



Original Article

An Analysis of Sunday School Teachers' Understanding of Children with Special Needs

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Abstract:

This research is to describe Sunday school teachers' understanding of the conditions of children with special needs at the GKE Pahandut Palangka Raya Hilir Resort. The research method used is qualitative research which aims to obtain an in-depth understanding which emphasizes understanding the subjective elements of the individual himself regarding the phenomenon being studied and is considered appropriate in answering the research problem. There were 4 subjects in this research, including Sunday school teachers for children with special needs at the GKE Pahandut Palangka Raya Hilir Resort. The results of this research generally show that teachers have a good level of understanding regarding children with special needs. This level of understanding does not mean that teachers fully understand the needs of children, but here the teachers have knowledge about children with special needs, although in its application the teachers still experience difficulties several times. Meanwhile, teachers' understanding of the needs of children with special needs is in the form of extrapolation understanding. Some teachers are quite capable of distinguishing the specificities experienced by children with special needs. Meanwhile, the factors that influence Sunday School teachers' understanding of the condition of Children with Special Needs at Pahandut Resort Palangka Raya Hilir include internal factors, namely those related to psychological (emotional) factors and external factors that influence Sunday School teachers' understanding, namely experience and work.

Keywords: Understanding, Sunday School Teacher, Children with Special Needs.



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Introduction

The number of children with special needs has increased every year. Based on a survey conducted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology in Central Kalimantan, the number of children with special needs registered in the

student verification system reached 531,385 in 2024. Children with special needs also require education and services appropriate to their conditions, accompanied by the awareness that they possess strengths and potential (Badriyah & Pasmawati, 2020). This indicates that children with special needs have the same right to participate in Sunday School services at church. Regardless of the type of challenges they face, their presence remains an important part of the church.

A study by [Harisantoso \(2022\)](#) discussed the congregation's perceptions of persons with disabilities or special needs in church ministry. The results showed that the church has a calling to realize equality and openness in providing inclusive services aimed at transforming negative views into attitudes of acceptance toward human diversity. The church is also expected to involve children with special needs in both ministry and social activities. In this way, the church plays an important role in empowering individuals.

In 2023, the Pahandut Palangka Raya Hilir Resort took the initiative to hold Sunday School services for children with special needs—the first of its kind in Central Kalimantan. This service was established out of a shared awareness to ensure the participation of children with special needs in church activities. Previously, Sunday School had been perceived as a service intended only for children without impairments. In reality, there were children with special needs attending Sunday School, yet their presence was not fully acknowledged.

An initial interview conducted in February 2023 with one of the pastors at Pahandut Palangka Raya Hilir Resort revealed that the purpose of holding Sunday School for children with special needs was to support spiritual and religious development, build strong faith from an early age, introduce Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, foster self-confidence, and embrace them with love. According to Theodorus (2021), attention to children with special needs should not only focus on their physical, mental, social, or emotional conditions, but also on their spiritual growth. Therefore, the church needs to design services that nurture the spirituality of children with special needs. Sunday School provides new experiences for them, which can be beneficial both for children and their parents.

Further initial findings showed that Sunday School services were first held in July 2023 and were planned to take place once a month. However, these services were temporarily halted due to a shortage of Sunday School teachers willing to accompany and serve children with special needs. Based on official decrees, the total number of Sunday School teachers was 28, drawn from various churches within the Pahandut Palangka Raya Hilir Resort. Yet, not all teachers were actively involved, and only 15 remained consistently engaged. On the other hand, Sunday School teachers hold a significant responsibility in guiding and educating children with special needs to support their spiritual growth.

A Sunday School teacher is someone responsible for setting an example in the spiritual development of children, showing love and care, and helping them grow in faith while addressing the challenges they face, since Sunday School students need the teaching of God's Word. Children are an essential component of the church and thus need proper care and guidance in their faith journey.

Instilling spiritual values in children plays a crucial role in shaping their character into adulthood ([Laia, 2018](#)). In practice, Sunday School teachers guide children through storytelling of God's Word, singing, and prayer, creating joy and

meaningful activities. This reflects how God uses Sunday School teachers as channels of blessing for children ([Bawole, 2020](#)).

As teachers serving children with special needs, Sunday School teachers should have the right understanding and perception of their nature. With this awareness, they can provide appropriate treatment and care according to the children's needs ([Irdamurni, 2018](#)). However, difficulties are often encountered in understanding the characteristics of children with special needs, sometimes leading teachers to expect them to perform at the same level as other children and creating confusion in handling them ([Suharsiwi, 2017](#)). Among the teachers serving children with special needs, only one had a background as a teacher in a special needs school (SLB) teaching Christian Religious Education, while the others came from different professional backgrounds.

This aligns with a previous study on the perceptions of Sunday School teachers toward children with special needs in the Toraja Church congregation in Depok, conducted by [Sampe \(2023\)](#). The findings indicated that teachers had strong understanding of children with special needs, would not discriminate against them, and perceived them positively. Teachers' teaching methods, as well as their ability to adapt and modify learning for children with special needs, were influenced by these positive perceptions. As a result, Sunday School could strive to provide education for children with special needs in good faith so that they too could grow spiritually to their fullest potential.

Based on the discussion above, it is evident that the understanding of Sunday School teachers regarding children with special needs is essential for providing appropriate teaching and ministry. This is what encouraged the researcher to conduct this study.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative approach aimed at providing an in-depth understanding and explanation of the phenomena under investigation in accordance with the research problem. The data collection techniques used were interviews and observations.

Research Participants

The participants in this study consisted of five individuals: four Sunday School teachers actively involved in serving children with special needs and one pastor engaged in the ministry. The method used to select the participants was purposive sampling, meaning that participants were chosen based on specific criteria aligned with the objectives of the study.

Data Analysis

The process of data analysis was carried out both during and after data collection, in which the components of data analysis were interactively interconnected. The qualitative data analysis procedures included data reduction, namely the process of selecting, simplifying, and transforming raw data obtained in the field; data display, namely describing the organized information in the form of narrative text; and conclusion drawing and verification.

The data obtained in the field were recorded through audio devices, then transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were coded and categorized according to themes, after which thematic analyses and reflections were conducted for each participant. Following the data analysis, the next stage was data interpretation. Data interpretation refers to the development of ideas from the findings, which are then related to theoretical frameworks (existing theories). In this study, the researcher interpreted the analysis of data regarding Sunday School teachers' understanding of the condition of children with special needs.

Results

Description of Research Subjects

The research subjects consisted of five individuals, including Sunday School teachers for children with special needs at the GKE Pahandut Palangka Raya Hilir Resort. The description of the research subjects is presented in the table below.

Table 1.

No	Subject Initials	Age	Last education		Work
1	Mrs. TT	35	Theology		Ministry Pastor
2	Ms N	39	Christian Education	Religious	Special School Teacher
3	Mrs I	40	Early Childhood Teacher Education	Childhood	Early Childhood Education Teacher
4	YY's mother	44	Economics		Shadow Teacher
5	Mrs. LN	36	Economics		Housewife

Description of Sunday School Services

There are several forms of Sunday School services for children with special needs at the Pahandut Palangka Raya Hilir Resort. Teachers warmly welcome the children upon arrival. The teacher asks the child to count from one to three using picture aids, and once the child completes the task, the teacher gives a reward in the form of praise, followed by a high five, before the child enters the classroom. In addition, teachers provide opportunities for all children to actively participate during the Sunday School sessions as well as in larger church activities.

Sunday School services are carried out using several methods, such as singing with movements, short dramas performed by the Sunday School teachers, and games about recognizing body parts. During the service, parents accompany their children from the beginning to the end of the program. At the conclusion of the service, teachers provide tips and steps as follow-up activities so that parents can continue them at home with their children.

Description of Sunday School Teachers' Understanding of Children with Special Needs

The first participant had knowledge related to certain conditions, particularly autism. This understanding was gained from a seminar she attended prior to the

initiation of Sunday School services, as well as from her experience as a mother of a child with special needs. However, regarding other types of special needs, her understanding was limited. She believed that such conditions required proper diagnoses from doctors or psychologists, as she found it difficult to identify them solely based on visible characteristics.

The second participant possessed adequate knowledge due to her profession as a teacher in a Special Needs School (Sekolah Luar Biasa). This role made her accustomed to meeting and interacting with children with special needs. In addition, she frequently received training and knowledge from the Department of Education and other government institutions. She often provided advice and shared experiences with other teachers, particularly in handling situations when children with special needs displayed unusual behaviors such as tantrums.

The third participant expressed a strong interest in supporting children with special needs, particularly in education, by serving as a shadow teacher. She actively sought information about conditions such as ADHD and autism, and she frequently participated in online training sessions organized by the Anak Terang Foundation in Surabaya. She was later invited to join the foundation as a therapist in Palangka Raya. This participant demonstrated a broad understanding of various types of special needs, including autism, ADHD, physical disabilities, intellectual disabilities, and others.

The fourth participant had limited knowledge and understanding of children with special needs. She joined the Sunday School ministry for children with special needs because she felt called to serve, and she showed empathy toward parents raising children with special needs. She emphasized the importance of community support for parents, especially for those who might feel discouraged or insecure about their children's conditions.

Discussion

Description of Sunday School Services for Children with Special Needs at the Pahandut Palangka Raya Hilir Resort

Sunday School is one of the Christian education programs organized by the church. Through Sunday School services, Christian religious education is emphasized as a program that teaches people about God and nurtures them to enter into a direct personal relationship with Him ([Pattinama, Y.A., 2019](#)). Sunday School services, particularly within the church, highlight the concept of a Child-Friendly Church. This means that both the church and Sunday School are open to children in any condition, including those with special needs.

At the Pahandut Palangka Raya Hilir Resort, Sunday School services for children with special needs primarily focus on nurturing the spiritual growth of the children. Sunday School teachers guide and introduce children to God. On the other hand, these Sunday School services pay less attention to the children's physical and mental development, as there has not yet been an early detection process or collaboration related to interventions aimed at developing the talents of children with special needs.

In terms of the forms of service provided, Sunday School teachers for children with special needs engage in interaction and dialogue with the children. Teachers are expected to take the initiative to interact and communicate more with the children ([Bimas Kristen, 2020](#)). This is evident in Sunday School activities, which always begin

with a warm welcome for the children upon arrival. Teachers ask the children to count from one to three using picture aids, and once completed, the teacher rewards them with praise, followed by a high five before the child enters the classroom.

Another form of service provided is ensuring equal opportunities for all children to actively participate during Sunday School sessions. One example is the Children's Joyful Festival, which reflects the principle of equal opportunities for all children with special needs. Teachers and educators are expected to provide the same opportunities regardless of the child's specific condition or limitations, so as to foster their interests and potential. For example, children with special needs are involved in competitions or celebrations such as Easter and Christmas events.

Additionally, Sunday School services employ a variety of teaching methods. The program is known to use diverse approaches in its teaching. Furthermore, Sunday School also builds collaboration among children, teachers, church members, and parents. Teachers must recognize that they are not alone and cannot do everything by themselves. They need the involvement of others to achieve an effective learning process. This is demonstrated at the end of each Sunday School activity, when teachers provide practical suggestions for parents to continue at home with their children.

Description of Sunday School Teachers' Understanding of Children with Special Needs

Teachers' understanding is an important indicator in achieving the goals of learning and services provided. If teachers lack understanding of services for children with special needs, they will struggle to provide appropriate learning to them. Teachers with limited comprehension of students with special needs often fail to deliver educational services suited to the children's conditions. Therefore, it is crucial that teachers have a good understanding of children with special needs so that they can be properly served ([Komariyah, N.S., 2023](#)).

Sunday School teachers serving children with special needs at the Pahandut Palangka Raya Hilir Resort come from diverse educational backgrounds. This naturally results in varying levels of understanding among teachers. Such diversity in knowledge about children with special needs poses a challenge for the Sunday School program. Some efforts have been made, such as organizing seminars to provide teachers with additional knowledge. However, to date, teachers have only received such training once.

Based on the level of understanding observed from the interviewed subjects, it can be concluded that the teachers' understanding is generally at the level of "comprehension." However, they are not yet fully able to apply what they understand to real-world problems. Teachers still depend on assistants when delivering instruction, and they often feel uncertain in taking action or addressing the behaviors of children with special needs.

In terms of the form of understanding, teachers' comprehension of children with special needs tends to be at the level of Extrapolative Understanding. This refers to the ability to think or predict (forecast) based on an understanding of tendencies or conditions communicated to them. Several teachers are fairly capable of distinguishing the specific needs experienced by children with special needs. This is largely because some of them already possess adequate prior knowledge regarding special needs.

Factors Influencing Understanding

Several factors influence the understanding of Sunday School teachers. These include internal factors, namely those that come from within the individual, such as psychological factors related to emotions, motivation, intelligence, interests and talents, health, and personal maturity. The internal factor most evident among Sunday School teachers is psychological-emotional, as some teachers have an emotional involvement with children with special needs. For instance, one subject also has a child with special needs, another works as a teacher in a special needs school, and another serves as a shadow teacher for children with special needs.

In addition to internal aspects, external factors such as experience play an important role in shaping teachers' understanding. Experience serves as a means of gaining deeper comprehension. Teachers' prior experiences in interacting with children with special needs have equipped them with valuable skills for engaging with these children in Sunday School. Another external factor is occupation. Work experience influences the level of understanding, as it is closely linked to social and cultural interactions that affect comprehension. Teachers who work as educators or shadow teachers tend to possess a stronger understanding of children with special needs compared to those without such backgrounds.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the services provided in Sunday School primarily focus on the spiritual growth of the children. However, on the other hand, the Sunday School for Children with Special Needs at Resort Pahandut Palangka Raya Hilir pays less attention to the physical and mental development of the children.

The services delivered by Sunday School teachers for Children with Special Needs at Resort Pahandut Palangka Raya Hilir include approaches such as engaging in interaction and dialogue with the children, providing opportunities for all children to actively participate during Sunday School sessions, applying diverse and varied teaching methods, as well as building collaboration among children, teachers, church members, and parents.

The understanding of Sunday School teachers regarding the condition of Children with Special Needs at Resort Pahandut Palangka Raya Hilir is at the level of "understanding." However, this level does not imply a complete grasp of the children's needs. Rather, it indicates that the teachers have a general knowledge of children with special needs, even though in practice they still encounter certain difficulties. The teachers' understanding of the needs of children with special needs can be categorized as Extrapolation Understanding, which refers to the ability to predict or infer based on observed tendencies or conditions. Some teachers are sufficiently able to differentiate the specific needs experienced by children with special needs, largely due to the fact that several of them have acquired fairly good knowledge related to special needs.

The factors influencing the understanding of Sunday School teachers regarding the condition of Children with Special Needs at Resort Pahandut Palangka Raya Hilir include internal factors, particularly related to psychological-emotional aspects, and external factors, such as experience and occupation, which also significantly contribute to shaping the teachers' level of understanding.

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