

Developing the Seed of Faith Model: Integrating Piagetian Cognitive Development and Pauline Theology

Autor:

Didimus Sutanto B.
Prasetya^{1*}
Johnly Mewengkang²
Winson Hermanto
Simamora³

Afiliation

Institut Agama Kristen
REAL Batam,
Indonesia¹
Sekolah Tinggi
Teologi GIDI Papua,
Indonesia²
Bethel Church
Malaysia Kuala
Lumpur, Malaysia³

***Email:**

dimuss4jc@gmail.com

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Abstract

Early Childhood Christian Education (ECCE) requires a pedagogical foundation that integrates children's cognitive development with holistic faith formation. Although Piagetian cognitive developmental theory and Pauline theology provide relevant theoretical foundations, limited research has systematically synthesized these perspectives into a pedagogical model for Pentecostal Early Childhood Christian Education in Indonesia. This study aims to develop the Seed of Faith Model through a theoretical synthesis of Piagetian cognitive development and Pauline theology. The study employed an integrative theory-building research design supported by an exploratory case study. The first phase integrated developmental theory and grammatical-historical exegesis of selected Pauline texts to construct the conceptual framework, while the second phase used an exploratory case study in a Pentecostal church-based ECCE institution to examine and contextualise the model and provide preliminary evidence of its pedagogical relevance. The resulting Seed of Faith Model comprises four interrelated components: Prepared Soil, Planted Seed, Nurtured Growth, and Expected Fruit. These components describe the dynamic relationship between children's cognitive development, faith formation, community mentoring, and Christian character development. The study contributes a theoretically grounded and theologically coherent pedagogical model that integrates developmental psychology and Pauline theology for curriculum development and pedagogical practice in Indonesian Pentecostal Early Childhood Christian Education.

Keywords: child faith formation; Early Childhood Christian Education; Pauline theology; Piagetian cognitive development; Seed of Faith Model

Abstrak

Pendidikan Kristen Anak Usia Dini (Early Childhood Christian Education/ECCE) memerlukan landasan pedagogis yang mengintegrasikan perkembangan kognitif anak dengan pembentukan iman yang holistik. Meskipun teori perkembangan kognitif Piaget dan teologi Paulus menyediakan landasan teoretis yang relevan, penelitian yang secara sistematis mensintesis kedua perspektif tersebut ke dalam suatu model pedagogis bagi Pendidikan Kristen Anak Usia Dini Pentakostal di Indonesia masih terbatas. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengembangkan Seed of Faith Model melalui sintesis teoretis antara perkembangan kognitif Piaget dan teologi Paulus. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain integrative theory-building research yang didukung oleh studi kasus eksploratori. Tahap pertama mengintegrasikan teori perkembangan dan eksegesis gramatikal-historis terhadap teks-teks Paulus yang dipilih untuk membangun kerangka konseptual, sedangkan tahap kedua menggunakan studi kasus eksploratori pada sebuah lembaga Pendidikan Kristen Anak Usia Dini berbasis gereja Pentakostal untuk mengontekstualisasikan model dan memberikan bukti awal mengenai relevansi pedagogisnya. Seed of Faith Model yang dihasilkan terdiri atas empat komponen yang saling berkaitan, yaitu Prepared Soil (Tanah yang Dipersiapkan), Planted Seed (Benih yang Ditaburkan), Nurtured Growth (Pertumbuhan yang Dipelihara), dan Expected Fruit (Buah yang Diharapkan). Keempat komponen tersebut menggambarkan hubungan dinamis antara perkembangan kognitif anak, pembentukan iman, pendampingan komunitas, dan perkembangan karakter Kristiani. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi berupa model pedagogis yang memiliki landasan teoretis dan koherensi teologis dengan mengintegrasikan psikologi perkembangan dan teologi Paulus sebagai dasar bagi pengembangan kurikulum dan praktik pedagogis dalam Pendidikan Kristen Anak Usia Dini Pentakostal di Indonesia.

Kata Kunci: formasi iman anak; Model Benih Iman; pendidikan Kristen anak usia dini; perkembangan kognitif Piagetian; teologi Paulus

INTRODUCTION

Faith formation in early childhood constitutes a fundamental concern not only for theology but also for educational practice, as it shapes children's emerging spiritual identity, moral reasoning, and lifelong relationship with God. Consequently, understanding how faith develops during early childhood has significant implications for curriculum design, pedagogical strategies, and spiritual accompaniment within Christian educational settings. Although developmental psychology and Christian education consistently recognize early childhood as a critical period for faith formation (Mata-McMahon et al., 2025; Stonehouse & May, 2010), children's ministry in many Indonesian Pentecostal churches continues to function primarily as a supplementary program rather than as an intentional educational ministry grounded in developmental and theological principles. This observation is informed by recent empirical research, particularly the finding of Iskandar and Tambunan (2024, pp. 279-294) that Pentecostal Sunday school programs frequently fail to incorporate children's developmental characteristics as a pedagogical foundation, as well as by the authors' sustained professional engagement with Pentecostal ECCE institutions in the Indonesian context.

Piagetian cognitive developmental theory provides one of the most influential frameworks for understanding how children construct knowledge through active interaction with their environment (Piaget, 1952, pp. 3-7). Although several aspects of Piaget's theory have been revised, contemporary scholarship continues to affirm its pedagogical relevance for explaining developmental readiness and designing age-appropriate learning experiences (Babakr et al., 2019). Pauline theology complements this developmental perspective by portraying faith formation as a transformative process involving the renewal of the mind, Christlike character, and growth within the believing community (Rom. 12:2; Gal. 4:19; Gal. 5:22–23; Eph. 4:12–16). Spiritual growth, therefore, extends beyond doctrinal knowledge to an ongoing transformation of cognition, character, behavior, and communal life (Wright, 2013, pp. 404-407). Rather than viewing faith merely as doctrinal knowledge, Pauline theology understands spiritual growth as an ongoing process that integrates cognition, affection, behavior, and communal life.

Recent studies have increasingly emphasized the need to strengthen faith formation in Christian education from various perspectives. Research on Pentecostal Sunday school

ministries highlights that learning programs often fail to incorporate children's developmental characteristics as a pedagogical foundation (Iskandar & Tambunan, 2024, p. 282). Other studies advocate more contextual and learner-centered approaches to Christian Religious Education (Sianipar et al., 2021), the integration of faith and learning within Indonesian Christian education (Nelly et al., 2024), and pedagogical responses to technological change while maintaining sound theological foundations (Saputra & Serdianus, 2022, p. 50). In addition, Yutersi et al. (2022) demonstrate the positive contribution of Christian community-based education to spiritual growth. Collectively, these studies underscore the importance of developmentally appropriate and theologically grounded Christian education. However, they primarily address pedagogical practice, curriculum renewal, or spiritual formation as separate concerns. To date, little attention has been given to developing a coherent pedagogical model that theoretically synthesizes Piagetian cognitive development and Pauline theology for faith formation in Pentecostal Early Childhood Christian Education. This unresolved gap provides the rationale for the present study.

Building on this research gap, the present study argues that Piagetian cognitive development and Pauline theology are not merely compatible perspectives but complementary foundations for constructing a pedagogical framework for Early Childhood Christian Education. The study develops the *Seed of Faith Model* as an integrative pedagogical framework comprising four interrelated components that synthesize Piagetian cognitive developmental readiness and Pauline principles of faith formation. The present study pursues three objectives: (1) to identify conceptual convergences between Piagetian cognitive development and Pauline theology as a basis for theoretical integration; (2) to construct the *Seed of Faith Model* through systematic theoretical synthesis; and (3) to verify and enrich the model's pedagogical relevance through an exploratory case study in Pentecostal Early Childhood Christian Education. A closely related earlier publication from the research team (Prasetya et al., 2025) examined Pentecostal pneumatology and children's spirituality; the present study extends this line of inquiry by introducing the *Seed of Faith Model* as a new contribution to ECCE scholarship.

The significance of this study extends beyond the development of a new pedagogical model. Theoretically, it contributes to Early Childhood Christian Education scholarship by

constructing a genuine synthesis between Piagetian cognitive development and Pauline theology, thereby providing a coherent framework for understanding the reciprocal relationship between children's cognitive readiness and faith formation. Practically, the proposed Seed of Faith Model offers an operational reference for curriculum design, developmentally appropriate learning strategies, teacher preparation, and faith formation practices in Pentecostal Early Childhood Christian Education. By bridging developmental psychology and theological reflection, this study provides a conceptual foundation for strengthening children's ministry and advancing pedagogical innovation within the Indonesian Pentecostal context.

METHOD

This study employed an integrative theory-building research design supported by an exploratory case study. The design was selected because the primary aim was to construct a pedagogical model for Early Childhood Christian Education (ECCE) through the systematic integration of developmental psychology and Pauline theology, while examining its pedagogical relevance in an authentic educational setting. Following the logic of theory-building research (Lynham, 2002), the study was conducted in two sequential phases. Phase 1 focused on constructing the conceptual framework through theoretical integration, while Phase 2 used an exploratory case study to examine and contextualise the proposed *Seed of Faith Model* in practice. The case study was not intended to provide statistical validation or substantive revision of the model, but to generate preliminary contextual evidence regarding its pedagogical relevance.

Phase 1 employed a dialogical interdisciplinary approach to integrate Piagetian cognitive developmental theory and Pauline theology. The integration was informed by the methodological framework for integrating psychology and theology proposed by Stevenson et al. (2010). The two disciplines were treated as complementary but epistemologically distinct perspectives: Piagetian theory provides an empirical and descriptive account of children's developmental readiness, whereas Pauline theology provides a normative theological account of the purpose and direction of faith formation.

The integration proceeded through three sequential steps. First, each framework was

analyzed independently to identify its central concepts, internal logic, and explanatory scope. Second, conceptual convergences and differences were identified, particularly concerning development, relationality, participation, transformation, and growth. Third, the convergent insights were brought into dialogue and synthesized into an integrated pedagogical logic. This process did not assume a one-to-one correspondence between Piagetian developmental stages and Pauline categories of faith formation. Rather, Piagetian theory was used to clarify developmental conditions and pedagogical readiness, while Pauline theology provided the theological purpose, direction, and telos of faith formation. The synthesis therefore sought to integrate the complementary contributions of the two disciplines without reducing theological concepts to psychological constructs.

The conceptual phase involved a critical review of Piaget's theory of cognitive development alongside a grammatical-historical exegesis of five Pauline passages selected for their complementary relevance to faith formation: Romans 12:2, Galatians 4:19, Galatians 5:22–23, Ephesians 4:12–16, and 2 Timothy 3:14–15. These passages were selected because they address interconnected dimensions of formation, including the renewal of the mind, the formation of Christ in believers, character formation, communal growth and maturity, and formation through Scripture and teaching. The exegetical analysis followed the grammatical-historical method, attending to the linguistic, literary, and historical contexts of each passage (Fee & Stuart, 2014, pp. 56-60). All biblical quotations in the English text are taken from the New International Version (NIV, 2011), unless otherwise indicated.

The exegetical findings were then placed in dialogue with the developmental concepts derived from Piagetian theory. Rather than merely juxtaposing the two bodies of knowledge, the analysis examined how developmental readiness could provide pedagogical conditions for faith formation and how Pauline theology could establish the theological purpose and formative direction of those practices. The resulting synthesis constituted the proposed *Seed of Faith Model*.

Phase 2 employed an exploratory case study to examine and contextualise the proposed *Seed of Faith Model* within an authentic educational setting and to provide preliminary contextual evidence regarding its pedagogical relevance. The case study was conducted at a Pentecostal church-based ECCE institution in Batam, Indonesia, during the

second semester of the 2024/2025 academic year, from February to June 2025. The institution serves children aged 3 to 6 years in two age-grouped classes.

Data were collected through three complementary sources: participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Six learning sessions were observed across the semester: two sessions in February, two in March, and two in May. Each observation lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The sessions were intentionally distributed across several months to provide recurring engagement with the educational setting and to observe practices across different points in the semester. This schedule represents sustained, multi-month engagement rather than intensive or continuous field presence.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three teachers and five parents to obtain perspectives on children's faith formation, pedagogical practices, developmental characteristics, and the perceived relevance of the model's conceptual elements. Document analysis included institutional curricula, weekly lesson plans, and instructional materials. The documentary analysis focused on stated learning objectives, biblical content, instructional strategies, learning activities, and indications of cognitive and spiritual development. These sources enabled comparison between observed practices, participant perspectives, and formal pedagogical documentation.

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006, pp. 77-101, 2021, p. 4). The analysis proceeded through familiarization with the data, identification of relevant codes, development of themes, and interpretation of patterns in relation to the conceptual dimensions of the *Seed of Faith Model*. The case study findings were not used to statistically test or revise the model. Instead, they were used to examine whether the model's conceptual elements were recognizable in educational practice and to identify their contextual expressions.

Trustworthiness was strengthened through source and method triangulation, member checking, and recurring engagement with the research setting across multiple months (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 270; Yin, 2018, p. 45). Source triangulation involved comparing data from teachers, parents, and institutional documents, while method triangulation involved comparing observations, interviews, and documentary evidence. These

procedures supported a more comprehensive interpretation of the model's pedagogical relevance.

The study received institutional permission prior to data collection. Written informed consent was obtained from all adult participants, including teachers and parents. Parents also provided informed consent for their children's participation in classroom observations. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of the study's purpose and procedures. Confidentiality was maintained through coded identifiers throughout data collection, analysis, and reporting. No personally identifying information about the children, teachers, or parents is reported in the manuscript.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Piagetian Cognitive Development and Its Implications for ECCE

The analysis of Piagetian cognitive developmental theory identified developmental readiness, active meaning-making, and progressive cognitive transformation as three foundational principles for Early Childhood Christian Education (ECCE). Piaget describes children as active constructors of knowledge who develop increasingly complex cognitive structures through interaction with their physical and social environments (Piaget, 1952, pp. 3-7). Rather than viewing children as passive recipients of information, Piaget explains learning as a process of active exploration and continuous adaptation. Although aspects of Piaget's theory have been refined by subsequent developmental research, its emphasis on developmental readiness and age-appropriate learning remains relevant to contemporary early childhood education (Babakr et al., 2019; Berk, 2013, pp. 221-224). For ECCE, this principle establishes developmental readiness as the starting condition for faith-related learning, suggesting that theological concepts should be presented according to children's emerging cognitive capacities rather than primarily through abstract instruction.

For children aged 3-6 years, the preoperational stage (2-7 years) is particularly relevant. During this stage, children's cognitive abilities expand through symbolic thought and language. Children increasingly learn through stories, symbols, imitation, imagination, songs, and dramatic play, although their thinking remains intuitive and relatively egocentric (Piaget, 1952, pp. 76-91). These characteristics indicate that Christian concepts become more

accessible when communicated through concrete experiences, narratives, symbols, and participatory activities that connect with children's everyday lives. Utami and Yus (2025) similarly argue that play functions not merely as recreation but as a primary context through which young children construct meaning and develop increasingly sophisticated patterns of thinking. The analysis therefore indicates that developmentally appropriate pedagogy is not simply a methodological preference but a foundational condition for meaningful faith formation in ECCE.

Piaget's concepts of assimilation and accommodation further explain how children incorporate new experiences into developing cognitive structures (Piaget, 1952, pp. 350-354). Assimilation occurs when new experiences are interpreted through existing schemas, whereas accommodation involves modifying those schemas in response to new information. Through the continuing interaction of these processes, children progressively reorganize their understanding of reality. Applied to Christian education, this perspective suggests that faith-related learning should connect new concepts with children's existing experiences while gradually extending their understanding through meaningful and appropriately challenging activities. Children therefore participate actively in constructing meaning rather than merely receiving theological information. Stories, prayer, songs, play, relationships, and concrete experiences can function as mediating contexts through which children begin to connect biblical ideas with their developing understanding of God, self, others, and the world.

Contemporary research further supports the importance of active, relational, and meaningful learning in early childhood education. Mata-McMahon et al. (2025) demonstrate that children's meaning-making develops through interconnected experiences involving identity, relationships, and purposeful action, while Holmes et al. (2025) emphasize that supportive educational environments significantly influence children's holistic development. These findings reinforce the continuing relevance of Piaget's emphasis on active engagement and developmentally appropriate experiences.

Taken together, the Piagetian analysis yields three pedagogical implications for the present study. *First*, developmental readiness establishes the starting point of learning; *second*, active and concrete engagement provides the process through which children construct meaning; and *third*, progressive development establishes the direction toward

increasingly complex understanding. These principles provide the developmental foundation for the subsequent dialogue with Pauline theology. In the *Seed of Faith Model*, they function not as stages of faith themselves, but as developmental conditions that shape how faith formation can be pedagogically facilitated during early childhood.

Faith Formation and Character Development in Pauline Theology

Pauline theology presents faith formation as a dynamic process of transformation that extends beyond the acquisition of religious knowledge. The exegetical analysis of five Pauline texts identified five closely related dimensions of formation: renewal of the mind, formation of Christ in believers, Spirit-shaped character, communal growth toward maturity, and formation through Scripture from early childhood. Together, these dimensions portray faith formation as a holistic process involving cognition, character, relationships, spiritual maturity, and engagement with Scripture within the community of faith (Wright, 2013, pp. 404-407). These findings provide the theological foundation for the subsequent integration with Piagetian developmental theory.

The transformative dimension is evident in Romans 12:2, where Paul exhorts believers: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (NIV, 2011). The expression *anakainōsis tou noos* points to the renewal of patterns of thought and perception in accordance with God's will (Dunn, 1988, pp. 711-713). The analysis indicates that faith formation therefore involves more than the acquisition of religious information; it entails a transformed way of understanding and responding to reality. For ECCE, this principle suggests that children's emerging understandings of God, values, and relationships should be intentionally nurtured through developmentally appropriate experiences. Tambunan and Iskandar (2024, p. 579) similarly argue that transformative Christian education requires the integration of cognitive and spiritual development into a unified educational process.

A second dimension emerges in Galatians 4:19, where Paul writes: “My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you” (NIV, 2011). The verb *morphōthē* conveys the idea of Christ being formed in believers, while Paul's metaphor of childbirth portrays formation as a process that requires care, struggle, and growth

(Biblework 7, 2006). The passage therefore provides a direct theological basis for understanding faith formation as an ongoing process rather than the simple transmission of doctrinal knowledge. For ECCE, this perspective shifts pedagogical attention from merely communicating religious content toward creating formative environments in which children are gradually nurtured toward Christlike patterns of life.

The formative outcome is further expressed through the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22–23: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (NIV, 2011). The singular noun *karpos* supports an integrated understanding of these qualities as expressions of Spirit-shaped Christian character rather than merely a collection of independent virtues (Cranfield, 1975, p. 397). The analysis therefore indicates that character formation is not limited to external moral instruction but is related to the transforming work of the Spirit and becomes visible in attitudes, relationships, and everyday conduct. Nelly et al. (2024, p. 178) similarly emphasize that effective Christian education integrates theological principles with educational practice to foster holistic intellectual and spiritual growth. In ECCE, this suggests that character formation should be embedded within children's daily relationships, practices, and learning experiences rather than treated as a separate instructional objective.

The communal dimension of faith formation emerges in Ephesians 4:12-16, where Paul portrays believers as members of the body of Christ who grow toward maturity through mutual participation and edification. Paul describes the goal as attaining “the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (NIV, 2011, v. 13), while the contrast between *nepios* (infant) and mature believers illustrates spiritual growth as a progressive movement toward maturity (O’Brien, 1999, pp. 305-308). The analysis indicates that faith formation is therefore relational and communal rather than exclusively individual. Teaching, encouragement, mentoring, and mutual participation constitute important contexts for spiritual growth. For ECCE, this finding highlights the complementary roles of teachers, parents, and the church in creating a relational environment in which children's faith can be nurtured.

The formative significance of early childhood is particularly evident in 2 Timothy 3:14–15, where Paul reminds Timothy that “from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (NIV,

2011). The expression *apo brephous* (“from infancy”) indicates that engagement with Scripture can begin at the earliest stages of life, before children attain mature abstract reasoning (*Biblework* 7, 2006). The passage therefore supports intentional and continuous faith formation through Scripture, teaching, prayer, worship, and faithful modelling from early childhood. For ECCE, this finding reinforces the importance of collaboration between family, church, and educators in establishing early patterns of Christian formation.

Taken together, the five Pauline texts analyzed in this study reveal a coherent theological understanding of faith formation encompassing *renewed cognition* (Rom. 12:2), *formation of Christ in the believer* (Gal. 4:19), *Spirit-shaped character* (Gal. 5:22–23), *communal growth toward maturity* (Eph. 4:12–16), and *Scripture-grounded formation from early childhood* (2 Tim. 3:14–15). These findings indicate that Pauline faith formation is simultaneously cognitive, formative, relational, communal, and developmental. This theological synthesis provides the normative purpose and formative direction that complements the developmental conditions identified in Piagetian theory, thereby establishing the basis for constructing the *Seed of Faith Model*.

Theoretical Synthesis: From Convergence to Integration

The preceding analyses identified several conceptual convergences between Piagetian cognitive development and Pauline theology. However, convergence alone does not constitute theoretical integration. Following the dialogical interdisciplinary approach described in the Method section and informed by the integration framework of Stevenson et al. (2010), the present study moved from independent analysis of each perspective to a systematic examination of their conceptual relationships. The two perspectives were treated as complementary but epistemologically distinct explanatory systems. Piagetian theory primarily explains the developmental conditions through which children construct meaning, whereas Pauline theology provides the theological purpose, direction, and telos of faith formation. The integration therefore did not seek to collapse psychological and theological categories or establish a one-to-one correspondence between developmental stages and stages of faith. Instead, it examined their convergences and differences and translated their complementary insights into a coherent pedagogical logic for ECCE.

The first area of convergence concerns the developmental nature of human growth. Piaget argues that cognitive development progresses through stages characterized by developmental readiness and increasing complexity (Babakr et al., 2019; Piaget, 1974, pp. 27-29). Pauline theology likewise portrays spiritual growth as a progressive movement toward maturity, using images of development from infancy toward maturity (1 Cor. 13:11; Eph. 4:13-14; Gal. 4:19). Although the two perspectives employ different conceptual and disciplinary languages, both understand growth as a process rather than an instantaneous achievement. The synthesis therefore identifies developmental readiness as a foundational pedagogical principle: ECCE should begin from children's emerging cognitive capacities while directing learning toward progressive formation and Christian maturity (Stonehouse & May, 2010, pp. 49-51). Piaget thus contributes the developmental conditions of learning, while Pauline theology provides its formative direction.

The second area of convergence concerns the relational nature of development and formation. Piaget emphasizes children's interaction with their environment as an important context for the development and reorganization of cognitive structures (Piaget, 1977, pp. 32-33). Contemporary developmental perspectives, particularly Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, further emphasize guided participation and social interaction in learning (Eun, 2019, pp. 20-23; L. Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Pauline theology similarly locates spiritual growth within relationships and the community of believers, where teaching, mutual encouragement, discipleship, and shared participation contribute to maturity (Rom. 15:14; Gal. 6:2; Eph. 4:32). The synthesis does not equate cognitive interaction with Christian community; rather, it identifies relational formation as a complementary pedagogical principle. Children's learning and formation are facilitated through meaningful relationships, while Pauline theology gives those relationships a theological and communal purpose. In ECCE, this principle highlights the formative roles of teachers, parents, peers, and the wider faith community.

The third area of convergence concerns active participation in learning and formation. Piaget rejects passive models of learning, arguing that children construct understanding through active engagement and the processes of assimilation and accommodation (Piaget, 1952, pp. 6, 350-354). Pauline theology likewise portrays believers as participants in an

ongoing process of formation through obedience, practice, learning, and growth, as reflected in Paul's exhortation to "work out your own salvation" (Phil. 2:12). Bunge (2001, pp. 14-17) similarly emphasizes children as moral and spiritual agents who actively respond to God's work within family and faith-community contexts. The synthesis therefore identifies active participation as a third pedagogical principle. Children should not be treated merely as recipients of religious information but as active participants in age-appropriate experiences through which meaning, relationships, and Christian dispositions are gradually formed.

The dialogical analysis also revealed an important conceptual distinction between the two perspectives. Piagetian theory is primarily descriptive and developmental: it explains how children's cognitive capacities emerge, develop, and reorganize. Pauline theology is normative and theological: it articulates the purpose, character, and direction of Christian transformation. These differences do not prevent integration; rather, they clarify the complementary functions of each perspective. Piaget helps determine how and under what developmental conditions learning can occur, whereas Pauline theology determines what that formation is ultimately directed toward. Thus, the present study does not treat psychological development as a substitute for theological formation, nor theology as an explanation of psychological mechanisms. Instead, the synthesis establishes a complementary division of explanatory functions.

From this dialogue, three foundational pedagogical principles emerge: developmental readiness, active participation, and relational formation. Developmental readiness identifies children's cognitive capacities as the starting condition for learning; active participation describes children's engagement in constructing meaning and responding to formative experiences; and relational formation locates these processes within relationships with teachers, parents, peers, families, and the faith community. Pauline theology gives these principles their theological telos through the renewal of the person, formation of Christlike character, growth toward spiritual maturity, and participation in the community of faith. The resulting pedagogical logic can therefore be expressed as a movement from developmental conditions, through active and relational formation, toward Christian character and maturity.

Accordingly, the contribution of the present study is not simply to demonstrate that Piagetian theory and Pauline theology can be discussed together. Rather, the study establishes

a complementary pedagogical logic in which Piagetian cognitive development provides the developmental conditions and processes of learning, while Pauline theology provides the formative purpose and theological direction. This integrated logic constitutes the conceptual basis for the four interrelated components of the *Seed of Faith Model*: Prepared Soil, Planted Seed, Nurtured Growth, and Expected Fruit.

The Seed of Faith Model: An Integrative Pedagogical Framework

Building upon the theoretical synthesis developed in the preceding section, this study proposes the *Seed of Faith Model* as an integrative pedagogical framework for Early Childhood Christian Education (ECCE). The structural metaphor of the model is drawn from Jesus' Parable of the Sower in Mark 4:1–20, while its theological content is grounded primarily in the Pauline texts examined in this study. This distinction is important because Mark 4 provides the organic imagery of reception, growth, and fruitfulness, whereas Pauline theology provides the theological purpose, formative direction, communal context, and character outcomes of Christian formation.

In Mark 4:3–9, Jesus describes a sower scattering seed (*sporos*) on different kinds of soil (*gē*), with different outcomes of growth and fruitfulness. In Jesus' subsequent explanation, the seed is identified as the word (*logos*) in Mark 4:14, while those represented by the good soil are described as people who hear, receive, and bear fruit (*karpophoreō*) in Mark 4:20. The imagery therefore emphasizes that fruitfulness involves the reception and development of the word within particular conditions (France, 2002, pp. 194-197). In the present study, this imagery functions as a structural metaphor rather than a direct blueprint for the model. The four components, *Prepared Soil*, *Planted Seed*, *Nurtured Growth*, and *Expected Fruit*, are synthetic pedagogical constructs developed through the integration of the Markan metaphor, Piagetian developmental theory, and Pauline theology.

The theological substance of these components is derived primarily from the Pauline analysis presented above. Romans 12:2 contributes the principle of cognitive renewal; Galatians 4:19 provides the theological image of Christ being formed in believers; Galatians 5:22–23 identifies Spirit-shaped character as the fruit of transformation; Ephesians 4:12–16 locates growth within the community of faith; and 2 Timothy 3:14–15 establishes the

formative significance of Scripture from infancy. Thus, Mark 4 provides the model's structural metaphor, Piagetian theory provides its developmental logic, and Pauline theology provides its theological substance and telos. This integration enables the model to maintain the distinctive contribution of each perspective while bringing them together within a coherent pedagogical framework for ECCE.

The first component, *Prepared Soil*, represents the developmental, relational, and spiritual environment in which faith formation can take root. Consistent with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), this environment includes the family, church, educational institution, and broader cultural influences that shape children's earliest experiences. From a Piagetian perspective, a secure and stimulating environment provides experiences through which children actively construct meaning, while Pauline theology situates spiritual growth within the community of faith (Eph. 4:12–16). Within Pentecostal ECCE, openness to the work of the Holy Spirit also constitutes an important dimension of this environment (Prasetya et al., 2025). Casson et al. (2023) demonstrate that intentional attention to young children's spiritual flourishing in ecclesial settings contributes to their overall well-being. *Prepared Soil*, therefore, represents the conditions that make meaningful faith formation possible.

The second component, *Planted Seed*, refers to the intentional introduction of biblical truth and faith-forming experiences in ways calibrated to children's developmental readiness. In Mark 4:14, the seed is interpreted as the word, providing the biblical basis for understanding the seed as that which is intentionally received and cultivated. In ECCE, however, the seed is not reduced to the transmission of information. It includes Scripture, stories, prayer, worship, symbols, relationships, and concrete experiences through which children encounter and begin to construct meaning about God. During the preoperational period, biblical narratives, songs, symbols, rituals, storytelling, and concrete learning experiences provide developmentally appropriate media for communicating spiritual meaning (Arifianto, 2023; Christensen, 2001, pp. 143-145; Veronika Nato Kolin & Emmeria Tarihoran, 2025). The Pauline grounding is particularly evident in 2 Timothy 3:14–15, which locates engagement with Scripture from infancy, and Galatians 4:19, which presents formation into the likeness of Christ. Thus, *Planted Seed* integrates Piagetian developmental

appropriateness with the Pauline emphasis on formative engagement with Scripture and Christ.

The third component, *Nurtured Growth*, emphasizes that faith formation develops through continuing accompaniment rather than isolated instructional events. Although Mark 4 uses the imagery of growth, the present model extends this imagery pedagogically by emphasizing the relational processes through which children's faith experiences are sustained. Teachers, parents, pastors, and the wider church community function as co-formers through modeling, dialogue, encouragement, and participation in Christian practices. This component integrates Piaget's emphasis on active learning with Vygotsky's concept of guided participation and Paul's understanding of the church as the body of Christ in which believers grow toward maturity (Eph. 4:12–16) (Eun, 2019; Utami & Yus, 2025). Iskandar and Tambunan (2024) likewise identify collaboration among teachers, parents, and churches as an important factor in effective Pentecostal children's ministry. *Nurtured Growth*, therefore, represents the continuing relational and communal processes through which initial faith experiences are reinforced, interpreted, and embodied.

The fourth component, *Expected Fruit*, represents the gradual outcomes of holistic faith formation. In Mark 4:20, the good soil produces fruit, providing the metaphorical basis for understanding formation in terms of observable transformation rather than mere reception of information. Within the theological synthesis of this study, this fruit is interpreted through Paul's description of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22–23 and his emphasis on maturity and formation into the likeness of Christ (Gal. 4:19; Eph. 4:13). Accordingly, authentic growth may become visible through emerging Christlike character, relational trust, participation in worship, compassion, spiritual curiosity, and responsiveness to God. Such outcomes should be understood developmentally rather than as indicators of fully mature faith. Fowler (1981, pp. 121-122) and Mata-McMahon et al. (2025) likewise support an understanding of early faith development as progressive and shaped by children's developmental and relational contexts.

The four components are not isolated stages and should not be understood as direct equivalents of either Piagetian stages or Pauline theological categories. Rather, they constitute synthetic pedagogical constructs generated through the dialogue between developmental

psychology, biblical-theological analysis, and contextual educational evidence. *Prepared Soil* identifies the conditions that make formation possible; *Planted Seed* identifies the intentional content and experiences introduced into those conditions; *Nurtured Growth* identifies the continuing relational processes through which formation develops; and *Expected Fruit* identifies the gradual expression of Christian character and maturity. The model is therefore recursive rather than strictly linear. Changing developmental and relational conditions affect subsequent learning experiences, while emerging forms of growth create new opportunities for continued nurture and formation.

Accordingly, the *Seed of Faith Model* should be understood as a theoretically constructed pedagogical framework, not as a direct biblical model extracted from Mark 4 or as a simple combination of Piagetian theory and Pauline theology. Mark 4 provides the structural metaphor, Piagetian theory provides the developmental conditions and processes of learning, and Pauline theology provides the theological purpose, formative direction, communal context, and desired outcomes. This integration constitutes the distinctive contribution of the model for curriculum development and pedagogical practice in Pentecostal ECCE.

Exploratory Case Study: Contextualizing the Seed of Faith Model

Following the theoretical development of the *Seed of Faith Model*, an exploratory case study was conducted at a Pentecostal church-based Early Childhood Christian Education (ECCE) institution in Batam, Indonesia. The purpose of this phase was not to statistically validate or substantively revise the model's components, but to contextualize the theoretical framework within an authentic educational setting, identify pedagogical practices and challenges related to children's faith formation, and examine whether the conceptual dimensions of the model were recognizable in educational practice (Lynham, 2002, pp. 223-224). Data were drawn from three complementary sources: classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with eight participants comprising three teachers and five parents, and institutional curriculum documents, including weekly lesson plans and instructional materials. Thematic analysis generated three interrelated themes concerning transmissive pedagogy, experiential and relational learning, and collaborative faith formation. Across the eight

interviews, participants expressed broadly consistent recognition of these three patterns, although individual participants placed different degrees of emphasis on biblical knowledge, children's experiences, parental involvement, and observable character development. Accordingly, the quotations presented below are selected as representative illustrations of recurring patterns in the interview data rather than as exhaustive representations of all eight participants.

The first theme concerns the continuing presence of transmissive pedagogy in children's faith education. Classroom observations indicated that biblical instruction was frequently centered on verbal explanation, repetition, and Scripture memorization, with children's learning commonly assessed through their ability to recall biblical information or verses. This pattern was also evident in the documentary data. The institution's weekly lesson plans for the 2024/2025 academic year regularly identified Bible verse memorization as a stated learning objective, while the instructional materials accompanying these plans emphasized repetition and recall of selected biblical texts. At the same time, the documents contained comparatively limited explicit guidance concerning developmental differentiation, experiential learning, or children's active construction of meaning. The documentary evidence therefore provided an institutional perspective that complemented the observational findings by showing that memorization was not merely an occasional classroom practice but was embedded in formal instructional planning.

The documentary pattern was broadly consistent with the interview accounts of the teachers and parents, although participants differed in the degree to which they regarded memorization as sufficient for children's faith formation. Several participants described parental expectations for visible and measurable learning outcomes, particularly children's ability to remember Bible verses. At the same time, teachers emphasized the importance of adapting biblical teaching to children's developmental capacities. One teacher explained: *"I understand that parents want their children to memorize verses. But I also know that a four-year-old child cannot yet fully grasp the abstract meaning of those verses. What children can experience is whether they feel loved, whether they feel safe, whether learning about God is enjoyable. Those are the things that truly form their faith"* (MP, 2025). This quotation represents a recurring concern expressed in the teacher interviews: biblical content was

considered important, but its educational value was perceived to depend on how that content was communicated to young children.

The convergence of documentary, observational, and interview evidence indicates a pedagogical tension between the transmission of biblical content and the developmental characteristics of young children. This finding does not imply that Scripture memorization was regarded negatively by participants; rather, the data suggest that memorization alone was perceived as insufficient to capture the broader process of children's faith formation. Piagetian theory suggests that children in the preoperational stage construct meaning primarily through concrete experiences, symbolic activities, stories, imaginative play, and meaningful social interaction (DeVries & Zan, 1994, p. 71; Piaget, 1952, pp. 121-123). Arifianto (2023) similarly argues that Christian education emphasizing doctrinal transmission alone is insufficient to cultivate holistic faith and character formation. From the perspective of the *Seed of Faith Model*, this finding provides contextual support for the principle represented by *Planted Seed*, namely that biblical content needs to be communicated in ways that correspond to children's developmental capacities rather than being reduced to information transmission and memorization.

The second theme highlights the importance of experiential and relational learning in children's faith formation. Classroom observations showed that activities involving storytelling, music, role play, prayer, sensory exploration, drawing, and active participation generally generated greater attention, emotional engagement, and spontaneous interaction than predominantly verbal instruction. Children frequently responded to these activities by asking questions, relating biblical narratives to personal experiences, and participating voluntarily in worship and prayer. These observations indicate that children's engagement with Christian teaching occurred not only through verbal reception but also through embodied, symbolic, relational, and experiential forms of learning.

The interview data reinforced this observational pattern. The five parents generally described meaningful spiritual development in terms of observable changes in children's attitudes, practices, relationships, and spontaneous expressions of faith rather than through biblical recall alone. One parent described this perspective in the following way: *"I don't expect my child to leave class having memorized many verses. What I hope for is that she*

wants to pray on her own before bed, that she talks about Jesus with an excited face, that she's willing to share with her younger sibling because 'Teacher said God likes it when we share.' To me, that is already extraordinary" (ER, 2025). This account illustrates a pattern also identified across the parent interviews, namely that parents recognized children's spiritual growth through everyday practices and relational behavior.

Teachers expressed a complementary perspective by emphasizing children's ability to communicate theological understanding through creative and participatory activities. One teacher explained: "*When I give children the chance to express what they think God feels like, through drawing, through movement, through saying what they want to tell God, you see things come out that no verse quiz could capture. One child drew a picture of God holding her hand. She said, 'God is always with me even when Mummy is not there.' That is theology. That is faith formation*" (MLT, 2025). The two quotations represent complementary rather than identical perspectives: the parent emphasizes observable spiritual practices in everyday life, whereas the teacher emphasizes children's symbolic and expressive participation in learning. Together with the observational evidence, these accounts suggest that faith-related meaning-making becomes visible through multiple forms of children's participation.

These findings correspond with Piaget's emphasis on active engagement in the construction of meaning (Piaget, 1952, pp. 350-354) and with Mata-McMahon et al. (2025), who argue that children's meaning-making develops through interconnected experiences involving identity, relationships, and purposeful action. They also correspond with Paul's description of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23, in which Christian transformation becomes visible through dispositions and relational behavior rather than through knowledge alone. Within the *Seed of Faith Model*, these findings provide contextual illustration of the relationship among *Planted Seed*, *Nurtured Growth*, and *Expected Fruit*: developmentally appropriate experiences provide opportunities for children to engage with faith, relational accompaniment sustains that engagement, and emerging attitudes and behaviors provide observable expressions of formation.

The third theme concerns the collaborative nature of faith formation among teachers, parents, and the wider church community. Interview data from both teachers and parents indicated that children's spiritual development was perceived as more meaningful when

classroom learning was reinforced through practices at home and within the church. These practices included family prayer, conversations about biblical stories, worship participation, and encouragement to demonstrate Christian values in everyday relationships. Although participants differed in their descriptions of specific practices, the interviews showed a broadly shared recognition that children's faith formation could not be confined to classroom instruction. The institutional curriculum documents provided complementary evidence by indicating that Christian learning was expected to extend beyond the classroom through home-based reinforcement and participation in church activities. Thus, documentary evidence, interview accounts, and classroom observations converged in identifying the family, educational institution, and church as interconnected contexts of children's faith formation.

One teacher recalled using a hand puppet to narrate the parable of the prodigal son. Following the activity, a child spontaneously asked, *"Will God still hug me when I am naughty?"* The teacher interpreted the question as an indication that the child was connecting the biblical narrative with a personal concern. Rather than simply recalling a biblical fact, the child was using the story to explore a question concerning God's acceptance, forgiveness, and relationship with the child. This episode illustrates the type of relational and participatory interaction that teachers described in the interviews and that was also observed during classroom activities.

From a developmental perspective, this interaction illustrates how guided conversation and relational support can facilitate children's construction of meaning. Such interaction is consistent with the concept of scaffolding associated with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, in which more knowledgeable others support children as they develop increasingly complex understandings (Eun, 2019, pp. 20-23; Utami & Yus, 2025; Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). From a theological perspective, the interaction corresponds with Paul's understanding of the believing community as a context in which growth toward maturity occurs through teaching, encouragement, and mutual participation (Eph. 4:12-16). Holmes et al. (2025) similarly demonstrate the significance of collaboration among educational, familial, and ecclesial contexts for children's faith development.

Taken together, the three themes demonstrate a substantial convergence among the

three sources of evidence while also preserving their distinctive contributions. The curriculum documents reveal the formal institutional emphasis on biblical content, particularly Scripture memorization and home reinforcement. Classroom observations demonstrate how teachers and children enact these curricular expectations while also engaging in storytelling, play, prayer, creative expression, and other experiential practices. Interviews with teachers and parents provide participants' interpretations of these practices and reveal a broadly shared movement from viewing faith formation primarily as knowledge acquisition toward recognizing observable character, relational, and experiential dimensions of children's faith. The consistency of these patterns across the eight interview participants strengthens the interpretation that the themes were not derived from isolated individual opinions. At the same time, the use of representative quotations acknowledges that participants did not necessarily articulate their experiences in identical terms.

The case study therefore provides contextual evidence that the pedagogical concerns addressed by the *Seed of Faith Model* are recognizable within the case setting. The findings do not establish the effectiveness of the model, nor do they demonstrate that the case study independently generated or modified its four components. Rather, they contextualize the model by showing how its underlying pedagogical logic corresponds with practices, challenges, and participant perceptions found in an authentic Pentecostal ECCE setting. *Prepared Soil* is illustrated through the relational and institutional environment involving teachers, parents, and the church; *Planted Seed* is represented by the intentional introduction of Scripture and Christian teaching, together with the observed need for developmentally appropriate modes of communication; *Nurtured Growth* is reflected in continuing accompaniment, guided interaction, and collaboration among adults and children; and *Expected Fruit* is visible in children's emerging attitudes, relationships, participation, and expressions of faith. Consequently, the exploratory case study provides preliminary contextual evidence of pedagogical relevance and plausibility, while further empirical research is required to examine implementation, developmental change, and faith formation outcomes through longitudinal and systematic research designs.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that integrating Piagetian cognitive development and Pauline theology provides a coherent theoretical foundation for Early Childhood Christian Education. Rather than functioning as a conceptual comparison, this integration, conducted through a dialogical interdisciplinary method, culminates in the development of the *Seed of Faith Model*, an integrative pedagogical framework comprising four interrelated components: *Prepared Soil*, *Planted Seed*, *Nurtured Growth*, and *Expected Fruit*, grounded in Piagetian developmental logic and Pauline theological principles. The exploratory case study provides contextual illustrations of the model's pedagogical relevance and plausibility within an Indonesian Pentecostal ECCE institution, while acknowledging that the findings are contextualising rather than confirmatory evidence. Theoretically, this study contributes an integrative framework that bridges developmental psychology and Pauline theology, while practically the model offers guidance for curriculum design, age-appropriate instructional strategies, teacher formation, and collaborative partnerships among families, churches, and ECCE institutions. Nevertheless, the empirical grounding is limited to a single exploratory case study within one Pentecostal ECCE institution in Batam, Indonesia, which limits the transferability of the contextual findings beyond the observed setting. Future research should therefore examine the applicability of the *Seed of Faith Model* across diverse denominational, cultural, and educational contexts, develop and validate empirical instruments to assess the interaction between children's cognitive development and faith formation, and conduct longitudinal studies to examine faith formation outcomes in ECCE settings implementing the model's principles. Future case studies should also report more precisely the number and age range of participating children to strengthen the transparency and assessment of the empirical design.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI USE

The authors declare that generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used during the preparation of this manuscript. The authors reviewed, verified, and edited all AI-assisted output and take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and final content of this

article. AI was not used to generate the research ideas, analysis, or conclusions, and all references were checked manually against their original sources.

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