

Fostering Faith, Character, and Environmental Consciousness: The Holistic Approach of Christian Education in Early Childhood

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Abstract

This study explores the role of environmentally friendly learning materials in Christian education for early childhood. Using a qualitative research approach with descriptive analysis, library research is employed as the primary data collection method. The study takes place at TK GMIM Anugerah Tingkulu in Manado City, involving a literature review on environmentally friendly learning materials and Christian Education concepts. Observations and interviews with kindergarten teachers are conducted for data analysis. The findings highlight the crucial role of Christian education in nurturing the faith, character, and spiritual growth of young children. It extends beyond teaching church-related knowledge and integrates principles aligned with Christian values. By incorporating environmentally friendly learning materials like recycled items and digital tools, TK GMIM Anugerah Tingkulu educators promote environmental consciousness and sustainability. Active parental involvement in creating recycled educational toys and adopting eco-friendly practices further enhances Christian character education. This integration of faith, knowledge, and environmental stewardship fosters a holistic learning experience, equipping children for a digital future while nurturing their spiritual and environmental well-being.

Keywords : *Fostering faith, character, environmental consciousness, holistic approach, Christian education, early childhood*

INTRODUCTION

Global warming is an environmental issue that is currently being widely discussed. This global problem has a direct impact on the survival of all living beings in our world. Environmental experts, scientists, religious leaders, and the general public are increasingly recognizing the significance of this issue. Similarly, in Indonesia, the issue of environmental pollution leading to global warming is a compelling subject of study for various stakeholders.

In the context of Christian Education, environmental pollution issues also receive significant attention. This attention stems from the recognition of how the church plays a role in the well-being and survival of many individuals. Thus, the church's concerns extend beyond the interests of its congregations or the church community alone. Instead, the church is seen as having a responsibility to respond to all issues related to the lives of many people, particularly those closely tied to the environment.

In the face of growing environmental crises, it has become vitally important to instill not only academic knowledge but also ethical awareness and environmental responsibility in our future generations. Christian education, which emphasizes

stewardship of God's earth, offers a powerful framework for merging spiritual teachings with environmental education. This is particularly significant during early childhood, a stage widely recognized for its substantial impact on an individual's developmental trajectory. This research will explore the integration of green learning tools within Christian education for early childhood, with a particular focus on Manado City, Indonesia.

The literature under review in this research comprises two main concepts: Christian education and environmentally friendly learning resources. Christian education primarily aims to embed a Christian worldview in children and foster a lifelong love for learning, coupled with a dedication to serving in a manner that reflects Christ's teachings (Knight, G, 2006). In their research, Shonkoff & Phillips (Shonkoff, J. P., & Phillips, D. A. (Eds.), 2000) underscore the early childhood phase as a time of rapid cognitive, emotional, and social growth. Thus, Christian education at this stage targets teaching children about God's love, biblical principles, and their roles as caretakers of the environment.

On the other hand, environmentally friendly learning materials refer to educational resources and tools that are environmentally sustainable, and they nurture children's respect and understanding for the environment (Damerell et al., 2013). These resources, which can range from recycled materials to digital tools that cut down on the need for physical resources, resonate with the Christian doctrine of stewardship and equip children with the knowledge and skills necessary for a sustainable lifestyle. There is one previous study that discusses the cultivation of moral values for early childhood can also be applied through the use of traditional Minahasa learning media (Manoppo et al., 2022). The research reveals the importance of learning media as a tool in conveying meaningful messages for children's character education.

A critical part of this literature review is the unique context of Manado City, Indonesia. This city, with a majority Christian population, emphasizes a holistic Christian education. The incorporation and application of environmentally friendly learning media in Manado's Christian early childhood education forms the cornerstone of this research exploration.

METHOD

This study utilizes a qualitative research approach employing descriptive analysis, based on an extensive review of existing literature. The research was conducted at TK GMIM Anugerah Tingkulu Manado. This research was conducted from September to November 2022. The researchers performed a thorough examination of various journal articles and books pertaining to the subjects of learning resources for young children, and the principles of Christian Education to gather relevant data. Subsequently, the researchers conducted descriptive-analytical investigations by observing and interviewing the teachers at TK GMIM Anugerah Tingkulu Manado. The final phase involved the compilation of articles based on the data obtained from the literature review, arguments presented, observations made, and interviews conducted.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The principles of Christian education and its application in the lives of young children.

Christian education encompasses more than just imparting the teachings of the church to young children. This is evident in the establishment and ongoing support of universities by Christians. The fact that universities originated from the Christian worldview is often overlooked or underestimated by those who hold negative views towards Christianity. Christianity is a faith that engages in self-reflection and self-criticism, even though it can be a challenging process (Kurian & Lamport, 2015). This means that Christians have played a significant role in advancing knowledge and critical thinking.

Van Til views education through a Christian lens, emphasizing its connection to God's Word. He believes that education should enable us to understand and honor God. On the other hand, John Dewey's perspective on education is rooted in pragmatism and progressivism. According to Dewey, supernatural beliefs act as obstacles to humanity's advancement, and thus he advocates for their abandonment (Woenardi et al., 2022).

According to Van Brummelen, Christian education plays a crucial role in fostering children's faith, character development, and spiritual growth. It establishes a strong spiritual foundation by providing instruction on God, Jesus Christ, and biblical teachings. Christian education facilitates the formation of a personal connection with God and enhances children's understanding of Christian values and beliefs (Harro W. Van Brummelen, 2009).

Instilling character education during early childhood or preschool is crucial, as this period, ranging from 0 to 6 years, is recognized as a critical phase of growth and development. It presents the ideal opportunity to harness and cultivate children's inherent potential. Developmental psychology highlights the significance of fostering and guiding individuals during this golden age. The experiences and teachings imparted during this stage significantly influence a person's development throughout their adulthood (Woenardi et al., 2022).

The principles of Christian education and its application in the lives of young learners, especially in their moral and spiritual growth, are fundamental. This system of education merges faith, knowledge, and moral action, establishing a reliable foundation for kids to grow into responsible individuals in both a spiritual and environmental context. This discussion will focus on the application of Christian education for young children using green learning materials in Manado City, Indonesia.

2. Understanding the broader perspective of Christian education and its importance is necessary

The objective of Christian education is to impart a Christian worldview in children and nurture an enduring passion for learning and service that mirrors the teachings of Christ (Knight, G, 2006). Early childhood is a particularly sensitive period as it's marked by rapid growth cognitively, socially, and emotionally (Shonkoff, J. P., & Phillips, D. A. (Eds.), 2000). Christian education promotes the integration of faith and learning, allowing children to view the world from a biblical standpoint. It assists them in recognizing the interconnectedness between their Christian faith and all areas of knowledge and subjects. This fosters critical thinking and the ability to discern truth and

wisdom (David S. Dockery, 2011). Christian education during these years involves teaching kids about God's love, the values portrayed in the Bible, and their duties as caretakers of God's creation.

3. Promoting Christian Character Education through Parental Engagement in Creating Recycled Educational Toys

Based on interviews with teachers at TK GMIM Anugerah Tingkulu, it has been found that parents are also involved in the learning process, especially in the cultivation of Christian character education. The involvement of parents includes accompanying their children in creating educational toys using recycled materials such as used plastic packaging, empty mineral water bottles, and other natural materials. Throughout the process of making these educational toys, parents are requested by the teachers to assist their children in utilizing recycled materials as learning tools at home.

Based on observations by the teachers, it has been observed that several Christian values can be seen through this mentoring process, such as a sense of environmental awareness demonstrated by the child's conscious effort to avoid littering and their willingness to utilize discarded materials found around the house, which are usually considered as waste. However, with the guidance of parents and teachers, these materials can be transformed into educational toys. According to the writer, this demonstrates sensitivity to the microsystem as part of ecological theory. The learning process utilizing environmentally friendly teaching aids can help children concretely recognize God.

The microsystem environment is the smallest and most immediate environment that directly impacts children, encompassing their living environment and interactions with people. This includes their home, school or daycare, peer groups, and community. Interactions within the microsystem involve personal engagement with family, classmates, teachers, and caregivers, all of whom influence the child. The way individuals in this environment interact with the child has a significant impact on their growth. Similarly, the child's reactions to people in the microsystem affect how they are treated. The influence of the microsystem on child development, as seen in various parenting styles, can be observed in how parents set limits and use punishment in the Authoritarian Style, encourage independent learning while setting boundaries in the Authoritative Style, and exhibit a lack of involvement in the Permissive Indifferent Style, leading to the child's social incompetence and lack of self-control. Meanwhile, the indulgent permissive pattern refers to parents actively engaging in their child's life by indulging their desires with minimal limitations or control over their behavior. As a consequence, this approach leads to the child's social incompetence and a lack of self-discipline (Hamidulloh Ibda, 2022).

The role of parents in fostering their children's character is of utmost importance. It is their duty to ensure the effective development of crucial qualities like humility, gentleness, patience, love, and peace in order to counteract negative habits. Simatupang's research reveals that parental influence accounts for 69% of children's susceptibility to negative habits, with the remaining 31% influenced by other factors. Additionally, the study highlights that employing a planned, systematic, and targeted approach to behavior shaping can significantly reduce the likelihood of negative habits by 73% in children. Based on these findings, it is recommended that parents initiate the instillation of humility, gentleness, patience, love, and peace in their children from an

early age, as this has proven to effectively mitigate the adverse effects of disruptive times, particularly the development of negative habits (Simatupang et al., 2022).

The active involvement of parents in the learning process, particularly in instilling Christian character education at TK GMIM Anugerah Tingkulu. Parents contribute by assisting their children in creating educational toys from recycled materials, fostering environmental awareness and resourcefulness. This engagement within the microsystem aligns with ecological theory and significantly impacts child development. The observed Christian values and the use of environmentally friendly teaching aids contribute to children's concrete recognition of God. Furthermore, the analysis briefly highlights the consequences of the indulgent permissive parenting style, which can lead to social incompetence and a lack of self-discipline in children.

3. The environmentally friendly learning media and their significance in Christian education

Environmentally friendly learning resources are educational materials and tools that are sustainable, have minimal environmental impact, and promote children's appreciation for the environment. These resources can vary from recycled or repurposed items to digital tools that decrease the need for physical resources. These materials not only resonate with the Christian duty of being caretakers of God's creation but also provide children with the necessary knowledge and skills for sustainable living (Damerell et al., 2013).

Manado City, a dynamic and culturally diverse Indonesian city with a majority Christian population, offers a specific context to explore. The Christian community in Manado puts great emphasis on education. A wholesome Christian education for children is provided through the collective efforts of churches, schools, and families. Early childhood education in TK GMIM Anugerah Tingkulu Manado encompasses teaching Biblical values and principles, including the importance of preserving God's creation. The utilization of learning materials crafted from recycled materials can heighten children's awareness of maintaining a healthy and clean environment. By incorporating such media into teaching, educators can enhance creativity in the learning process, elucidate methods of environmental preservation, and impart knowledge on waste reduction through the recycling of used items into educational materials.

Each Early Childhood Education (PAUD) institution, particularly those with a Christian foundation, assumes a crucial role as a establishment primarily focused on instilling moral and religious values during early childhood. The objective is to facilitate children in acquiring knowledge of Christ from an early age, thereby fostering character development in line with biblical teachings. The effective cultivation of moral and Christian values necessitates the use of appropriate learning materials, which can ensure the successful implantation and development of Christian principles while simultaneously captivating the interest of children. As observed by researcher, children at TK GMIM Anugerah Tingkulu displayed significant enthusiasm for learning through play, particularly when utilizing learning media derived from recycled plastic waste (Jeane Marie Tulung & Febri Kurnia Manoppo, 2023). Additionally, the teachers have introduced christian education through diverse learning resources fashioned from plastic waste.

Based on interviews with the teachers there, it was found that they utilize various environmentally friendly learning materials, such as recycled materials and loose parts, as props to convey different Bible stories to the children. The incorporation of these environmentally friendly learning materials serves the purpose of waste reduction in the city of Manado, while also contributing to the education of parents and children about the importance of loving God and caring for His creation. Typically, teachers employ these environmentally friendly learning materials to narrate Bible stories, including dolls made from used cloth and socks, as well as decorative pictures depicting Bible stories created from plastic waste.

Nicole M. Ardoin and Alison W. Bowers' research analysis indicates that Early Childhood Environmental Education (ECEE) positively influences the affective and cognitive development of young children. It encourages them to explore the environment, boosts their self-confidence, and facilitates social connections. ECEE programs also contribute to the formation of cognitive frameworks for understanding the natural world and lay the foundation for skills and attitudes related to environmental improvement and protection. The reviewed studies highlight the significance of nature-rich settings and the incorporation of nature elements into classrooms, with a particular focus on trees, water, and nature in general. These programs aim to foster children's action skills and promote developmentally appropriate pro-environmental behaviors. Furthermore, the findings suggest that ECEE programs not only prioritize environmental education but also emphasize personal development and academic progress, aligning with early childhood goals such as kindergarten readiness. The evidence from their review demonstrates the positive outcomes of ECEE, encompassing affective and cognitive dimensions, and showcasing the joy and curiosity inherent in effective early childhood education. These programs encourage children to connect their emotions with environmental knowledge, action orientation, and civic engagement, taking a holistic view of the environment. The combination of early childhood education and environmental education creates a powerful synergy, enhancing the human experience in the world and benefiting future generations (Ardoin & Bowers, 2020).

The analysis by Nicole M. Ardoin and Alison W. Bowers underscores the positive influence of Early Childhood Environmental Education (ECEE) on the emotional and cognitive development of young children. ECEE programs encourage exploration, self-assurance, and social connections while establishing mental frameworks for comprehending the natural world. These programs prioritize environmental protection and improvement, fostering age-appropriate environmentally friendly behaviors. The incorporation of nature-rich settings and elements in classrooms plays a pivotal role in ECEE. The findings also emphasize the alignment between ECEE and early childhood goals of personal growth and academic advancement. The combination of environmental and early childhood education in ECEE creates a powerful synergy that enhances the human experience and yields long-term benefits for future generations.

The concept of school ecology extends beyond merely instructing students about the environment, although that is a part of it. Rather, ecological education involves establishing a system that embodies ecological patterns and principles at its core. The question arises: why should we incorporate ecology into schools? Ecology represents

the most resilient and stable system known to us. Ecosystems possess the ability to self-replicate, disperse, and sustain themselves. Natural systems enhance complexity and resilience over time, efficiently utilizing resources through countless interactions. It is evident that the interconnectedness of life forms a network. Drawing a parallel, ecological networks bear similarities to neural connections in the brain or, on a more abstract level, the connections within the curriculum or the social networks found in our schools and communities (Hamidulloh Ibda, 2022). The school ecology goes beyond teaching students about the environment by creating a system that reflects ecological principles. Implementing ecology in schools allows us to leverage the resilience and stability of natural systems, which self-replicate, disperse, and sustain themselves. These systems become more complex and resilient over time while efficiently utilizing resources through numerous interactions. The interconnectedness of ecological networks is similar to the neural connections in the brain, the links within the curriculum, and the social networks within our schools and communities. By embracing ecological education, we can deepen students' understanding of the natural world, foster sustainability, and promote comprehensive learning experiences that extend beyond the confines of the classroom.

In Manado's early Christian education, green learning materials are becoming increasingly popular. For instance, several Christian kindergartens have introduced gardening-based learning, where kids learn about the Bible and the environment by cultivating a garden using sustainable practices. This method not only reduces environmental impact but also provides a practical learning experience for children. Moreover, to decrease the usage of physical resources and waste, digital learning materials have also been incorporated. Some Christian early childhood education programs in Manado utilize digital storytelling apps to narrate Bible stories, eliminating the need for physical books (Kosara & Mackinlay, 2013.Ris, n.d.). This method is in line with the Christian duty of stewardship and also prepares children for a digital future.

CONCLUSION

Christian education plays a pivotal role in the development of young children, nurturing their faith, character, and spiritual growth. It goes beyond teaching church-related knowledge and encompasses principles that align with Christian values. By incorporating environmentally friendly learning materials, like recycled items and digital tools, Christian educators in TK GMIM Anugerah Tingkulu Manado promote environmental consciousness and sustainability. The active participation of parents in creating recycled educational toys and adopting eco-friendly practices further enriches the Christian character education. This integration of faith, knowledge, and environmental stewardship fosters a comprehensive learning experience that equips children for a digital future while nurturing their spiritual and environmental well-being.

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