and spiritual formation separately, revealing a significant research gap in their integration within CRE (Inayah et al., 2026; Abdullah & Bello, 2026; Ugap et al., 2025).

This study addresses this gap by developing an integrated narrative-based curriculum model for CRE that responds to Generation Z learning characteristics while preserving the essence of faith formation (Sitanggang, 2025; Windarsih & Komala, 2025; Nilawati & Fauzani, 2026). The study is conducted at the Youth Fellowship of the Indonesian Baptist Church of Helvetia, bridging theory and empirical practice.

The research questions are: (1) What are the learning characteristics of Generation Z in digital contexts? (2) How can narrative pedagogy be implemented in CRE? (3) How does digital integration support faith formation? (4) How can a narrative-based CRE curriculum model be developed? The objectives are to analyze Generation Z learning characteristics, examine narrative pedagogy implementation, and develop an integrative curriculum model for holistic faith formation.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative research approach with a single-case study design to explore the learning characteristics and educational experiences of Generation Z participants in Christian Religious Education (CRE). The case study design was selected because it allowed the researcher to obtain an in-depth, contextual, and interpretive understanding of participants' experiences with conventional teaching methods, digital learning media, biblical narratives, and the relevance of religious education to their everyday lives. The study did not aim to statistically test the effectiveness of a particular intervention but to identify recurring learning patterns and formulate a proposed narrative-based CRE curriculum framework based on the qualitative findings.

The study was conducted at the Youth Fellowship of the Indonesian Baptist Church of Helvetia and involved 10 Generation Z participants aged 15–22 years. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their active involvement in youth fellowship learning activities, familiarity with digital media, willingness to participate, and ability to reflect on their religious and educational experiences. Purposive sampling was considered appropriate because it enabled the selection of participants who could provide relevant and detailed information concerning the phenomenon under investigation (Sugiyono, 2013).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection technique to explore participants' perceptions of lecture-based instruction, visual and digital learning preferences, narrative-based learning, contextual relevance, emotional engagement, reflection, and spiritual value internalization. Participatory observation was conducted during youth fellowship learning activities to examine participants' engagement, interaction, responses to teaching practices, and use of digital media. Documentation included learning materials, digital media, activity records, and other relevant instructional documents. The observation and documentation data were used to support and contextualize the interview findings through data triangulation.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2021, 2022). The analysis involved six stages: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, construction of preliminary themes, review of the themes, definition and naming of the themes, and preparation of the analytical report. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and relevant documents were read repeatedly to identify meaningful patterns related to participants' learning experiences. Initial codes such as lecture fatigue, visual learning, digital learning, lack of relevance, emotional engagement, active participation, contextual learning, self-reflection, and memory retention were identified and grouped into broader categories.

Through an iterative process of comparison and interpretation, the categories were organized into four principal themes: pedagogical mismatch of conventional methods, digital learning characteristics of Generation Z, the meaning gap between doctrinal content and lived experience, and the perceived effectiveness of narrative approaches. The themes were developed from the data rather than predetermined before data collection. The relationships among these themes were subsequently synthesized to formulate a proposed narrative-based CRE curriculum framework integrating cognitive, affective, and experiential dimensions.

The curriculum framework presented in this study should therefore be understood as a conceptual and interpretive model derived from the qualitative findings. It was not subjected to experimental testing, statistical evaluation, or formal expert validation. The framework illustrates how narrative pedagogy, digital learning media, contextual reflection, and lived experience may be integrated to support the internalization of spiritual values among Generation Z learners.

The trustworthiness of the findings was strengthened through source triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. Triangulation was conducted by comparing interview data with observation findings and relevant documentation. Member checking was used to confirm the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations with participants, while peer debriefing was conducted to review the coding process, theme development, and analytical consistency. These procedures were applied to enhance the credibility of the findings and minimize potential researcher bias (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Sugiyono, 2013).

Results and Discussion

Interview Coding Table

Table 1. Category and Theme

No	Interview Excerpt	Initial Code	Category	Theme
1	"I get bored with lectures"	Lecture fatigue	Conventional method	Pedagogical mismatch

2	“I understand better with videos”	Visual learning	Learning style	Gen Z characteristics
3	“I learn from YouTube often”	Digital learning	Learning source	Digital dominance
4	“Bible stories feel disconnected”	Lack of relevance	Content relevance	Meaning gap
5	“Stories move me emotionally”	Emotional engagement	Affective response	Narrative strength
6	“Discussions are more engaging”	Participation	Social interaction	Active learning
7	“Relates to my life issues”	Contextual learning	Meaning making	Experience integration
8	“Spiritual videos help understanding”	Digital storytelling	Media use	Digital integration
9	“I reflect on my life after stories”	Self-reflection	Internalization	Spiritual formation
10	“Stories are easier to remember”	Memory retention	Cognitive learning	Narrative effectiveness

Table 1 presents the progression of the thematic analysis from participants’ interview excerpts to initial codes, categories, and broader themes. The data indicate that participants experienced limitations in conventional lecture-based instruction, particularly in relation to boredom, limited interaction, and weak contextual relevance. In contrast, visual media, YouTube, digital storytelling, discussion, and life-related narratives were perceived as more engaging and easier to understand. The coding process also shows that narrative-based learning supported emotional engagement, self-reflection, memory retention, and the connection of biblical content with participants’ everyday experiences. These initial codes were organized into broader categories and subsequently synthesized into four principal themes: pedagogical mismatch, Generation Z learning characteristics, the meaning gap between doctrinal content and lived experience, and the perceived effectiveness of narrative approaches. Collectively, these themes provide the empirical basis for formulating the proposed narrative-based Christian Religious Education curriculum framework.

Pedagogical Mismatch of Conventional Methods

Findings indicate a clear pedagogical mismatch between conventional teaching approaches and the learning expectations of Generation Z participants. Respondents consistently expressed dissatisfaction with lecture-based instruction, which they perceived as monotonous, unidirectional, and lacking meaningful engagement. This condition leads not only to cognitive passivity but also to reduced emotional and spiritual involvement in the learning process.

From a pedagogical perspective, this phenomenon reflects the persistent dominance of teacher-centered instruction in Christian Religious Education (CRE), where knowledge transmission is prioritized over meaning construction. Such an approach limits opportunities for dialogue, critical reflection, and experiential engagement. As a result, learners are positioned as passive recipients rather than active meaning-makers (Reed et al., 2013).

Traditional religious education often fails to connect doctrinal content with learners’ lived realities. In the context of this study, the mismatch is not merely methodological but epistemological, indicating a deeper disconnection between how knowledge is delivered and how Generation Z constructs meaning in digital environments. Consequently, this pedagogical

gap contributes to reduced motivation, disengagement, and weak value internalization (Franck & Thalén, 2021).

Digital Learning Characteristics of Generation Z

The data reveal that Generation Z learners demonstrate strong dependence on digital ecosystems as their primary learning environment. Participants consistently reported a preference for visual, interactive, and technology-mediated learning experiences, particularly through platforms such as YouTube, social media, and short-form video content.

This preference reflects a broader shift in cognitive processing patterns, where learners increasingly rely on multimodal input (visual, auditory, and interactive stimuli) rather than linear textual information. Digital environments also enable autonomy, allowing learners to control pace, access, and repetition of learning content, which enhances perceived learning effectiveness.

In this context, digital media is not simply a supplementary tool but has become an integral epistemic space for knowledge construction. Digital-native learners develop distinct engagement patterns characterized by immediacy, interactivity, and personalization (Bond et al., 2020; Rapanta et al., 2020).

However, the findings of this study further indicate that digital preference alone does not guarantee deep learning. Without pedagogical structuring, digital engagement risks remaining at the level of surface learning. Therefore, the challenge is not merely technological adoption but pedagogical integration that aligns digital tools with meaningful learning design.

Meaning Gap in Learning Content

A significant finding of this study is the existence of a “meaning gap” between instructional content and learners’ lived experiences. Participants reported that biblical narratives and doctrinal materials often feel abstract, distant, and disconnected from real-life challenges faced by adolescents.

This disconnect results in low contextual relevance, which subsequently weakens emotional engagement and spiritual internalization. Learners struggle to translate theological concepts into personal meaning frameworks, leading to a separation between knowledge acquisition and identity formation.

From a constructivist perspective, meaningful learning occurs when new information is actively connected to prior experience. The absence of such integration in CRE highlights a structural limitation in traditional pedagogies. Faith formation requires the integration of cognitive understanding with lived experience; however, in practice, this integration is often underdeveloped (Francis, 2005).

In this study, the meaning gap is further intensified by the lack of contextualization strategies within teaching practices. Biblical stories are often presented as historical or moral narratives without explicit linkage to contemporary adolescent experiences. This limits the potential of religious education to function as a transformative space for identity development.

Effectiveness of Narrative Approach

The findings strongly indicate that narrative-based learning is highly effective in enhancing emotional engagement, reflective thinking, and memory retention among Generation Z learners. Participants reported that storytelling particularly when combined with real-life relevance or digital formats creates deeper emotional resonance compared to traditional instructional methods.

Narrative functions as an epistemological bridge that connects abstract theological concepts with concrete lived experiences. Through storytelling, learners are able to position themselves within the narrative, enabling identification, empathy, and personal reflection. This process facilitates a deeper internalization of values, moving beyond cognitive understanding toward existential meaning-making.

Narrative learning enhances reflective practice by allowing learners to reconstruct experience through storytelling. This study extends their argument by demonstrating that narrative also functions as a spiritual formation mechanism within CRE contexts, particularly when integrated with digital storytelling platforms (Alterio & McDrury, 2003).

Furthermore, narrative learning aligns with transformative learning theory (Khalil & Elkhider, 2016), as it facilitates perspective transformation through emotional engagement and reflective disruption. Participants indicated that stories often triggered self-reflection regarding personal behavior, moral decisions, and spiritual identity.

Importantly, the effectiveness of narrative pedagogy is significantly amplified when combined with digital media. Digital storytelling enhances visualization, accessibility, and engagement, making religious narratives more relatable to Generation Z learners. Therefore, narrative pedagogy should not be viewed as a standalone method but as an integrative pedagogical framework that connects cognition, emotion, and experience (Bedenlier et al., 2020).

Taken together, these four themes demonstrate that the primary problem in Christian Religious Education lies not solely in learning methods, but in the mismatch between students' digital ecosystems and traditional pedagogical structures. Pedagogical transformation is urgently needed to bridge the gap between technology, experience, and faith formation.

Curriculum Framework

Figure 1 presents the proposed narrative-based Christian Religious Education curriculum framework developed from the four principal themes identified in the study. The framework begins with the learning characteristics of Generation Z, including their familiarity with digital environments, preference for visual materials, interactive orientation, and tendency toward experiential learning. These characteristics serve as the primary input for designing a more contextual and engaging CRE learning process.

At the center of the framework is narrative pedagogy, which includes biblical storytelling, digital storytelling, life-experience narratives, and contextual reflection. Narrative pedagogy functions as a bridge between doctrinal content and learners' lived experiences. Through stories that are connected to contemporary situations, learners are encouraged not only to understand religious concepts but also to interpret their relevance to personal, social, and spiritual life.

The framework integrates three interrelated learning dimensions: cognitive, affective, and experiential. The cognitive dimension focuses on faith understanding, interpretation, and theological meaning. The affective dimension emphasizes empathy, emotional engagement, and self-reflection, while the experiential dimension connects faith learning with digital interaction, real-life application, and religious practice. These dimensions are intended to operate simultaneously rather than separately, allowing learning to move beyond doctrinal knowledge toward more meaningful spiritual engagement.

The internalization process occurs through reflection, meaning-making, and identity formation. Reflection enables learners to examine the relationship between narrative content and their own experiences. Meaning-making allows them to interpret spiritual values within

their personal and social contexts, while identity formation represents the gradual integration of those values into their understanding of themselves and their faith. The expected outcome is holistic faith formation reflected in four areas: knowing faith, experiencing faith, developing spiritual identity, and applying faith in everyday life.

This framework should be understood as a conceptual synthesis derived from participants' experiences and the thematic findings of the study. It provides a pedagogical direction for integrating narrative learning, digital media, contextual reflection, and spiritual formation in CRE. However, further expert validation and classroom-based implementation are required to evaluate its applicability, practicality, and effectiveness in broader educational contexts.

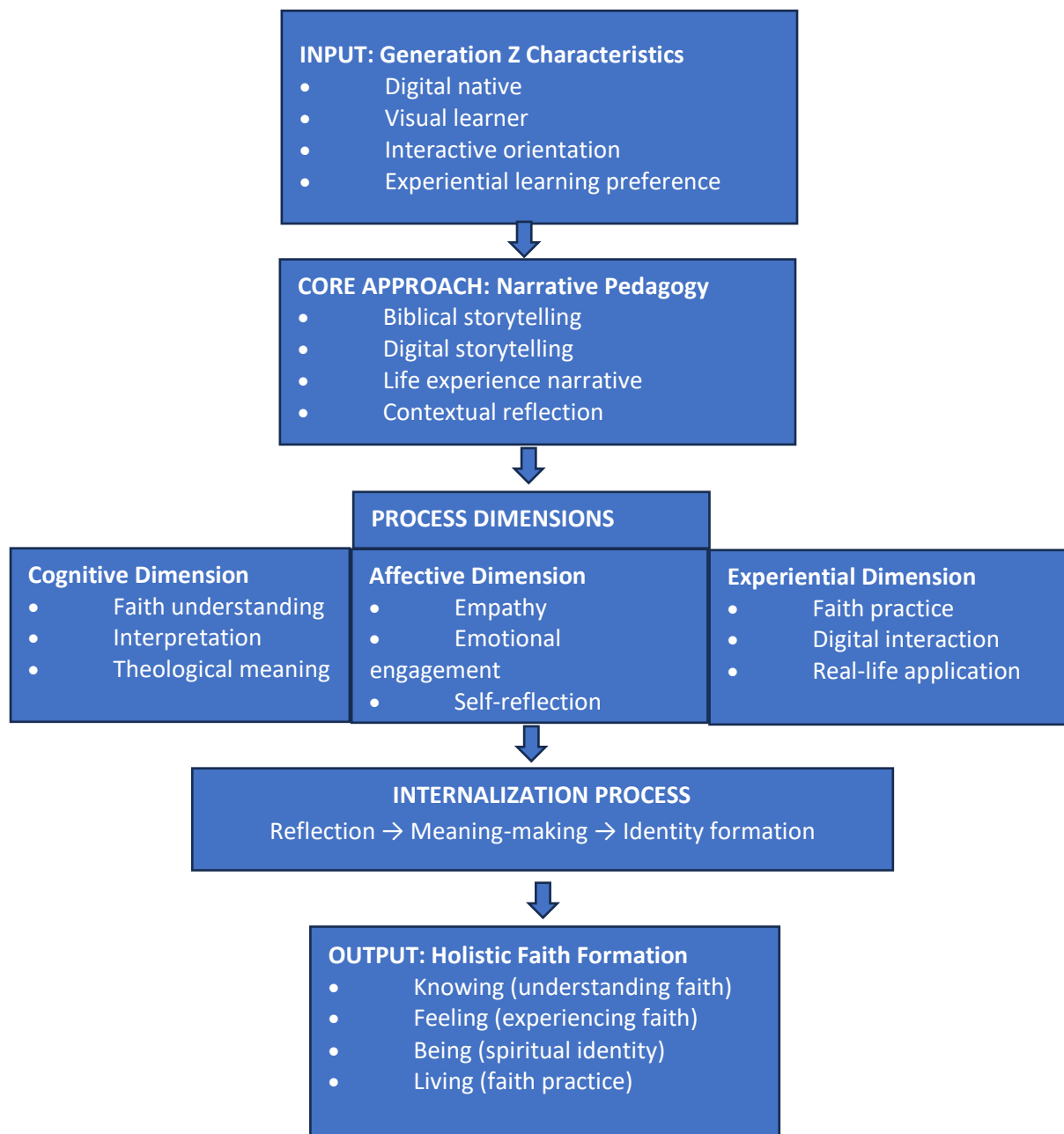


Figure 1. Narrative-Based CRE Curriculum Model for Generation Z

The findings demonstrate that narrative-based digital pedagogy significantly enhances engagement, reflection, and spiritual internalization among Generation Z learners (Ribeiro,

2016). The primary issue in CRE is not merely technological absence but pedagogical inadequacy. Lecture-based teaching leads to disengagement and weak emotional connection, consistent with (Franck & Thalén, 2021), who highlights limitations of teacher-centered religious education.

The study confirms that Generation Z's preference for visual and digital learning is structurally embedded in their cognitive and social formation (Bond et al., 2020; Rapanta et al., 2020). However, technology alone is insufficient without pedagogical framing. Technology functions as an enabler rather than a determinant of meaningful learning.

Narrative pedagogy serves as a critical bridge between doctrinal content and lived experience. This study extends their work by positioning narrative as a spiritual formation medium rather than merely a pedagogical tool. Emotional engagement emerges as a key driver of internalization (Alterio & McDrury, 2003).

Furthermore, the findings extend transformative learning theory (Khalil & Elkhider, 2016) by demonstrating that transformation is not only cognitive but also emotional and identity-based. Learners internalize values more effectively when narratives connect with their lived realities. Compared to (Francis, 2005), who emphasize faith formation as developmental, this study adds a digital-cultural dimension, showing that formation now occurs within digitally mediated environments. Overall, this study contributes a novel integrative framework combining narrative pedagogy, digital culture, and spiritual formation in a single coherent model, grounded in empirical evidence from a local church context.

Conclusion

This study concludes that digital transformation has significantly reshaped Generation Z learning characteristics, requiring a shift toward contextual and transformative pedagogy in Christian Religious Education. Conventional lecture-based approaches are no longer effective in fostering meaningful engagement and spiritual internalization.

Narrative-based digital pedagogy effectively bridges the gap between doctrinal knowledge and lived experience. It integrates cognitive, affective, and experiential dimensions, enabling holistic faith formation.

The proposed curriculum model demonstrates that storytelling, when combined with digital media and reflective practice, significantly enhances engagement and spiritual development.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, educators are encouraged to strengthen their competencies in narrative pedagogy and digital literacy so that learning can be delivered in a more contextual, interactive, and meaningful manner. Educational and religious institutions should also support the integration of narrative-based curriculum design with appropriate digital learning tools to better respond to the learning characteristics of Generation Z. Future researchers are recommended to extend this study by involving larger and more diverse populations and by applying mixed-methods approaches to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of the proposed framework. In addition, policymakers should consider developing contextual religious education policies that support the integration of digital pedagogy, narrative learning, and spiritual formation within contemporary educational settings.

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