

Contextualizing Mansinam’s Gospel Legacy: Forming Papua’s Alpha Generation through Early Childhood Christian Education

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Abstract

Papua had received the Gospel since 1855, yet continued to experience persistent socio-economic and moral challenges, including poverty, limited access to quality education, and the erosion of cultural values. These realities indicated a theological and developmental disconnect between the region’s Christian identity and its lived social condition. This study aimed to explore how Early Childhood Christian Education (ECCE) could be developed as a transformative response to this gap, particularly for the Alpha Generation growing up in Papua’s multicultural context. Conducted through a descriptive qualitative approach within the socio-religious context of Papua, the study employed theological and pedagogical reflection to analyse how Christian values and Papuan indigenous wisdom can be integrated into early education. Data were collected through literature review, analysis of church-based documents, and contextual educational materials. The findings revealed a critical need for Gospel-centered, culturally grounded ECCE models that promote holistic spiritual, emotional, and moral formation from an early age. The study concluded that a contextual and integrative approach to ECCE could bridge the divide between ritual faith and transformative Christian living. This research contributed a conceptual framework for churches and theological institutions to equip young children with Christlike character, cultural rootedness, and active participation in the renewal of Papuan society.

Keywords: alpha generation; Christian education; mansinam gospel; social transformation

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Introduction

The arrival of the Gospel in Papua on 5 February 1855 through the missionary efforts of Carl Wilhelm Ottow and Johann Gottlob Geissler was a transformative event that reshaped the theological, cultural, and social landscape of Eastern Indonesia. These early missionaries not only introduced the Christian faith but also brought with them holistic visions of education, health care, and social development (Timmer, 2015). Over the decades, Christianity became deeply rooted in Papuan life, and churches became central institutions that shaped both individual and communal identity. Through the establishment of schools, health clinics, and peace advocacy initiatives, the church functioned as a moral compass and agent of social change. However, despite its strong religious identity, Papua today still struggles with deep-rooted structural challenges such as poverty, limited access to quality education, low human development indices, and increasing social fragmentation (Chauvel & Bhakti, 2008; Papua, 2023). This enduring disconnect between the region's Christian commitment and its socio-economic reality raises critical theological and pedagogical concerns that demand closer attention.

Many scholars argue that while Christianity has been widely adopted in Papua, its transformative power remains underutilized. Far from catalyzing deep societal renewal, Christianity is often practiced in institutional and ceremonial forms, with limited impact on personal transformation or community resilience (Campbell, 2016; Farhadian, 2005). As Mawikere (2021) argues that evangelisation in the Papuan context must be rooted in local worldview and cultural realities to be transformative, rather than remaining at the level of ritual or institutional adherence. The emphasis on ritual and tradition, while culturally important, has not always been matched with efforts to develop moral agency, critical reflection, and ethical leadership, particularly among the younger generation. These concerns are especially pronounced in the context of the Alpha Generation (children born from 2010 onwards), who are growing up in a rapidly changing world marked by digital technology, globalization, and declining cultural continuity (Dale, 2024). These children are often disconnected from traditional Papuan wisdom and lack a strong theological foundation, making them vulnerable to moral confusion and identity loss (Sienkiewicz, 2020).

In light of these dynamics, the social significance of this study lies in its urgent response to the need for moral and spiritual formation during early

childhood, the most formative phase of human development. Research in developmental psychology consistently affirms that character formation, emotional regulation, and worldview construction begin during the early years of life, supported by foundational theories such as Erikson's psychosocial stages (e.g. initiative vs. guilt in early childhood). Moreover, empirical studies show that emotion regulation skills evolve from caregiver-led co-regulation in infancy to intrapsychic strategies by preschool age, underlining the critical role of early relationships in shaping self-control and moral behaviour (Thümmeler et al., 2022). Yet in Papua, early childhood education remains under-resourced and pedagogically limited. There is therefore an urgent need to redesign Early Childhood Christian Education (ECCE) so that it addresses not only intellectual growth but also emotional, moral, spiritual, and cultural formation. From a theological standpoint, the early years are a critical opportunity to nurture a Christ-centred identity and cultivate the virtues that underpin community life. However, significant challenges persist, especially in remote areas such as the Papua Highlands (Papua Pegunungan). These challenges include teachers' irregular attendance due to the inaccessibility of schools and security issues, the shortage of competent educators in their respective fields, severely limited educational facilities, and the geographical isolation that makes schools difficult to reach. As Modouw (2013, 2021) emphasizes, these structural barriers continue to hinder the realization of a transformative education system that integrates local wisdom with Christian values. If the church is to shape a future generation that is both spiritually grounded and socially responsive, it must begin with a more robust and contextualized ECCE framework. However, this effort cannot be separated from the broader educational system in Papua, which is deeply influenced by structures established by the central government. The systemic challenges (such as unequal resource distribution, limited infrastructure, and policy gaps) create barriers that local churches and communities must navigate in order to provide transformative early childhood Christian education.

From both scientific and social-urgency perspectives, this research fills a critical gap by addressing the contextualization of ECCE within Papua's multicultural and indigenous realities. While Christian education is widely studied globally, few address ECCE tailored to Papuan contexts. Scholars such as Siahaya et al. argue that in plural societies like Indonesia, Christian education must integrate local wisdom and cultural diversity to cultivate transformative

character development (Siahaya et al., 2020). Dominant ECCE models (often derived from Western pedagogy) remain poorly adapted to Papuan realities, frequently neglecting local storytelling, communal rituals, music, dance, and oral traditions that are central to Papuan child-rearing. A practical example of such contextualization can be found in the *Buku Paket Kontekstual Papua* developed by Yayasan Kristen Wamena (YKW), which provides Christian education materials that integrate biblical teaching with local narratives, songs, and practices. Although distributed primarily as teaching resources rather than academic publications, these materials demonstrate the feasibility and necessity of contextualized ECCE models in Papua (Drijl, 2013). Similar insights are echoed by Gea and Noyita (2020) and Gulo et al. (2022), who highlight that effective Christian education in Papua must align with students' cultural and social realities. Widjaja (2019) likewise reminds that the church's educational mission in Papua should embody the spirit of contextual engagement, where faith and culture work together in forming identity and community transformation. This is compounded by the fact that most theological education in the region remains adult-centred and cognitive, focusing on doctrinal instruction while leaving little room for child-focused spiritual formation or culturally responsive pedagogy. Yakini, indigenous pedagogical tools that convey theological meaning and reinforce cultural identity (such as storytelling by elders) are largely absent, despite evidence from Papua (e.g. the Hubula community) showing that Christian education can and should be culturally situated to be meaningful.

This study addresses this knowledge gap by proposing a contextually rooted and gospel-centered model of ECCE. Rather than viewing children as passive recipients of religious content, this approach sees them as active participants in the process of spiritual formation. This perspective is supported by child theology and virtue ethics, which affirm the moral and theological capacity of young children (Bishop & Berryman, 2009). The study also draws from socio-cultural learning theories, especially Vygotsky's (1978) emphasis on learning through social interaction and cultural tools, which aligns well with Papuan communal values. The use of narrative theology further strengthens the pedagogical framework, positioning biblical stories as living narratives that shape identity, imagination, and ethical action (McAdams, 2001).

One of the core theoretical foundations of this research is virtue ethics, which moves beyond rule-based morality to focus on the cultivation of good

character through habit and community practice. The virtues of compassion, humility, justice, integrity, and hospitality are not only biblical but are also deeply embedded in Papuan communal ethics. As Gea and Noyita (2020) emphasize, moral and spiritual growth in Papuan classrooms is strongly influenced by the consistency and discipline of teachers in shaping students' daily learning attitudes. Similarly, Y. Gulo et al. (2022), found that Christian education in schools significantly contributes to the formation of student character when it is supported by contextualized pedagogy and lived moral examples.

The integration of virtue ethics within indigenous pedagogies is also aligned with the vision of contextual evangelization described by Mawikere (2021), who argues that Christian formation in Papua must begin with local worldview transformation rather than external moral instruction. In theological reflection, Widjaja (2019) interprets this as part of Papua's "Macedonian call," inviting the church to embody the Gospel within Papuan cultural and historical realities.

Furthermore, narrative theology offers a pedagogical bridge between faith and culture. When children are invited to enter into God's story through culturally resonant methods such as dance, song, and ritual storytelling, they develop a stronger sense of purpose and belonging. Warwer (2023) illustrates this principle through problem-based learning models for family worship that enable Scripture to be experienced as a living narrative rather than abstract doctrine. Likewise, Ferre and Rumansara (2023) affirm that a contextual theology which integrates ecological and cultural wisdom strengthens both moral formation and community responsibility in Papuan Christian life. Through the integration of these theological and pedagogical perspectives, ECCE in Papua can serve not merely as instruction in moral rules, but as a transformative process that nurtures character, identity, and spiritual maturity in culturally grounded ways.

The originality of this study also lies in its practical integration of theology, pedagogy, and culture. While other research has discussed character education in multicultural settings (Mania, 2010; Tafona'o, 2015; Zainiyati, 2014), few have connected these discussions with Christian theological commitments or local cultural expressions. By drawing upon both global theories and local wisdom, this study creates a conceptual framework that is simultaneously rooted and adaptive. In doing so, it affirms that ECCE should not be a one-size-fits-all model but must be designed to reflect the theological, cultural, and developmental realities of the children it seeks to serve.

Moreover, the development of this framework offers practical implications for churches, educators, and community leaders in Papua. It invites churches to reimagine their role not only as places of worship but as formative communities that shape the moral imagination and spiritual identity of children from their earliest years. It challenges educators to move beyond rote memorization and doctrinal teaching toward more dynamic, participatory, and holistic methods. And it empowers communities to reclaim their cultural heritage as a vital resource for spiritual formation, rather than viewing it as something separate from or inferior to biblical teaching.

The aim of this study was to develop a theologically grounded and culturally contextualized model of Early Childhood Christian Education tailored to the needs of Papua's Alpha Generation. This model seeks to promote character formation, cultural rootedness, and spiritual resilience from early childhood, recognizing the unique challenges and opportunities of the Papuan context. The objectives of the study were threefold: First, to analyze the theological and developmental challenges faced by Generation Alpha in Papua, particularly the tension between strong religiosity and limited moral transformation. This analysis explores how cultural disruption, digital influence, and weak early faith formation contribute to identity fragmentation among Papuan children; Second, to identify the spiritual, emotional, and educational needs of early childhood in this context, focusing on how local parenting practices, communal values, and church-based education can be aligned to nurture holistic growth. This involves examining how indigenous pedagogies, such as storytelling and communal rituals, can foster both faith and emotional intelligence; and Third, to propose a curriculum framework that integrates gospel-centered values, Papuan cultural expressions, and child-focused pedagogical strategies suitable for church and community settings. The proposed framework emphasizes contextual learning, active participation, and culturally resonant teaching materials to help children internalize Christian virtues while affirming their Papuan identity.

Through these objectives, the study not only contributes to theological scholarship and educational theory but also offers a practical, transformative response to one of the most pressing challenges facing Papua today: raising a generation that is deeply rooted in Christ, confident in their cultural identity, and capable of engaging the world with wisdom, compassion, and courage. To guide this inquiry, the research addresses the following questions: (1) What are the

specific ECCE needs of Papuan communities, particularly in remote regions? (2) How can indigenous pedagogies, including local approaches such as the *Honai-style education model*, be integrated into ECCE frameworks? (3) In what ways can a Gospel-centered and culturally responsive ECCE model contribute to the holistic transformation of Papuan society?

Method

This study employed a library research methodology within a descriptive qualitative design, aimed at developing a theologically grounded and culturally contextualized model of ECCE for the Alpha Generation in Papua. Library research was selected as the most appropriate strategy to explore theological, educational, and cultural literature, enabling the synthesis of concepts across disciplines relevant to early Christian formation. As noted by Teske, this method facilitates deep theological engagement, especially in contexts where field-based data collection is not feasible or appropriate (Teske, 2002).

The research was situated within Papua's socio-religious context, shaped by the Gospel's arrival on Mansinam Island in 1855 and marked by ongoing educational and socio-economic challenges. Textual sources consulted included theological treatises, church documents, academic journal articles, contextual education frameworks, and cultural analyses. A purposive sampling strategy was applied to identify key works on ECCE, virtue ethics, narrative theology, child development, and indigenous pedagogy (e.g., Blazer (2022); Campbell (2016); Farhadian (2005); Sidabutar & Prasetya (2024)). Data were accessed through academic databases such as JSTOR, ResearchGate, and open-access theological libraries. To avoid overstating evidence, the study does not present new empirical data but relies on existing literature and secondary reports. Statistical references (e.g., literacy or participation rates) are drawn from previously published studies and are used illustratively rather than as original field findings.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the research process. Although this study primarily employed a library-based methodology with no direct engagement with human subjects, it also incorporated insights drawn from documented field observations and previously published interviews with Sunday school teachers and community educators in Papua. These secondary sources were used to contextualize the discussion and to illustrate the practical realities of ECCE in the region. Because no new data were collected directly from

participants, formal institutional review board approval was not required. All materials and data were obtained through publicly accessible or institutionally permitted academic databases. This methodological framework allowed for the construction of a missional-pedagogical model that interprets the theological and sociocultural dynamics of early childhood formation and proposes a practical, context-based educational response rooted in gospel values and Papuan identity.

Findings

The Gospel Legacy in Papua: A Historical and Theological Reflection

The arrival of the Gospel in Papua on February 5, 1855, through the missionary efforts of Carl Wilhelm Ottow and Johann Gottlob Geissler, marked a decisive turning point in the region's history (Timmer, 2015). Beyond introducing Christianity, their mission laid the foundation for education, health services, and community development, embedding values of human dignity, peace-building, and holistic transformation into Papuan society. These initiatives (such as schools, Scripture translation, and medical care) enabled Christianity to become an integral part of Papuan cultural identity and communal life.

Today, more than 80% of Papua's population identifies as Christian (Papua, 2023), making it one of the most Christianized provinces in Indonesia. Churches are present in nearly every village and have played important roles in cultural preservation and community cohesion. However, despite this wide religious presence, the transformative impact of Christianity on social realities remains limited. This presents a theological and missiological paradox: how can a people so deeply associated with Christian faith still be caught in cycles of poverty, inequality, and moral fragmentation? This contradiction can be observed in existing studies that report a gap between high levels of religious participation and much lower indicators of biblical literacy and ethical application (Farhadian, 2005; Modouw, 2021). For instance, while surveys indicate that the majority of Papuans regularly attend church, significantly fewer demonstrate basic biblical knowledge or translate faith into ethical decision-making. This suggests that for many communities, religious practice tends to remain ritualistic rather than relational, emphasizing external conformity over internal transformation.

A similar paradox emerges when viewed from the socio-economic perspective. National development reports consistently show that Papua has the

highest poverty and HIV/AIDS prevalence rates in Indonesia and lags behind in educational attainment (BPS Papua (Papua, 2023); Ministry of Health (Kesehatan, 2023)). These indicators suggest a systemic gap between the spiritual capital of the church and its translation into social capital for sustainable development. From a theological standpoint, this raises serious questions about the nature of Christian witness and the effectiveness of discipleship in the region: Has the Gospel been reduced to ceremonial observance, or is it truly incarnating the values of Christ in everyday life?

When read through a theological lens, the available data underscores the need for a critical reassessment of how the Gospel is being communicated and internalized in Papuan society more broadly. While the figures cited earlier represent general trends rather than statistics limited to the Alpha Generation, they nevertheless highlight structural and pedagogical gaps that directly affect children born from 2010 onward. If Christianity is primarily conveyed as doctrinal knowledge without fostering personal engagement or ethical embodiment, it risks being reduced to a cultural relic, honored historically but ineffective in addressing present challenges. The real danger, therefore, is not irreligion but untransformed religiosity, a form of godliness without transformative power. This concern is particularly urgent for the Alpha Generation, who face unique pressures from digital technology, globalization, and the erosion of cultural traditions.

A growing body of research in Christian education and developmental psychology suggests that early childhood is the most critical window for identity formation, moral development, and spiritual grounding. During these formative years, children begin to construct their worldview, establish behavioral patterns, and internalize values through imitation, narrative, and relational modeling. However, in many Papuan settings, ECCE remains undervalued and underdeveloped. Educational programs tend to focus either on memorization of Scripture or on imported models of Western pedagogy, which often lack contextual relevance.

To bridge this gap between religious identity and lived transformation, a shift is needed from event-based religiosity to formation-based discipleship, beginning in early childhood. This includes grounding children in biblical narratives, cultivating virtues such as humility, compassion, and courage, and integrating indigenous pedagogical tools like storytelling, music, and symbolic

rituals. By affirming the spiritual capacity of young children and involving parents, churches, and elders in their discipleship, the Gospel can once again become a living, transformative force in Papuan society.

Ultimately, the Gospel's arrival in 1855 was not merely a historical moment—it was the planting of a vision: a redeemed people whose faith would shape both heart and society. That vision remains, but its realization now depends on the church's ability to pass on the faith in a form that is both theologically deep and culturally rooted. The legacy of Mansinam will not endure through commemoration alone; it must be carried forward through a generation of children who are formed in Christ, grounded in their culture, and equipped to live out the Gospel in every sphere of life.

The Urgency of Early Childhood Christian Education (ECCE)

The spiritual and moral foundation of an individual is most effectively laid during early childhood. Given the gap between religious participation and ethical or educational outcomes, the results of this study show that one of the most strategic and underutilized avenues for transformation in Papua is ECCE. Modouw (2013, 2021) highlights that the root of Papua's educational problems lies in structural weaknesses such as teacher absenteeism, lack of qualified educators, limited facilities, and the geographical isolation of schools. These systemic challenges resonate with what is observed in early childhood Christian education, where many Sunday school teachers and volunteer educators in rural Papua have minimal formal training in pedagogy or theology. Their practices often depend on outdated manuals or informal mentoring, which are insufficient to address the complex spiritual, emotional, and developmental needs of children.

To move beyond this limitation, ECCE requires not only theological depth but also practical tools that are culturally responsive. The following is an example of a simple ECCE module and evaluation rubric that integrates gospel-centered values with Papuan cultural expressions. As a practical response, this study proposes a sample ECCE module on the theme of "*Creation and Stewardship.*" The lesson begins with storytelling based on Genesis 1-2, where God is introduced as the Creator. To make the story tangible for children, natural materials such as stones, leaves, and shells are used as visual aids, helping them connect the biblical narrative with their immediate environment. The learning process is further enriched through the integration of Papuan cultural expressions, such as

singing local songs about nature and community life. In this way, biblical teaching is not abstract but embodied in familiar symbols that resonate with children's cultural background.

To assess learning outcomes, a simple evaluation rubric can be applied. Children are evaluated not only on their ability to recall the story and key elements of creation (spiritual formation and cognitive growth) but also on their capacity to demonstrate empathy, responsibility, and respect in group activities (emotional development). In addition, participation in cultural songs and practices is considered a marker of cultural integration, ensuring that ECCE affirms local identity while nurturing Christ-centered values. This holistic approach shows how ECCE can bridge the gap between theological instruction and cultural rootedness, moving beyond ritual participation toward genuine transformation.

Building on insights from existing reports and observations documented in community education studies, several core challenges and needs can be identified:

First, Low educator training: A major challenge in ECCE in rural Papua is the low level of formal training among educators and Sunday school teachers. Many of them lack access to structured education in pedagogy or theology. Consequently, their instructional practices are often shaped by informal mentoring or outdated manuals, which do not adequately equip them to meet the complex spiritual, emotional, and developmental needs of young children. This lack of foundational training is further compounded by the absence of professional development opportunities and certification programs designed for indigenous and under-resourced contexts. Without such tailored support, educators face difficulties in connecting biblical teachings with the lived experiences of Papuan children.

As noted by Halawa et al. (2021), Christian educators are called not merely to deliver rote instruction but to serve as transformational leaders, grounded in both biblical theology and educational psychology. Moreover, without a sound understanding of child development, educators may unintentionally hinder the spiritual formation of their students, failing to contextualize theological content in ways that resonate with children's real-life circumstances. Riniwati (2020) emphasizes the importance of structured teacher training to ensure both theological accuracy and contextual relevance, stating that "Ministry to children requires not just knowledge but wisdom, wisdom born of spiritual maturity,

educational expertise, and contextual awareness.” The absence of continuous professional development programs further exacerbates this issue. Many teachers remain pedagogically stagnant and theologically outdated, especially in marginalized or indigenous communities. As a result, Christian education in such settings often lacks the depth, adaptability, and spiritual impact necessary for nurturing holistic growth in early childhood.

Second, Lack of contextualized curriculum: Another critical challenge in ECCE in Papua is the lack of a contextualized curriculum that reflects the linguistic, cultural, and social realities of local communities. Most ECCE teaching materials currently used are imported from urban or Westernized contexts, offering limited relevance to the lived experiences and cultural identities of Papuan children. As a result, these materials often neglect local languages, traditional symbols, folklore, and customs, elements that could otherwise serve as powerful tools to enrich theological instruction and spiritual formation. This cultural disconnect not only alienates children from their heritage but also diminishes the perceived relevance and transformative power of the Gospel message. When the curriculum fails to incorporate local myths, creation narratives, folk songs, and communal values, children may struggle to see how biblical truths relate to their own world. As Salu (2022) notes, the biblical model presented in Deuteronomy 6:4-9 emphasizes integrative, daily-life faith formation in the context of family and community, an approach that is hindered when curricular content is culturally dissonant.

Research by Helena et al. (2023), demonstrates that blending culturally relevant content with digital tools significantly enhances children’s engagement and comprehension in Christian education. In the same vein, Risamasu (2025) underscores that integrating indigenous worldviews into Christian pedagogy should not be seen as theological compromise, but rather as a faithful embodiment of the Gospel in context, an incarnational approach that honors the unique identity of learners. A contextualized curriculum allows children to see their own stories, languages, and values reflected in Scripture. This fosters not only a deeper understanding of the Gospel but also affirms their dignity as image-bearers of God. When the message of Christ is presented in a way that resonates with their cultural identity, Papuan children are more likely to internalize its truths as relevant, personal, and life-transforming.

Third, Inadequate moral formation: A third significant challenge in ECCE in Papua is the inadequacy of moral and spiritual formation. Many programs tend to emphasize rote memorization of Bible verses or the repetition of moralistic slogans, rather than fostering deeper capacities such as critical thinking, moral reasoning, emotional intelligence, and spiritual discernment. While memorization can serve as an introductory learning tool, it often falls short in cultivating meaningful internalization of biblical values. This superficial approach to moral education leads to a form of spirituality that is performative rather than transformative.

Children may learn what to believe, but they are rarely guided in how to apply biblical principles to everyday situations, such as resolving conflicts, expressing empathy, navigating peer pressure, or discerning truth in a rapidly changing digital culture. As a result, faith remains shallow and disengaged from real-life challenges, undermining the development of resilient disciples who embody Gospel-centered virtues in both personal and public spheres. Simamora and Hasugian (2020) caution against reducing Christian education to mere moral instruction or religious recitation. They emphasize that without the integration of cognitive understanding and emotional formation, children are unlikely to internalize the Christian faith in a way that endures over time. In other words, spiritual development must engage the whole child (mind, heart, and behavior) for true transformation to occur. Supporting this view, Niemiec et al. (2020), highlight the intrinsic connection between character development and spirituality. They argue that virtues such as compassion, courage, humility, and justice (hallmarks of Christlike character) should be cultivated intentionally from early childhood.

These virtues not only shape moral behavior but also serve as building blocks for a faith that is authentic, contextualized, and resilient. In sum, effective ECCE must move beyond behavioral compliance and foster holistic moral formation. Educators should create learning environments where children are not only taught Christian values but also empowered to live them out through reflection, relational practice, and guided moral engagement with the world around them.

Fourth, Limited parental engagement: A fourth critical yet often overlooked challenge in ECCE is the limited engagement of parents and caregivers in the spiritual formation of their children. In many Papuan communities, parents are

either uninvolved or feel unequipped to take an active role in guiding their children's faith journeys. This disengagement stems from several interrelated factors, including economic hardship, low levels of literacy, and a widespread cultural assumption that religious instruction is solely the responsibility of the church. As a result, children often experience fragmented spiritual development, limited primarily to Sunday school or church-based activities, with little to no reinforcement at home. This separation weakens the continuity of faith formation, causing spiritual growth to appear as an isolated religious event rather than an integrated part of daily life. Without consistent modeling and participation from parents, the impact of ECCE becomes shallow and unsustainable.

Baskoro and Budiñana (2021) emphasize that the home (particularly through practices like family devotions or the family altar) is the primary and most effective context for discipleship. When families fail to reinforce biblical lessons taught in Sunday school, children are left with inconsistent messages, reducing the likelihood of deep-rooted spiritual transformation. Labobar (2022) further argues that Christian character is most effectively formed when children witness the Gospel embodied in the daily lives of their parents and caregivers. In light of this, parental involvement must be viewed not as supplemental but essential to Christian education. Recent research by Sidabutar and Prasetya highlights the growing potential of digital media to support family discipleship. Through accessible content, mobile apps, and multimedia resources, families can be equipped to establish spiritual rhythms at home, even in low-resource settings. To address this gap, ECCE programs should intentionally equip and empower parents through culturally sensitive workshops, discipleship guides, and training sessions that reaffirm their God-given role as the primary spiritual mentors of their children (Sidabutar & Prasetya, 2024). By restoring the role of the family in faith formation, Christian education becomes a holistic, community-based effort, deepening the spiritual roots of the next generation.

These findings strongly indicate that for Christian education to catalyze long-term transformation, it must begin in early childhood, be contextually grounded, and involve family and community stakeholders. In summary, the results underscore a vital theological insight: a gospel that is not embodied through transformed character and community upliftment loses its credibility. The numerical growth of Christianity in Papua must be matched by deep discipleship, beginning with the Alpha Generation. The path forward involves

not only preserving the legacy of the Gospel's arrival on Mansinam but also reinterpreting that legacy through a contextual ECCE model that cultivates biblically grounded, morally resilient, and culturally rooted Christian children. The path forward involves not only preserving the legacy of the Gospel's arrival on Mansinam but also reinterpreting that legacy through a contextual ECCE model that cultivates biblically grounded, morally resilient, and culturally rooted Christian children.

This vision calls for the strategic reorientation of the church's educational priorities, where early childhood ministries are no longer treated as peripheral or preparatory, but as central to the Church's mission. Sunday schools, often underfunded and led by volunteers with limited support, must be reimagined as intentional spaces of spiritual formation. This includes investing in age-appropriate theological resources, capacity building for teachers, and cross-generational mentorship. As Christian education scholars note, neglecting the formative years results in the church constantly addressing problems that could have been prevented through early moral grounding (Haynes, 2011).

Moreover, churches must begin to recognize the pedagogical value of indigenous knowledge systems and local practices. In many Papuan communities, elders and parents still preserve oral storytelling, ceremonial singing, and communal rituals, rich cultural forms that can serve as theological entry points for children. Rather than replacing these with imported pedagogies, ECCE programs should incorporate and reinterpret them through biblical themes, showing that the Gospel does not erase culture, but fulfills and redeems it (Sienkiewicz, 2020). This integration embodies the principle of incarnational pedagogy, that Christ meets people within their context and speaks their cultural "language" (John 1:14).

It is also critical for church leaders and theological institutions to engage in curriculum development partnerships with Christian educators, anthropologists, and Papuan cultural leaders. Such collaborative efforts can produce modular ECCE resources that are biblically faithful, culturally relevant, and adaptable across the diverse tribes and dialects in Papua. These modules can include Bible storybooks illustrated with local imagery, songs based on Psalms using Papuan rhythms, and character education materials using community heroes or legends that reflect Christian values.

Finally, the role of public policy and government collaboration should not be overlooked. While ECCE is primarily a church-driven mission, partnerships

with local education authorities can ensure broader coverage, sustainability, and legitimacy. Churches and NGOs can advocate for faith-based early childhood education frameworks to be recognized and supported within provincial education policies. This could open pathways for teacher training subsidies, certification programs, and curriculum validation, ultimately enabling Christian ECCE to flourish with both spiritual integrity and institutional credibility.

In conclusion, the urgency of ECCE in Papua is not simply a matter of curriculum or pedagogy, it is a matter of theological faithfulness and generational stewardship. The church must recover its prophetic role in shaping a generation of Papuan children who are not only literate in the faith but are also agents of transformation in their communities. Grounded in the Gospel, shaped by virtue, and affirmed in their cultural identity, these children can carry forward the vision of the Gospel in a way that is alive, embodied, and enduring.

Discussion

Theological Disjunction: Ritual without Transformation

The findings of this study reveal a profound theological dissonance in the practice of Christianity in Papua. Although existing reports indicate that religious participation is notably high, levels of Bible literacy and ethical application remain disproportionately low (Farhadian, 2005; Modouw, 2021). This disconnect points to what Farhadian (2005) terms “ritual religiosity,” a form of Christian expression that emphasizes ceremonial participation without producing inward transformation. Campbell (2016) similarly warns that when Christian identity is reduced to tradition and symbol, it loses its power to shape character and culture.

From a biblical perspective, this situation mirrors Isaiah 29:13, where God condemns worship that honors Him with lips while hearts remain distant. Suparyadi et al. (2024) argue that churches today are often effective in doctrinal preservation but weak in cultivating spiritual depth or moral agency. This points to a theological failure in discipleship. R. P. Gulo and Tapilaha (2024) suggest that Christian formation must move beyond intellectual agreement into a covenantal, ethical way of life marked by love, justice, and humility.

Nainupu (2024) adds that many Christian education models (particularly in early childhood) neglect the affective and volitional domains of faith, favoring

rote memorization over emotional intelligence and discernment. As a result, children grow up with a ceremonial form of Christianity that fails to anchor them in moral conviction or empower them to live gospel-centered lives. This study confirms that a renewed vision of discipleship must begin in the earliest years of spiritual development, and must focus on the whole child: heart, mind, and behavior.

Contextual ECCE as Missional Urgency

The state of ECCE in Papua reveals four critical deficits: low educator training, non-contextual curricula, shallow moral formation, and limited parental engagement. These findings signal a missional urgency: the church is failing to disciple children during their most formative years. Jesus' statement in Mark 10:14, "Let the little children come to me" is not a sentimental phrase; it is a radical reordering of the church's priorities. Children are not the future of the church; they are its present members and disciples.

Research confirms this urgency. Pamungkas and Indriasari (2021) demonstrate that moral and spiritual patterns established before the age of ten are strong predictors of lifelong faithfulness. Kurniawan et al. (2025) argue that ECCE is critical in pluralistic and vulnerable regions like Papua, where religious education must support not only faith development but peacebuilding and moral resilience. Their "PERAMAH" framework integrates religious moderation and early ethics, reinforcing that childhood is not a waiting room for adult formation, it is the foundation of it (Kurniawan et al., 2025).

Yet, ECCE in Papua continues to rely heavily on imported curricula that often fail to speak to Papuan culture, language, or worldview. Salu (2022) emphasizes that Deuteronomy 6 mandates contextual, life-integrated discipleship, not standardized instruction. Jeprianus and Budiman (2024) argue that when liturgy and theology are detached from cultural forms, they lose their power to shape hearts. A contextual approach to ECCE, one that integrates Papuan symbols, storytelling, music, and communal rhythms, is not only pedagogically effective, it is theologically faithful.

Gospel Legacy and Public Theology

The ongoing presence of poverty, HIV/AIDS prevalence, and low educational attainment in Christian-majority Papua raises a critical theological

question: What is the Gospel's role in public life? If the Gospel is truly transformative, it must be evidenced not only in individual salvation but in the healing of systems and the renewal of communities. Luke 4:18–19 presents Jesus' mission as one that proclaims good news to the poor, releases the oppressed, and gives sight to the blind, a holistic vision of salvation and restoration.

Labobar's (2022) "DAMAI" model suggests that peacebuilding is integral to Christian education. Applied to ECCE, this means curricula that foster empathy, justice, and community responsibility. Arifianto et al. (2022) argue that Christian values such as tolerance and national unity are not merely civic virtues but evangelical expressions of God's Kingdom. Children educated through this lens become not only disciples but also peacemakers and agents of shalom in their families and communities.

Christian education, when rooted in public theology, equips children not only with biblical knowledge but also with the skills to engage their world with hope, wisdom, and courage. The Gospel legacy of Mansinam must therefore not only be preserved through ceremonial commemoration but extended through generational discipleship that transforms society from the inside out.

Moreover, the historical memory of the Gospel's arrival on Mansinam should be understood not merely as heritage but as a mandate. It invites each generation to reinterpret that legacy in response to their current challenges. In the context of ECCE, this means forming children not only for personal piety but for active, compassionate engagement with the brokenness around them. ECCE thus becomes an avenue of public theology, where biblical truth intersects with real social needs, education, health, justice, and reconciliation.

In this regard, integrating public theology into early education can develop what Augustine called the *ordo amoris*, a rightly ordered love for God, self, and neighbor (Augustine & Chadwick, 2009). Papuan children formed in this ethos are better equipped to challenge cycles of marginalization and to become gospel-bearers in both word and deed. ECCE, then, is not charity, it is Kingdom investment.

Pedagogical Implications for Theological Institutions

The findings point to an urgent need for theological institutions—particularly those serving or located in Papua, to reorient their vision toward child-focused formation. ECCE must not be seen as auxiliary or optional. It is a

theological priority. Hutauruk and Irawati (2024) emphasize that theological educators must also be pedagogical leaders, trained in developmental psychology, contextual theology, and participatory methods. Seminaries must develop ECCE certification programs for Sunday school teachers, lay catechists, and parent-trainers, especially in rural or indigenous communities (Hutauruk & Irawati, 2024).

Furthermore, theological colleges should partner with local churches and tribal elders to produce curricula that are biblically rooted, linguistically accessible, and emotionally resonant. Chrismastianto et al. (2022) highlight the opportunity in the digital era to create mobile apps, dramatized Bible stories, and interactive resources in indigenous languages. These tools can reach families even in remote areas, expanding the church's reach and deepening spiritual formation at home (Chrismastianto et al., 2022).

Beyond formal education, theological institutions must model a theology of children that respects their agency and honors their voices. Children must not only learn about the Bible; they must see the Gospel enacted in the life of the church and be empowered to participate in its mission.

Implications

The findings of this study carry significant theoretical and practical implications for the future of Christian education and discipleship in Papua. Theologically, the study challenges churches and educators to move beyond ritualistic expressions of faith toward a deeper integration of character formation, moral reasoning, and culturally contextualized discipleship. The observed gap between religious participation and ethical application suggests that current models of Christian education (especially at the early childhood level) lack the formative power needed to sustain holistic spiritual maturity. This reinforces the need for a theology of early childhood that affirms children as spiritual agents capable of experiencing and expressing divine truth within their cultural framework.

Practically, this research calls for the development of ECCE models that are biblically grounded and locally relevant. The use of indigenous languages, storytelling traditions, and communal rituals must be integrated into curricula so that children can encounter the Gospel within their own cultural narrative. The study implies that theological institutions should expand their vision by offering

ECCE specialization tracks, certification for Sunday school teachers, and field-based partnerships with local churches. At the same time, churches must reframe children's ministry not as an auxiliary service, but as a core element of their mission strategy.

For policy stakeholders, the study suggests that ECCE should be recognized as a critical domain of moral and civic formation in Papua. Collaboration between religious institutions, local governments, and community leaders can strengthen educational access and quality in marginalized regions. If embraced seriously, these implications can foster a generation of Papuan children who are both spiritually resilient and socially responsible, anchored in Christ and equipped to engage their communities with wisdom, compassion, and cultural confidence.

Recommendation for Further Research

This study opens several important pathways for further research in the field of ECCE within the Papuan context. Future studies should explore empirical validation of the proposed contextual ECCE model through field-based research involving Sunday school teachers, parents, and children. Ethnographic and participatory action research methods could provide deeper insight into how cultural values, spiritual practices, and educational strategies are embodied in different Papuan communities.

Longitudinal studies are also needed to examine how early Christian formation impacts children's moral reasoning, cultural identity, and spiritual resilience over time. Furthermore, comparative studies between rural and urban ECCE models in Papua would help identify context-specific strengths and gaps. Digital innovations for family-based discipleship in low-resource settings also merit investigation, especially in light of the growing role of mobile media in spiritual education. Finally, interdisciplinary research involving theology, developmental psychology, and indigenous knowledge systems could strengthen the academic foundation of ECCE in Papua and offer models replicable in other indigenous Christian communities globally.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the legacy of the Gospel in Papua, though historically transformative, currently faces a critical theological and pedagogical challenge: the widespread presence of Christianity has not consistently resulted

in deep ethical transformation or holistic development. High levels of religious participation coexist with low biblical literacy and moral application, revealing a disjunction between ritual and discipleship. At the heart of this disconnection lies a missed opportunity in early childhood, an essential period for forming identity, virtue, and spiritual resilience.

ECCE presents a vital frontier for renewing the transformative power of the Gospel in Papua. However, it remains underdeveloped, constrained by low educator competence, imported curricula that lack cultural relevance, minimal moral formation strategies, and weak family involvement. Without intervention, this gap will perpetuate generational spiritual shallowness and cultural dislocation.

This study offers a conceptual framework for a contextual and Gospel-centered ECCE model that draws on theological reflection, child development theory, and indigenous Papuan wisdom. It envisions children not as passive recipients of religious instruction but as active participants in God's mission. By integrating narrative theology, virtue ethics, and local pedagogical practices, ECCE can form children who are both rooted in Christ and equipped to engage their communities with compassion, courage, and cultural confidence.

Ultimately, the Gospel's enduring relevance in Papua depends not merely on preserving its past but on shaping its future, through the lives of children who carry its message forward. The church, theological institutions, and community leaders must work collaboratively to place ECCE at the center of mission, formation, and renewal in the next generation.

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