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Recontextualizing The Sunday School Mission Based On The Raikesian Model For Church Growth: A Case Study At GSJA Eben Haezer Semarang

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Abstract

The Sunday School movement began in the 18th century as a holistic intervention for marginalized children, combining literacy, moral guidance, and faith formation. Yet in urban Indonesia today, that vision has largely faded. Sunday School is often treated as mere childcare or routine Bible storytelling, stripped of its transformative potential. This study came from concern about that gap. We examined practices at GSJA Eben Haezer Semarang and asked whether a Raikesian recontextualization is possible.

Using a qualitative case study design, we interviewed twelve teachers and church leaders, observed eight sessions, and analyzed church documents. Three patterns emerged. First, teaching prioritizes cognitive knowledge—memorization and facts—over spiritual and moral growth. Second, the ministry remains inwardly focused, with minimal outreach to children outside the congregation. Third, children's work operates separately from the church's broader growth strategy, reducing its impact.

In response, we developed the Holistic-Integrative Raikesian Model. Unlike checklist-style approaches, our model highlights bidirectional reciprocity between family integration and community engagement. We argue that this interaction, not isolated programs, is what transforms Sunday School into a generative space for intergenerational faith transmission. This study challenges the assumption that children's ministry is merely supportive. When Raikes' original paradigm is recovered and adapted, Sunday School becomes a driver of church growth—not through adult-centric numeric addition, but through child-led generational multiplication. Our findings offer both a theological corrective and a practical strategy for urban congregations, particularly in Global South contexts where similar disjunctures likely exist

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Keywords: Sunday School, Raikesian paradigm, holistic mission, Christian education, sustainable church growth

Introduction

Gereja Sidang Jemaat Allah (GSJA) Eben Haezer Semarang, like many other Pentecostal churches in Indonesian urban areas, faces complex challenges in maintaining sustainable congregational growth, both quantitatively and qualitatively, amidst rapid social changes. Church growth is measured not only by an increase in membership numbers but also through the depth of spirituality, maturity of faith, and integrity of character across generations (Flett, 2021). Within this framework, Sunday School should not be treated merely as an additional liturgical program, but as a strategic instrument for instilling faith continuity and ensuring the spiritual regeneration of the church (Kim, 2022). However, children's ministry in many churches still occupies a peripheral position, marked by repetitive and solely cognitively-oriented pedagogical approaches, without innovation or strategic linkage to the church's vision and mission (Harris & Jacobs, 2023). Consequently, the transformative potential of Sunday School has not been optimized to shape a contextual, critical, and rooted faith within the dynamic life of an urban community.

The modern Sunday School movement originated from the initiative of Robert Raikes (1736–1811), a philanthropist from Gloucester, England, who in the late 18th century conceived a reformist education model to address social inequalities among poor and illiterate children working in factories (Hindmarsh, 2018). Raikes utilized Sundays, the only rest day for working children, to teach basic literacy, morality, and spirituality through biblical texts. The primary goal of this approach extended beyond mere religious instruction; Raikes sought to shape character, develop literacy, and promote social welfare through holistic education based on Christian values (Brewer, 2021; Larsen, 2017). This integrative approach sparked significant social and spiritual transformation, triggered an evangelical revival, and strengthened the moral order of society through the church's active role in children's education (Ming & Muner,2022).

However, with the institutionalization of general education and the professionalization of pedagogy, Raikes' original vision underwent a narrowing of meaning. The Sunday School, which was initially a vessel for holistic ministry, has tended to become fragmented, turning into a space for religious instruction separate from social reality (Laqueur, 2020). Contemporary theologians refer to this phenomenon as the sacralization of children's ministry, namely the tendency to separate children's ministry from the social and missional dynamics of the church (Anthony, 2019; Yust, 2018). In the context of contemporary churches, including in Indonesia, Sunday School often functions independently and separately from overall evangelism and discipleship strategies (Miller, 2022).

Across denominations, studies point to what researchers call "pedagogical drift." Children's ministry has become about filling heads with facts. The deeper stuff character, faith, moral awareness gets neglected (Jesse, 2024; Larson, 2020). The Barna Group tracked 500 congregations and found that only 23% connected Bible teaching with moral and social development. The rest? Just standalone instruction. No integration. No connection to the church's bigger mission (Barna, 2021). Kim found the same pattern in Asian Pentecostal churches. Children's ministry ranked dead last in strategic priorities, despite all the talk about intergenerational discipleship (Kim, 2022). Here's the gap we're addressing. Historians have thoroughly documented Raikes' holistic vision literacy, moral formation, social concern, all together. But nobody has asked whether that 18th century model can actually work in a 21st century urban congregation. Yust called for recontextualization, but their work stayed theoretical

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(Yust, 2018). Concrete models? Still missing. Worse, most research comes from the West (S. E. Holmes, 2021; Larson, 2020). Urban Asia? Pentecostal churches in cities like Semarang? Those contexts remain unstudied. Ingersoll found a positive link, but their sample was mainline US churches (Ingersoll, 2020). Pentecostal settings with their distinct theological emphases are uncharted territory. So we step into that gap. To our knowledge, this is the first empirical study of Raikesian recontextualization in an Indonesian Pentecostal congregation. We ask: (1) What gaps exist between Raikes' principles and current practice? (2) What causes those gaps? (3) How can a recontextualized model drive holistic church growth?

Raikes' visionary approach was based on a concern for social justice and the spiritual welfare of marginalized children. He believed that biblical literacy could be the foundation for moral and social transformation (Brewer, 2021; Wilson, 2020). The Raikes Model is multidimensional, addressing intellectual poverty through literacy, social poverty through community engagement, and spiritual poverty through faith formation (R. Holmes, 2022). This vision not only transformed individual lives but also strengthened church structures through family involvement and the strengthening of cross-generational faith communities. Raikes' principles of holistic formation, biblical literacy, and social awareness remain relevant. But we cannot simply apply them to Indonesia today. The context is very different. Urban churches here face rapid urbanization, a digital culture, shifting family structures, and a pressing need for intergenerational discipleship. The 18th-century England that Raikes describes is not like 21st-century Semarang. So relevance doesn't mean replication. It means recontextualization, taking his theological and educational insights and integrating them into a model where children's ministry is connected to family discipleship, the church's mission, and holistic congregational growth. Focusing not just on increasing numbers but also on shaping faith across generations. This research expands our theoretical understanding of how Raikes' principles can be reformulated into a theological foundation for children's ministry, one that is directly relevant to the realities of urban Pentecostal churches in the 21st century.

In contemporary church growth theory, Donald McGavran emphasizes the importance of effective discipleship and the integration of new members into congregational life as key to sustainable church growth (McGavran & Arn, 2020). Recent empirical findings indicate that well-structured children's ministry plays a significant role in attracting and retaining young families, while instilling a solid spiritual foundation for lifelong faith development (Barna, 2021; Stonehouse & May, 2019). This study goes beyond applying the 18th-century model to the contemporary context. It reconceptualizes Raikes' holistic vision into a contextual theological framework that integrates children's ministry with family discipleship, intergenerational faith formation, and church mission in an urban Pentecostal context. In doing so, this book expands current Sunday School scholarship from a predominantly pedagogical perspective to a missional and ecclesial understanding of children's ministry as a strategic component of holistic church growth.

Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of Sunday School praxis at GSJA Eben Haezer Semarang. This design was chosen for its ability to reveal the phenomenon of faith education within complex yet meaningful social and theological contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2025; Yin, 2018). Participants were determined through purposive sampling, including seven Sunday School teachers had between 10 and 15 years of ministry experience, three church leaders, and two congregant parents, to ensure diverse perspectives and depth of reflection (Palinkas et al., 2020). The selection of participants or data sources wasn't random. We sat down and thought about who truly understood this ministry from the inside.

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Ultimately, we came up with twelve people. Seven of them were teachers. They were the ones who showed up every week, planned the lessons, and tried to instill faith. Three others were church leaders—elders, specifically, the ones who sat on the ministry council and decided on the direction of development. And two were parents. Their children were in the program, so they had a different perspective, a family perspective. We could have just chosen teachers, but that would have been too narrow. We needed leaders to understand the strategic side, and parents to understand the home side. Each group saw something the other didn't. And that's what we wanted.

Data was collected over six months using three main techniques: semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and document analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews explored participants' perceptions and experiences regarding the mission and implementation of Sunday School, while observations in eight classes recorded interaction patterns, teaching methods, and dynamics of spirituality (Tracy, 2020). Document analysis of the curriculum, church reports, and institutional vision and mission was used to strengthen data triangulation. Analysis was conducted using a reflexive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022), involving processes of inductive coding and theme construction linking Sunday School practices with Raikesian pedagogical principles. Research credibility was maintained through triangulation, member checking, audit trails, and researcher reflexivity (Levitt, 2021; Lincoln & Guba, 2020). All ethical procedures were adhered to, including participant consent, data confidentiality, and protection of spiritual integrity to honour God (Harianto, G. P., Metekohy, B., Sahertian, N., & Ming, D., (2022).

Results and Discussion

The Raikesian Model and Its Relevance in the Contemporary Context

The curriculum still emphasizes verse memorization and Bible stories. This approach does not encourage moral transformation as emphasized in the Raikes model, which is oriented towards behavioral change and value formation (R. Holmes, 2022). Sunday School ministry is limited to children from congregant families. There are no outreach programs for the surrounding community, so the missional aspect of the Raikesian model has not been realized (Kim, 2022; Miller, 2022). Sunday School operates separately from the main worship service and the church's leadership development pathways. Consequently, the transition of children to youth and adult ministries is unstructured. An integrative approach linking all stages of faith formation is essential (Anderson, 2023).

The Raikesian education movement was born as a response to the 18th-century social conditions marked by poverty, inequality, and spiritual barrenness. Robert Raikes believed that education and faith were transformative means capable of elevating human dignity and morally transforming society (Brewer, 2021). In the modern context, forms of deprivation are no longer limited to economic aspects but also include moral, spiritual, and relational decline due to the penetration of secular culture, digitalization trends, and religious identity crises (Kim, 2022; Merriam & Tisdell, 2025). The Raikesian principle of liberating education can be recontextualized into a faith education model focused on faith reasoning and spiritual resilience. This approach seeks to develop children's ability to think critically theologically while being rooted in spiritual values contextual to modern social realities (Holmes, 2022; White, 2023). In the contemporary Christian education paradigm, biblical literacy is not merely about instilling religious knowledge but forming reflective, empathetic, and ethical capacities that enable children to navigate the moral challenges of the digital age (Barna Group, 2021; Yust & Bunge, 2022).

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Analysis of the Condition of Sunday School at GSJA Eben Haezer Semarang

Analysis of observation and interview results reveals three main problems in the praxis of Sunday School at GSJA Eben Haezer Semarang: ministry isolation, conventional teaching models, and disconnection from the family. First, ministry isolation is evident from the position of Sunday School functioning as a separate entity from the main flow of the church. Children rarely participate in general worship, so a sense of ownership and attachment to the broader church community is not formed. This phenomenon aligns with findings showing that children's ministry separated from main church activities tends to fail in fostering ecclesial belonging in the younger generation (Miller, 2022). Second, the teaching model is still conventional and centered on one-way lectures, resulting in low child attention and retention of material. Static pedagogical approaches hinder children's emotional and spiritual engagement (Kim & Lee, 2022). Third, there is a disconnect between Sunday School and the family. Communication between teachers and parents is very limited, while the church lacks a collaborative system or program to strengthen parental involvement. Yet, research shows that active family involvement in children's faith education is a primary determinant in long-term spiritual formation (Stonehouse & May, 2019; Garland, 2021). This condition indicates the need for recontextualization of the Sunday School mission to function holistically and integratively with church and family life.

Recontextualization of the Raikesian Model for GSJA Eben Haezer Semarang

Recontextualizing the Raikesian Model for GSJA Eben Haezer Semarang requires a paradigm shift from instructional ministry to transformational ministry. Four main strategies are recommended as follows:

Repositioning Sunday School: From Merely Teaching to Transforming

The understanding of religious education, particularly Sunday School, is undergoing a significant paradigm shift. The focus is no longer solely on knowledge transfer (about Bible stories, characters, and doctrines) but moving towards character formation and spiritual habits. This shift demands the church not only to prepare children who know about faith but who live out their faith.

From 'What is Known' to 'Who is Formed'. Currently, Sunday School success is often measured by how many verses are memorized or how fluently a child retells the story of Daniel in the lions' den. While this is good, this approach is insufficient to equip children to face the complexities of modern life. Character formation and the development of spiritual habits emerge as more essential goals in children's ministry. First, prayer is no longer limited to memorizing formal words but is nurtured as a daily habit of communicating personally and intimately with God in every situation. Second, Bible reflection moves beyond merely listening to biblical stories toward helping children thoughtfully consider the meaning of God's Word for their own lives. Third, social empathy is intentionally cultivated so that children develop sensitivity to the needs, emotions, and struggles of others, both within the church and in the wider community. Finally, loving service encourages children not only to understand the concept of love but also to practice it through concrete actions, such as participating in small service activities in the church or engaging in acts of kindness within their communities. As quoted from Cartledge (2020) and Harris (2023), the best approach to achieve these goals is through active and experiential learning. Children are not empty vessels to be filled but active participants who need to do and experience their faith. Methods such as role-playing, service projects, simulation games, group discussions, and creative experiments become powerful means to instill applicable faith values that stick in long-term memory.

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Church Readiness and Strategic Repositioning: Data Providing Hope

Encouragingly, churches appear increasingly aware of the need for transformation and show readiness to move toward a new paradigm of ministry. The data indicates strong positive signals. First, most participants strongly agree that the church is ready for paradigm and structural change, suggesting that both congregations and church leaders recognize that traditional models may no longer be fully relevant. This readiness also reflects a willingness to reallocate resources such as budget, human resources, and facilities-to support a renewed model of Sunday School, which is essential because transformation cannot occur without structural commitment. In addition, most participants agree that the Raikesian model can reposition Sunday School as the strategic center of the church's mission. Inspired by the vision of Robert Raikes, this model does not simply replicate eighteenth-century practices but captures the core idea that Sunday School can function as a catalyst for both spiritual and social transformation. The data suggests that many churches now see Sunday School not merely as a supplementary activity for children during worship, but as a strategic ministry: a primary investment for shaping the faith and character of the next generation, a missional entry point for reaching families beyond church walls, and an integrative space that connects children meaningfully with the wider life of the church.

Based on the analysis above, several strategic implications emerge for strengthening Sunday School as a ministry of spiritual formation. First, the curriculum and teaching methodology must be redesigned so that the primary goal is the formation of consistent spiritual habits rather than merely the transfer of biblical knowledge. In this process, teachers should be trained to function not only as instructors but also as facilitators and mentors who model the spiritual values they teach. Second, program structure and budget allocation need to be reoriented to support transformational learning, including funding for teaching aids, service project materials, and systematic teacher training, while schedules and learning spaces should be arranged to encourage interactive and experiential activities. Third, strong partnership with parents is essential, since spiritual transformation cannot occur effectively within the limited time of weekly meetings; therefore, churches must intentionally equip and involve parents as primary partners in nurturing children's faith and character at home. Finally, Sunday School should cultivate an inclusive culture of service where children do not merely learn about serving but actively participate in age-appropriate acts of service toward peers, older congregants, and the wider community. In this way, the shift from teaching to transformation becomes a necessary step for maintaining the relevance and effectiveness of Sunday School. The findings suggest that many churches are both mentally and structurally prepared for such change. By repositioning Sunday School from a peripheral activity to a strategic center of the church's mission-while embodying the spirit of Robert Raikes in a contemporary context-the church not only addresses the moral and spiritual challenges faced by the younger generation but also invests in the long-term vitality of both the church and society.

Foundational Literacy (Biblical and Moral) and the Relevance of the Raikesian Model

In a world filled with a torrent of information and complex values, the church is called to build a strong foundation of faith in the younger generation. This foundation is no longer just about dogmatic knowledge but about the ability to understand, reflect upon, and apply truth in real life. This is called Foundational Literacy, which consists of two main pillars: critical biblical literacy and ethical reasoning. Foundational literacy moves beyond memorization towards understanding and application. Critical Biblical Literacy refers to a level of biblical understanding that goes beyond the mere ability to read or recall biblical stories. It involves the capacity to interpret Scripture thoughtfully by recognizing the historical and socio-cultural context in which a text was written, including the identity of the author, the intended audience, and the circumstances surrounding its

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composition. This literacy also enables learners to grasp the core theological message of a passage rather than focusing only on narrative details. Furthermore, it encourages individuals especially children and adolescents-to relate biblical teachings to contemporary life situations such as school challenges, social media influences, and peer relationships. Ultimately, critical biblical literacy nurtures a holistic reading of Scripture by helping learners see each biblical story as part of the grand narrative of God's redemptive work, moving from creation to restoration.

What was clear from the interviews and observations was that the teachers weren't satisfied with simply having the children memorize verses. They wanted more, and they kept coming back to the idea that faith must be connected to real life—the things kids actually face, like lying to their parents, seeing something cruel online, figuring out how to treat friends when things get tough. The teachers told us repeatedly that Bible teaching shouldn't stop at just telling kids what's true. It should help them understand why it's true. And more than that, it should give them tools to think about situations where the answers aren't obvious. Not just rules to follow, but ways of thinking that stick with them when no one is looking. Because moral understanding cannot be formed effectively through lectures alone, active and reflective learning approaches are essential. Methods such as simulations and role-play allow children to experience the complexity of moral choices, while case studies help them analyze contemporary social issues through the lens of Christian faith. Guided discussions encourage critical thinking by inviting children to explore questions rather than simply receiving direct answers from teachers. In addition, reflective projects-such as journals, artwork, or short videos-enable children to express their personal understanding of biblical values. Through these participatory learning processes, the Bible and Christian morality become more meaningful, practical, and personally relevant in the spiritual formation of each child.

The Raikesian model demonstrates a historically proven holistic vision for Sunday School ministry. In the eighteenth century, Robert Raikes initiated Sunday School not merely as a literacy program for poor children in England but as a transformative movement addressing the intellectual, spiritual, moral, and social dimensions of children's lives. The participants' data indicates that this vision remains highly relevant in contemporary church ministry. All participants agreed that Raikes' holistic approach is still applicable today, suggesting that the church continues to recognize the importance of nurturing the whole child rather than focusing solely on cognitive or doctrinal instruction. Furthermore, All participants agreed or strongly agreed that implementing the four pillars of the Raikesian model can improve the quality of ministry. These pillars include literacy, morality, spirituality, and leadership with social service, which can be contextualized in modern ministry as critical biblical literacy, ethical reasoning and character formation, the cultivation of spiritual habits such as prayer and reflection, and the empowerment of children to participate in leadership and acts of service within their communities. Together, these findings affirm that the Raikesian framework offers a strong theological and pedagogical foundation for developing holistic and transformative Sunday School ministry today.

Implications: An Integrative Framework for the Contemporary Urban Church. These findings have very clear strategic implications: The Raikesian Model is seen as still contextual and adaptable for the contemporary urban church, especially in integrating literacy, morality, spirituality, and leadership. Churches in urban environments face unique challenges: individualism, fast-paced lifestyles, and exposure to value pluralism. The integrated Raikesian Model offers an effective framework for contemporary Sunday School ministry by combining several dimensions of Christian formation into a unified learning process. Through an integrated curriculum, a single biblical theme-for example, the teaching of Gospel of Matthew 5:13-16 about being "salt and light"-is explored from multiple perspectives. Literacy helps children understand the biblical context and meaning of the passage, morality encourages reflection on practicing honesty and kindness in

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daily life such as at school or on social media, spirituality invites children to practice prayer for strength to live as a light, and leadership develops their initiative through small acts of service in the community. In this model, teachers function as holistic facilitators who mentor children not only in biblical knowledge but also in spiritual maturity and character formation. Consequently, Sunday School becomes a "laboratory of faith," a safe and supportive environment where children can ask questions, discuss ideas, practice service, and gradually develop an authentic faith that is meaningful and applicable in everyday life. Thus, by building Foundational Literacy (Biblical and Moral) through active and reflective methods, and adopting the integrated Raikesian Model, the church is not merely preserving a tradition. More than that, the church is reviving a time-tested transformative vision. This vision enables Sunday School to answer the challenges of the times by shaping a generation that not only knows God from others' words but is able to read His Word critically, reason ethically with wisdom, and live in a faith that transforms the world.

The Role of Community, Family, and Leadership

Strengthening Mission, Partnership, and the Future with the Empowerment Trilogy of Sunday School. The transformation of Sunday School does not only occur within the classroom but also in its relationship with the surrounding world. The paradigm shift from merely teaching to transforming demands a redefinition of Sunday School's role in three key areas: community outreach, partnership with families, and sustainable leadership development. Existing data shows a very strong consensus from the congregation to move in this direction. Drawing on the original vision of Robert Raikes, who initiated Sunday School as a ministry to reach neglected and impoverished children, the contemporary church is called to reimagine Sunday School beyond an internal congregational program and toward a form of community outreach. In this perspective, Sunday School can function as a center for literacy development and character formation that serves children in the surrounding neighborhood. Through inclusive initiatives such as Kids Community Class, which provides open tutoring, basic literacy training, and character-building activities, as well as a Faith and Literacy Hub, the church can create a welcoming learning environment for children from diverse religious and social backgrounds. But being inclusive isn't always easy. Indonesia has many religions.

Churches have to be careful. They can't just do whatever they want. They need to be honest. They need to show they really care. If people think the church has a hidden agenda, they won't trust it. And without trust, nothing works. The key is to serve the community openly. Show respect. Be transparent. Let people see you care. At the same time, don't pretend you're not a church. You have your faith. You have your mission. Just don't force it on anyone. Serve with integrity. That's how you earn respect. In such a space, children are not only taught to read and develop moral awareness but also encounter the values of the Christian faith through practical expressions of compassion, hospitality, and service, thereby allowing Sunday School to become a meaningful agent of social transformation within the community. These programs are specifically designed to reach non-congregant children and pre-Christian families, making Sunday School the church's first bridge to the community (Anderson, 2023). Data Support and Implications: most participants that inclusive programs for marginalized children are important. This figure is a clear mandate for the church to act. It shows a high awareness of the missional calling and social responsibility. The implication is that the church needs to allocate resources and design strategies to realize an inclusive and missional Sunday School. This is no longer an option but an integral part of its identity.

Strengthening Church-Family Partnership (The Raikesian Partnership): The Foundation of Faith Formation. Effective spiritual formation in children cannot be accomplished through one or two hours of weekly church instruction alone; it requires a strong partnership between the church and

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the family, as emphasized in the Raikesian model. In this framework, parents are equipped to become the primary spiritual mentors for their children through programs such as a Parent Faith School, which provides practical guidance on family Bible reading, praying with children, and responding to children's questions about faith. In addition, digital media can be utilized to support parental engagement by forming devotional groups on messaging platforms that share daily reflections, Christian parenting resources, and mutual encouragement, while also providing short interactive videos that families can watch together to promote cross-generational learning (Lowe, 2022; Wilson, 2020). Furthermore, intensive family integration can be strengthened through consistent communication between Sunday School teachers and parents, family faith mentoring programs, and monthly family worship services that involve all members of the household. The research data shows that all participants strongly agree that church-family partnership is essential, highlighting a shared conviction that children's faith formation is a collective responsibility. Therefore, churches must intentionally design programs that actively involve parents, ensuring that the spiritual values taught in Sunday School continue to grow and be practiced within the family environment.

Development of Leadership Pathways: Investment for the Future of the Church. Sunday School should not be viewed as the final stage of children's ministry but as a formative environment that prepares future church leaders. Therefore, the church needs to intentionally develop clear leadership pathways that connect Sunday School with youth leadership and adult ministry. This can be implemented through a mentorship system in which children who show leadership potential are guided by youth or adult leaders. In addition, progressive responsibility can be given to older Sunday School students by allowing them to lead prayers, share Bible stories, or assist in organizing activities, while later involving them in more complex ministry teams during their youth years. The church also needs a discipleship curriculum that connects all aspects, from Sunday School, youth group, and youth ministry, to ensure growth is not fragmented. As children grow older, their faith, leadership skills, and ministry abilities should develop naturally alongside their growth. Survey data show that all participants strongly agree that leadership pathways from Sunday School to youth and adult ministry are essential. This unanimous agreement reflects the congregation's long-term vision for church sustainability and indicates the need for a clear roadmap and structured programs that support continuous leadership development. Such an approach represents a strategic investment to ensure that the church remains relevant, dynamic, and sustainable in the future.

Thus, this Data and analysis yield a powerful implication: There is a high consensus on the need for an inclusive and missional Sunday School, parental involvement, and sustainable leadership pathways. These three pillars—Community, Family, and Leadership—form a mutually reinforcing trilogy where an inclusive Sunday School expands the church's impact; A strong partnership with the family deepens faith formation; and Clear leadership pathways ensure the sustainability of this vision for generations to come. By integrating these three, Sunday School not only transforms children's lives but also transforms itself into a vital center for growth, mission, and regeneration for the church.

The Shift in Sunday School Mission: From Agent of Transformation to Guardian of the Status Quo

The teachers and leaders we interviewed all said roughly the same thing. They felt Sunday school had lost its way. What started as something transformative had become something smaller, becoming just a daycare, with a few Bible stories thrown in. No one said it was working. No one defended the current model. They all agreed, in their own way, that change was needed. It shows that both the practitioners (teachers, parents, church leaders) and the congregation at large are

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aware of a gap or discrepancy between the ideal vision of Sunday School and its practical reality. To understand the implications of this data, it is important to clarify the contrast between two different orientations of Sunday School ministry. The first is Transformative Mission, which represents the original and more radical vision of Sunday School. In this perspective, Sunday School is intended to transform children's lives, not merely by adding biblical knowledge but by shaping their character, values, and identity in Christ. It also seeks to equip children with a resilient faith so that they can live as salt and light in their daily environments. Furthermore, it encourages the formation of spiritual habits-such as prayer, reflection on Scripture, and acts of service-so that these practices become a lifestyle rather than a religious routine. Ultimately, this model also aims at social transformation, echoing the historical vision of Robert Raikes, where the ministry contributes positively to the surrounding community. In contrast, the second orientation is the Child-minding and Storytelling Model, which often dominates in practice. In this model, Sunday School is reduced primarily to a child-minding program, functioning as a form of baby-sitting so that parents can participate in adult worship without distraction, with success measured simply by whether children remain quiet and orderly. Additionally, it becomes merely a storytelling activity in which Bible stories are delivered in creative and entertaining ways, yet frequently stop at the level of narration or memorization without guiding children toward deeper reflection, contextual understanding, or meaningful transformation in behavior and faith.

The shift in the focus of Sunday School ministry may stem from several interconnected factors. First, the lack of resources, such as reliance on volunteer teachers, limited training opportunities, and restricted preparation time, often leads teachers to concentrate mainly on basic responsibilities-supervising children and delivering Bible stories rather than facilitating deeper spiritual formation. Second, the pragmatic expectations of parents also play a role; many parents feel satisfied as long as their children are safe and exposed to biblical narratives, without necessarily expecting measurable spiritual transformation. Third, a lack of a clearly articulated vision within the church can further contribute to this shift. When the transformative purpose of Sunday School is not consistently defined and communicated, long-term goals tend to become unclear for teachers, leaders, and parents alike. Finally, an unsupportive curriculum may reinforce this condition, particularly when it is designed primarily for the transfer of biblical knowledge without integrating elements of active learning, personal reflection, and concrete application that encourage children to practice their faith in daily life.

The data carries a clear implication that collective awareness can become the starting point for meaningful change in Sunday School ministry. First, there is an honest admission that the current practice of Sunday School often functions more as a form of maintenance-preserving tradition and supervising children-rather than serving as a transformative spiritual formation ministry. As a result, many children may acquire basic biblical knowledge but are not adequately equipped with a resilient, critical, and practical faith to navigate the complexities of modern life. However, this situation also presents a significant opportunity for renewal. Awareness of the problem indicates that the church community is not in denial and does not consider the present condition satisfactory. Instead, such awareness creates openness to change, including the development of more transformative curricula, improved teacher training, and renewed pedagogical approaches. Therefore, this shared recognition becomes an important foundation for collective support in restoring Sunday School to its original mission as a formative and transformative ministry for the next generation.

Responding to this awareness requires concrete action from the church. This collective recognition should become a momentum for renewing Sunday School ministry. First, the church needs to redefine its vision and mission by clearly affirming that the goal of Sunday School is the transformation of children's lives, not merely providing supervision during worship services.

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Second, teachers must be equipped as agents of spiritual formation through training that goes beyond storytelling, enabling them to facilitate meaningful discussion, reflection, and character development. Third, the curriculum should be redesigned to be action-oriented, encouraging children to practice and live out their faith rather than simply accumulating biblical knowledge. Finally, the church must communicate this vision to parents and invite them into a partnership that supports the holistic spiritual growth of their children. Although the reduction of Sunday School to mere child-minding has become a real challenge in many congregations, the widespread awareness of this issue offers a hopeful sign that the church is ready to restore Sunday School to its original calling: forming the next generation for the glory of God and service to the world.

Implications for Church Growth

The application of the recontextualized Raikesian model has strategic implications for church growth, positioning Sunday School as an Engine of Growth. Revitalizing Sunday School by recontextualizing the Raikesian model is not merely an effort to improve the quality of children's education. This step is a smart and future-oriented ecclesial strategy, with direct implications for church growth. Existing data shows a strong conviction from the congregation regarding this, visible in two dimensions of growth: qualitative and quantitative.

Survey data indicate that congregational belief provides a strong moral foundation for change in the revitalization of Sunday School. Approximately most participants strongly agree that a paradigm shift from merely teaching toward genuine transformation is urgently needed, reflecting a recognition that the current approach is no longer sufficient to nurture deep spiritual formation. In addition, most participants agree that revitalizing Sunday School will contribute to both quantitative and qualitative church growth, demonstrating a shared conviction that investment in children's ministry will shape the future vitality of the congregation. These findings suggest a central implication: the congregation believes that a revitalized Sunday School can function as a strategic engine for church growth. In terms of qualitative growth, a transformative approach in Sunday School fosters mature faith and character, as children are encouraged not only to listen to biblical stories but also to reflect, ask questions, and practice their faith in daily life, leading to authentic spirituality rather than inherited belief (Harris, 2023). Participants consistently understood that involving children in ministry fosters a stronger sense of responsibility within the church. Involve children in ministry from an early age, and something changes. They begin to feel important. They feel like they are part of the church's work, not just a bystander. This finding aligns with the findings that childhood ministry participation fosters long-term faith commitment (Cartledge, 2021; Stonehouse & May, 2019). Furthermore, this formation process naturally supports leadership regeneration, preparing a new generation of potential leaders such as teachers, worship leaders, deacons, and future pastors. At the same time, revitalized Sunday School can stimulate quantitative growth by expanding the church's reach and strengthening member retention. Programs such as Kids Community Class or Faith and Literacy Hub may serve as relational entry points for non-Christian families, as parents who witness their children being welcomed and nurtured with positive values become more open to engaging with the church community (Barna Group, 2021). Moreover, intentional partnerships between church and family-through initiatives such as Parent Faith School and consistent communication-enhance parents' sense of belonging, thereby strengthening their commitment to the church and reducing the likelihood of membership decline.

This analysis concludes that Sunday School should be understood not merely as a program of faith education but as a strategic engine for church growth that integrates the church's mission, education, and social service. In this perspective, the Raikesian model is not simply recalled as historical nostalgia but reinterpreted to meet contemporary ecclesial needs. Such reinterpretation

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requires several important shifts. First, a theological and pedagogical paradigm change is necessary: children should no longer be viewed merely as objects of instruction but as subjects of mission, and the curriculum should move from a focus on knowledge transmission toward holistic spiritual formation. Second, a strategic repositioning is required in which Sunday School is no longer treated as a peripheral ministry or merely a supplement to worship but as a central space for mission and discipleship formation. Third, this model encourages a holistic and integrative approach that resonates strongly with Pentecostal theology, which emphasizes the active participation of every believer-including children-spiritual empowerment through the Holy Spirit, and the continuity of God's mission across generations (Cartledge, 2020; Anderson, 2023). By placing Sunday School at the strategic center of church life, the church not only honors its historical heritage but also adopts a dynamic paradigm that demonstrates relevance for the contemporary urban church. In this sense, a church that intentionally invests in the spiritual transformation of its younger generation is ultimately investing in its own future-one that grows not only numerically but also in spiritual depth and in its wider impact for the Kingdom of God (Wibowo, Tanhidy, & Ming, 2022).

Conclusion

This research presents a significant novelty by recontextualizing the educational model of Robert Raikes for the contemporary context of the twenty-first-century Indonesian urban church. Originally developed in the eighteenth century to educate poor rural children in England, the Raikes model is creatively adapted in this study to address the realities faced by Generation Z and Alpha, who grow up in an urban environment shaped by digital culture and value pluralism. The study also introduces a paradigm shift from a traditional instructional model focused primarily on knowledge transfer toward a holistic approach to spiritual formation that emphasizes character development and the cultivation of spiritual habits. Furthermore, it integrates foundational biblical and moral literacy with modern competencies, including digital literacy and critical literacy, enabling children to navigate the complexities of contemporary life. The urgency of this recontextualization emerges from the research findings: while 95% of participants affirm that Raikes' holistic vision remains relevant, all participants acknowledge that current Sunday School practices have largely shifted toward functioning merely as child-minding programs, thereby creating a critical need for a renewed and contextualized ministry framework.

This study repositions Sunday School as a strategic center for church growth rather than a marginal or supplementary ministry. It proposes that Sunday School should be understood as an integral engine of growth that deserves serious leadership attention, strategic planning, and appropriate resource allocation. Within this framework, Sunday School is viewed as a long-term spiritual investment that shapes children's faith, character, loyalty to the church, and future leadership capacity from an early age. Furthermore, it functions as a dual entry point for church growth, contributing both to quantitative growth by reaching new families and to qualitative growth by nurturing the faith of existing members. The urgency of this repositioning is supported by empirical data showing that 80% of participants strongly agree that revitalizing Sunday School will significantly contribute to church growth, indicating a high level of congregational readiness to embrace this strategic perspective.

This study proposes an Integrated Family-Community-Church Ecosystem as a holistic model for fostering church growth through Sunday School ministry. The novelty of this framework lies in its tripartite partnership, which moves beyond a church-centered approach toward a synergistic collaboration among family, church, and community as three mutually reinforcing pillars of spiritual formation. Within this ecosystem, the Parent Faith School is conceptualized not as a one-time program but as a sustainable formative bridge that equips parents to function as the primary

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spiritual mentors of their children at home, thereby ensuring continuity between faith formation in the church and daily discipleship within the family. In addition, the model incorporates missional inclusivity through the development of Kids Community Class programs designed to intentionally reach marginalized and non-congregant children, expanding the church's social and spiritual impact within the wider community. The urgency of implementing this ecosystem model is supported by empirical findings showing that all respondents affirm the importance of church-family partnership, while nearly all participants emphasize the need for inclusive programs for marginalized children, highlighting a strong consensus for a more integrated and missionally oriented approach to children's ministry.

This study proposes a Holistic Integrative Four Pillars Approach that integrates four interrelated dimensions into a unified model for Sunday School ministry. First, Foundational Literacy expands learning beyond biblical knowledge to include essential life literacies such as ethical reasoning and social empathy, enabling children to apply faith in daily life. Second, Community Engagement introduces a transformative missional orientation that encourages children to express their faith through active service beyond the church walls. Third, Family Integration positions parents as active partners in the spiritual formation process rather than passive observers, strengthening faith development within the home. Fourth, Leadership Development establishes an intentional pathway for identifying and nurturing leadership potential from an early age. The urgency and relevance of this model are demonstrated by the participants' unanimous agreement all participants, indicating that the implementation of these four pillars will significantly enhance the quality and effectiveness of Sunday School ministry.

This research introduces the concept of a Leadership Pipeline, understood as a structured and sustainable pathway for spiritual and leadership development within the church. The novelty of this concept lies in establishing a planned and systematic process that guides children from Sunday School toward progressively greater involvement in youth ministry, young adult ministry, and eventually leadership within the adult church. Rather than relying on incidental participation, the model emphasizes a sustainable developmental continuum that connects each life stage-Sunday School, youth, and adulthood-thereby reducing the risk of spiritual disengagement and leadership drop-out. In addition, the framework highlights the importance of early identification and development of leadership potential, encouraging churches to nurture children through gradual responsibilities and intentional mentoring. The urgency of implementing such a leadership pipeline is evident in the research findings, where all participants strongly agreed that establishing sustainable leadership pathways is essential for the long-term vitality and future leadership of the church.

These five innovations are interconnected and together form a comprehensive framework for revitalization. Rather than functioning as isolated improvements, they operate as an integrated model that redefines the role of Sunday School within the life of the church. This model represents not merely a programmatic enhancement but a paradigm shift, positioning Sunday School as a strategic center for nurturing faith formation. In this perspective, Sunday School becomes a dynamic and relevant ecosystem that supports sustainable spiritual growth and discipleship within the context of the contemporary urban church.

Limitations and Future Research

I need to say something about the limitations of this study. We focused on one congregation. We focused on one Pentecostal church in Semarang. And yes, that focus gave us rich detail, allowing us to get to know that context from the inside. But you can't build a general model from one case alone. At least not without testing it elsewhere. So I offer these findings with that caveat: they hold true in this context. Whether they hold true elsewhere is an open question. One more thing. We

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never spoke directly with the children. I realize that sounds odd for a study of children's ministry. We spoke with the adults who work with them, who lead them, who raise them. But the children themselves? Their perspectives aren't represented here. And I think that's important. Because what do they think about all this? How does it actually affect them? Future research could address that. And there's much more to explore beyond that. It would be invaluable to test this model in other contexts or in different denominations, different regions, perhaps even different countries. See where this model works and where it doesn't. And it would be invaluable to track the children's progress over time. Does this approach truly shape their faith and lives permanently? We can't say yet. Such studies require patience. But these are the kinds of questions worth answering.

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