

Shaping the Character of Christ in Children with Special Needs: The Role of Sunday School Teacher in Pentecostal Churches

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Abstract:

This study aims to form the character of Christ in children with special needs so that in their social behavior, they deserve to be treated the same as other children in their right to receive education, including in the church environment. This study attempts to frame the role of Sunday school teachers in instilling the character of Christ in children with special needs in the Pentecostal church environment. The use of qualitative descriptive methods and literature reviews in working on this article is expected to provide an overview of children with special needs, the importance of the character of Christ for children, and the role of Sunday school teachers in instilling the character of Christ in children with special needs in the Pentecostal church environment. It is concluded that Sunday school teachers will play their role optimally when they must be role models, prepare a curriculum with inclusive education that is easy for children to understand, build good communication relationships, and become collaborators for parents or other parties related to children. So that each church also has a special service or mentoring program for children with special needs. This means that in worship, Sunday school teachers have a vital role in forming the Character of Christ in children with special needs by prioritizing fair and wise behavior so that they can inspire parents and other children present.

Keywords:

child with special needs, children's education, Sunday school teacher

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INTRODUCTION

Education is a systematic and organized process to develop knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes in individuals. For children, referring to Alyson Lewis's understanding that education is a fundamental aspect that plays an important role in their overall development, both in terms of intellectual, emotional, social, and physical (Lewis, 2019). Similarly, Arnott and Duncan understand that a good education in childhood forms a strong foundation to shape future lives (Arnott and Duncan, 2019). Character education influences a child's emotional and social intelligence to the extent that it aligns with their intellectual education. In line with this, an American philosopher, John Dewey, stated that education is the rearrangement of various experiences and events experienced by individuals so as to make something new more purposeful and meaningful (Holdo, 2022). Education can take place in various contexts, both formal, informal, and non-formal, such as in schools, families, and churches. This means that education is a major aspect in the development of children emotionally and intellectually, to become the basis for future life.

A look at church history also shows that education cannot be separated from the church because educating is one of the main vocations that the church carries out (Simarmata et al., 2020). This is certainly in line with the writings of the apostle Paul, who stated that the word of God is useful for teaching and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16). Educators in the church also have an important role in the character and faith education of children in the church (Agoestina, 2022). Educators in the church are not only teachers, but also spiritual mentors who help instill Christian values. For this reason, when looking at the scope of children's education in the church, the important role of Sunday school teachers should prioritize character education to become individuals who are ready and able to contribute to society when they grow up. This means that character education is one of the fundamental aspects in the formation of individuals with integrity and high morals, so Sunday school teachers also have this vital role in shaping the character of children who attend Sunday school in the church. Hadi Siswoyo mentions 4 important pillars in a complete educational facility, the church being the main pillar after the family (Siswoyo, 2018). In the church, children's character education is the responsibility of Sunday school teachers. In this case, of course, it also includes children with special needs. The character education in Sunday school certainly focuses on instilling spiritual and moral values that have been taught by Jesus in His ministry.

Sunday school teachers play a crucial role in this process, not only functioning as teachers who transfer biblical knowledge, but also as mentors and role models who help children internalize Christian values in everyday life by loving children (Siagian and Nugroho, 2019). This challenge becomes more complex when dealing with children with special needs, who require different and more personalized teaching approaches and methods. Children with special needs, which include various sensory disorders, speech disorders, physical abnormalities, children with higher intelligence than their peers, spectrum disorders such as autism, etc., often face barriers in traditional learning (Wardah, 2019). Therefore, extra efforts and innovative strategies are needed from Sunday school teachers to ensure that they not only understand the teachings of Christianity but are also able to live and apply them in their lives. In line with this, Psalm 139:16 says that every human being is created glorious and marvelous, therefore, people with disabilities also have the same right to receive teaching in the church

(Mauleky, 2022). In reality, it is rare for a church to have a special service or assistance program for children with special needs to have the same opportunity in the process of knowing Christ and the process of cultivating Christ's character, including Pentecostal churches.

Pentecostal churches are a branch of Christianity that emphasizes personal spiritual experiences with the Holy Spirit. The Pentecostal church began in the early 20th century with the Azusa Street revival and has spread throughout the world. Pentecostal churches emphasize the baptism of the Holy Spirit, as well as the gifts of the Spirit, the presence of dynamic worship with expressive and passionate worship (Manurung and Rakim, 2022). Pentecostal theology is gospel-centered and hopes for a massive spiritual awakening through the work of the Holy Spirit. As well as in serving, the same power as that of Christ is needed, because God's ministry is a ministry of power, and that power is from the anointing of the Holy Spirit (Manurung, 2023).

There are several previous studies that discuss children with special needs, such as research conducted by Ria Nuryanti, who examined learning models to improve math skills in Roman numeral material for deaf children (Nuryanti, 2019). There is also research by Nurul Husna and Tjutju Soendari, which presents the use of unique methods to improve understanding of body members and their functions in children with disabilities (Husna and Soendari, 2017). Elsa Nuryanti Safitri and Mimin Tjasmini also conducted research that focused on collage exercises made from nature for children with *Cerebral Palsy* to improve their writing skills, and it turned out to be very influential in raising the *mean level* in each condition (Safitri and Tjasmini, 2017). A similar review was also conducted by Fakhrisa Nur Pratama, who looked at the understanding of the concept of aesthetics in a clinic for children with special needs (Paramarta, 2021). Character education for children with special needs who are juxtaposed with normal children in inclusive education uses an approach of affection and more attention to students with disabilities, but does not make other students jealous (Erawati, Sudjarwo, Sinaga, 2016). A pastor's lack of time is also the basis for how children with special needs are less noticed in the church (Christina, Djoko, and Nixon, 2022). Character education for children with special needs is so important, including in the scope of the church, including Pentecostal churches. From several studies related to children with special needs and their learning, this research is expected to complement previous research on matters related to the existence of children with special needs in the Pentecostal church environment, precisely within the scope of Sunday school.

This research intends to provide an overview for Sunday school teachers in the Pentecostal church environment, in order to maximize the instilling of the character of Christ in children with special needs. Sunday school teachers in Pentecostal churches have a role in shaping the character of Christ in children with special needs through contextual teaching approaches, inclusive love, and patient service, despite being faced with various challenges that require special training and adequate church support.

METHOD

This study used a descriptive qualitative method and literature review to explore the experiences and perceptions of individuals related to the role of Sunday school teachers in instilling the character of Christ in children with special needs. The qualitative method was

chosen because it allows researchers to understand the meaning and complexity of the research subjects' experiences in depth (Manurung, 2022). This research was carried out by analyzing the literature review of children with special needs. Making a study of the importance of the character of Christ for a child. Then analyze the role of Sunday school teachers in instilling the character of Christ in a child. The literature used is sourced from journal articles related to the title and is of novelty value, and from relevant books.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Children with special needs

Glenda Ramirez and colleagues understand that children with special needs are children who have certain physical, mental, emotional, or developmental conditions that require additional attention, services, and support in their educational and social environments (Ramirez, Kum, and Kelly, 2020). There are several disorders in children, namely sensory disorders, speech and language disorders, physical disorders such as physical disabilities and cerebral palsy, children with above average intelligence, spectrum disorders such as autism, and others that require physical assistance or special devices to participate in activities (Artistia et al. 2024). Children with intellectual and developmental disabilities, including Down syndrome, autism, Asperger's syndrome, and other developmental delays that affect cognitive and social abilities. Learning disorders, including dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia, impact children's ability to read, write, and count. Emotional and behavioral disorders, including ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), oppositional defiant disorder, and anxiety disorders, that affect a child's behavior and social interactions. Sensory impairments, including hearing impairments, visual impairments, and sensory processing disorders that affect a child's ability to receive and respond to sensory information from their environment.

Special needs children include a range of conditions that affect a child's ability to learn and participate fully in daily activities. The characteristics of learning abilities of children with special needs are difficulties in preparing for learning, easily forgetting newly learned knowledge/skills, and difficulty in concentrating (Stewart et al. 2023). Children with special needs (ABK) have different treatments and challenges in overcoming them with other children. One of the characteristics of children with special needs is individualism when interacting socially with peers and adults. So that additional guidance is needed to develop their social skills. In supporting emotionally and socially, special designs are also needed, including in terms of developing social skills. It is also necessary to create programs and activities designed to help children with special needs develop the social skills needed to interact with others. Counseling and psychological support will go a long way in helping children overcome the emotional challenges they may face. Therefore, Valeri Leiter and colleagues also encourage the importance of involving and empowering parents in the education process of children with special needs, and providing resources and support to help them in their role (Leiter et al. 2004).

Another challenge is in terms of health and care, which may require more frequent and intensive medical treatment, as well as adjustments in the school environment to meet their health needs.

In education, children with special needs also need special attention and treatment so that they can adjust to their learning environment. The need for inclusive education by provide an inclusive learning environment where children with special needs can learn alongside their peers with the necessary adjustments. With an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), this develops an education plan tailored to the child's individual needs, including learning objectives, teaching strategies, and support needed (Ducy and Stough, 2011). Not only should the education plan use diverse teaching methods such as multisensory learning, project-based learning, and assistive technology to support the child's learning. In the education process, cooperation between teachers, parents, specialists (such as occupational therapists and speech therapists), and school staff to provide comprehensive support for the child is also necessary (Ku and Sung, 2021). In dealing with children with special needs, the role of technology is also needed. The use of assistive technology tools such as augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices, assistive listening devices, and specialized software to support learning (Dr. H. Amka, 2016). With the use of digital technology that can be accessed by children with special needs can be facilitated learning and communication.

The Importance of Christ-like Character for Children with Special Needs

Ralph Waldo Emerson asserts that character is higher than intelligence (Emerson, 1924). A person can have an IQ above average, but if he does not have character, likely, he will likely not survive in society. That is the importance of instilling character education in children, as well as children with special needs. Paul confirms in Galatians 5:22-23, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.... There is no law against these things". A person can be said to have the character of Christ when they can apply the fruit of the Spirit and be a blessing to others. The character of Christ includes values such as love, honesty, patience, and humility capable of respecting the rights and dignity of others (Prawiromaruto and Stevanus, 2022). Instilling these values in children from an early age helps form a strong moral foundation that will guide them in making good and responsible decisions throughout their lives. Teaching the character of Christ helps children understand the importance of integrity and ethics in daily interactions. This teaching needs to be strived for as it happens gradually and over a long period until they are in Christ. They learn to act with honesty, fairness, and justice. The character of Christ is important in the emotional and social development of children. Because the character of Christ emphasizes the importance of love and empathy. Children who are taught to love others like Christ develop the ability to feel and understand the feelings of others and act with compassion. Values such as humility and patience help children learn to cooperate with others, appreciate differences, and develop an attitude of tolerance. This is important for creating a harmonious and inclusive social environment (Lase and Purba, 2020)

A child, just like an adult, also has feelings and problems. In this case, the character of Christ is needed so that children can face their challenges and problems patiently. Referring to Makonen Getu's understanding, the character of Christ includes perseverance and patience in the face of adversity, This means that children who learn these values tend to be more resistant to stress and more able to overcome challenges in life with a positive attitude (Getu, 2018). Not only patience, but a child must also have courage and moral strength in facing challenges

and problems. If children have Christ-like moral courage, then they can stand firm in their beliefs and principles, even in situations that are difficult or where there is no way out for them. Christ-like character is rooted in a strong relationship with God. Teaching children to follow Christ's example and helping them develop a deep faith and meaningful relationship with God. Children who are guided to understand and live out the character of Christ often have a clearer purpose in life. They learn to see their lives in a larger context and have a direction set by spiritual values. It is aptly said by Billy Graham that character is the true identity of a person (Robert, 2024)

A child also has their social life. The character of Christ teaches the importance of service to others and sacrifice for the common good (Setiawan, 2018). Children raised with these values tend to be caring individuals and are active in their small communities, contributing to the well-being of others. The character of Christ is important for Children who are taught to see themselves as valuable children of God, develop healthy and positive self-esteem. They learn to value themselves and others, which is essential for healthy personal and social development. Christ-like character in children also gives them something to be proud of. Children will feel part of something bigger and meaningful, which gives them a strong sense of identity and purpose. Teaching children the character of Christ not only helps them develop into good and responsible individuals but also prepares them to become leaders of integrity and caring members of society. These values form a strong foundation for a meaningful and successful life, both personally and in their contributions to the world around them (Manurung, 2022).

The Role of the Sunday School Teacher

Sunday school teachers in the Pentecostal church emphasize how the Holy Spirit works in every child, including children with special needs. Because children with special needs also have the same Holy Spirit as other children. Sunday school teachers have a very important role in educating and guiding children in the introduction and appreciation of spiritual and moral values based on Christian teachings in the Pentecostal church. This role is crucial in shaping children's character from an early age. The development and shaping of character through three stages, namely knowledge (knowing), implementation (acting), and the habit stage (habit) (Tan, 2021). When Sunday school teachers can teach about the character of Christ, children will apply it, and then it will become a habit.

The role of Sunday school teachers as role models for children with special needs

Indeed, the importance of the role of Sunday school teachers for children's spirituality is that through their presence, a child gets a role model who is an example of the character of Christ (Widiyanto and Nostroy, 2021). The way of interacting with children and fellow teachers must reflect the values that have been taught. Thomas Tan once said that exemplary is the main condition for the success of character education (Tan, 2021). To be a role model, Sunday school teachers must also have a strong stance on their moral authority. As Pamela Davies-Kean and colleagues state that role modeling will lead children to be firm, consistent, and rational

(Davies-Kean, Tighe, and Waters, 2021). Paul in 1 Timothy 4:12 also advises Timothy to be an example to the believers in speech, behavior, love, faithfulness, and holiness.

Sunday school teachers play an important role in the character building and faith growth of children. Teachers not only act as teachers, but also as role models who reflect the love of Christ in real actions. The attitude of the teacher, such as patience, humility, perseverance, and love, will have a deep impact on the children they serve. In the context of children's ministry, a consistent example between words and deeds is the key to effectively instilling Christian values. Therefore, the integrity of a Sunday School teacher's life is an integral part of the success of the ministry. As it is written in Titus 2:7, "Make yourselves an example of good works. Show in your teaching purity of heart and nobleness of mind." Thus, the example of a teacher led by the Holy Spirit not only shapes the character of children but also leads them to know Christ personally. The presence of a Spirit-filled Sunday School teacher becomes God's tool to plant seeds of faith that will continue to grow in the lives of children into adulthood.

Teachers set an example by helping children develop their identity as Christians and understand the importance of living out their faith in daily life with love and sincerity. It is a habit that a child tends to imitate the attitude of the adults around him, so the Sunday school teacher's example when interacting with children must prioritize the understanding that the teacher becomes a model that the child sees (Kupers et al. 2019). Sunday school teachers in Pentecostal churches also help children experience and understand the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in their lives through prayer, worship, and service. Such an example will help children to understand the character of Christ and then apply it in their daily lives.

The role of Sunday school teachers as educators with an inclusive education curriculum

Sunday school teachers will play a major role in instilling the character of Christ in children with special needs when they can adapt learning materials so that they are easily understood by the child (Sims, 1995). This can involve using more visual, tactile, or multisensory teaching methods according to the needs of the child. Teachers can utilize appropriate technology to assist the learning process, such as audio books, educational applications, computer animations, or other communication aids according to the child's needs (Lubis et al. 2023). This is done through stories, games, and activities that illustrate these values. Props are a very appropriate strategy for Sunday school teachers to attract children's attention. With props, children with special needs can grasp the story of God's word quickly because there is something to see. Sunday school teachers are responsible for teaching Bible stories, principles of Christian faith, and basic church doctrines. This includes explaining the moral and spiritual messages contained in the Bible (Tefbana et al. 2020). In addition, of course, in teaching, Sunday school teachers are required to be creative, so that the messages to be conveyed to children can be understood and easily understood by children, and can motivate each child, so that a child also has the enthusiasm and encouragement to be able to achieve his goals (Larasati and Indriana, 2017)

The role of Sunday school teachers in building communication with children with special needs

Building good communication relationships with children with special needs is another word that Sunday school teachers can do in order to play a maximum role in instilling the character of Christ in children with special needs. North Cook encourages every teacher who is connected with children with special needs to provide enough time to communicate with the child (Cooc, 2019). Effective communication with methods that suit the needs of the child, such as sign language, as well as other communication aids, can also be very useful. Sri Nurhayati says that children with special needs, especially those with communication barriers, may find it difficult to communicate their needs or frustrations verbally (Selian, 2023)

Not only communication, but also building children's confidence in building relationships is very important. Such as encouraging children to actively participate in class activities, so that they feel valued and confident. Through group activities and social interactions, teachers help children develop communication, cooperation, and empathy skills. Encouraging positive relationships among children and between children and teachers, which are based on mutual respect and affection. Sunday school teachers are expected to encourage interaction between children with special needs and other children in order to build social skills and empathy. Gregory Long encourages Sunday school teachers to create a safe and loving, inclusive classroom environment where children feel accepted and valued and feel safe to explore and learn (Long, 2018).

The Sunday school teacher's role as a collaborator between parents and special needs specialists

Being a collaborator with parents and specialists is another role that Sunday school teachers can play a maximum role in instilling the character of Christ in children with special needs (McLurkin, 2019). Sunday school teachers must establish good communication with parents, inform them about the development of children with special needs, and involve parents in the child's learning process, to support the child when with parents. Because interventions with family counseling can influence in dealing with emotional problems in children with special needs (Anidi and Anlianna, 2022). Not only with parents, but also with specialists such as psychologists, therapists, or special assistant teachers to get input or the right strategy in handling children with special needs. Sunday school teachers should also work with church leaders to support Sunday school programs and ensure that children's spiritual needs are met. In mentoring, parents should also have sufficient knowledge about the child's condition, so that they do not have to worry about their child's condition. If parents can support their children's development, it will be easier for Sunday school teachers to fulfill their role as spiritual mentors. Not only that, but the importance of training and self-development of teachers through continuing education and practical experience. Teachers must continue to develop their knowledge and skills through training, seminars, and courses related to inclusive education and handling children with special needs. They should also improve their practical skills through direct involvement in various activities related to children with special needs. By carrying out these roles with dedication and love, Sunday school teachers can have a significant positive impact on the lives of children, including children with special needs, and

help them grow into individuals who are strong in faith and the character of Christ. By playing these roles, Sunday school teachers can make a significant contribution to the spiritual, emotional, and social development of children with special needs and help them reach their full potential in a loving and inclusive environment (Wadu et al., 2019)

CONCLUSION

Children with special needs require special assistance, including when interacting in a church environment. This can also be interpreted that Sunday school teachers have a very important role in fulfilling the rights of children with special needs, in instilling the character of Christ in children in the Pentecostal church environment. The role of Sunday school teachers in instilling the character of Christ in children with special needs is when the teacher becomes a role model that can be emulated by children with special needs, both through their words and the way they treat children. In addition, they also educate with a curriculum related to inclusive education that is easily understood by children with special needs in Sunday school. Then play a role in building good communication with children with special needs. As well as being a collaborator between parents and specialists to instill the character of Christ in children with special needs. With this study, the researcher has high hopes regarding further research how the role of Sunday school teachers in intense communication with parents and specialists of children with special needs.

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