

Religious Practices of Students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) from Parents' Perspective

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Abstract

Students with special educational needs (SEN) face learning challenges that require suitable approaches according to individual needs. There are various perceptions of the disabled and the issues they face in practicing religious demands. This study aims to identify parents' practices regarding the importance of religious life among students with SEN, with the objective of understanding parents' knowledge and involvement in understanding these practices. This study uses a survey design with qualitative methods involving five parents who have children with special educational needs. Epstein's theory of involvement is used as a guide, emphasizing elements of parenting, communication, and home learning. The findings show that parents' knowledge of the importance of religious life includes teaching and understanding religious knowledge, awareness of responsibility, and moral formation. In terms of parental involvement, it involves observing, interacting (parent-child), using aids like technology, and providing worship tools. The study's implications include improving teaching strategies and support for students with SEN, and providing practical guidance for parents and educators.

Keywords: Students with Special Educational Needs (SEN), Religious Life, Epstein's Theory of Involvement, Parental Practices.

Introduction

Currently, with increased access to education, many countries find that the number of children with special educational needs increases annually (Huayun Yuan, 2023). Students with special educational needs (SEN) are those who face learning difficulties. Among them, some find it hard and take longer to master certain things. Noragayah and Farhah (2023), state that every student with special educational needs is special and unique, possessing different strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, they require suitable approaches according to their needs. In a religious context, the disabled should not be sidelined from the right to gain knowledge, as acquiring knowledge is a fundamental right of all humans (Omar et al.,

2021). Religious life plays a crucial role in shaping individual and community identity. Hence, Islamic education is considered capable of enhancing human life quality and fostering harmony in individual personalities encompassing faith, morality, and knowledge (Dzulkifli and Suhid, 2018).

The inability of this group leads some to think that the disabled are exempted from receiving and fulfilling all the demands prescribed by Islam (Yusoff et al., 2017). According to Asyiq and Nazri (2022), their physical limitations should not be used as an excuse to exclude or abandon some religious responsibilities because they are also included among the accountable. Although there are certain exemptions in the way of performing duties and the permission to carry them out, the demands still apply to them (Omar et al., 2021). In the study by Razuan et al (2019), it is stated that the opportunity for religious education and classes for the disabled is limited, alongside the constraints of the teacher-to-student ratio and the lack of periodic training for teachers to deliver religious teachings to the disabled. The number of teachers with a religious education background capable of delivering Islamic teachings using sign language is very limited (Omar et al., 2021). Students with SEN face different challenges than regular students. Thus, adjustments in learning methods, learning support, teaching materials, infrastructure, and facilities still need improvement to provide religious education to this group in a comfortable environment (Zulkifli et al., 2022).

Many studies highlight perceptions towards the disabled and the issues they face in practicing religious demands. The disabled often face challenges in accessing religious knowledge, especially related to societal perceptions of their exemption, a lack of suitable facilities, insufficient support, and teachers' understanding of how to teach and educate them in religious aspects. However, examining parents' roles in the religious lives of their disabled children is an issue that demands deep attention (Yusoff & Awang, 2019). This is because parents are the main individuals in determining the development or personal growth of their children. According to the study by Okello (2023), parental involvement in their children's education can positively impact the overall development and readiness of children for adult life and the future.

Therefore, this study is important for understanding parents' knowledge, involvement, and support regarding the religious life of students with SEN. It not only provides insight into the need for religious knowledge for them but also highlights the parents' role in supporting the religious development of their disabled children. The study's implications also include improving teaching strategies and support for students with SEN, contributing to society, and helping religious scholars understand the religious life needs of students with SEN. Therefore, this study aims to explore parents' practices regarding the importance of religious life among students with SEN. This study is conducted to achieve the following objectives: first, to understand parents' knowledge of the importance of religious life among students with SEN, and second, to understand parents' involvement in the religious life of students with SEN.

This study uses a qualitative approach, with the sample consisting of five parents who have children with special educational needs. To conduct this study, the researcher used Epstein's theory of involvement by Joyce Epstein (2010) as a guide to explore parents' practices regarding the importance of religious life among students with SEN. Epstein's theory

of involvement contains six elements of parental involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community. However, this study focuses on the elements of parenting, communicating, and learning at home, related to parents' knowledge and involvement. Using these elements, two parental practices can be focused on: knowledge and involvement.

Overall, this article has four sections. The first discusses the literature review on religious education for students with SEN. The next section covers the research methodology, involving sampling, data collection, and data analysis methods. This is followed by the research findings and discussion, and lastly, the implications and conclusion sections.

Literature Review

Parents' Role in Children's Education

Parents are the closest parties to their children. Their role in guiding their children's formation and development is very important. It is well known that parents bear a significant responsibility and trust to care for and provide full love throughout the child's growing process. Zaiton & Gunasegaran (2017), state in their study state that parents play a primary role in education because the family and home environment is where basic education starts. The responsibility of parents in determining and shaping children's behavior is a primary focus, and it is important to provide positive nurturing to build a harmonious family (Ibrahim et al., 2018).

Similarly, in a study conducted by Okello (2023), it was found that active parental involvement in children's daily learning routines is a successful educational strategy, besides strengthening positive communication between parents and children. A study by Abdul Haris and Cahyadi (2021), on the methods of Islamic religious education for children with special needs in primary schools in Indonesia and its impact from parents' perspectives stated that using suitable methods and techniques according to the needs of children with special needs is crucial to improving the quality of Islamic religious education in the classroom. Therefore, parents' role is not limited to providing guidance but also involves engaging and using effective strategies to foster a positive attitude towards continuous learning.

The Importance of Religious Education in Life

According to Mohamed et al (2020), knowledge grows in tandem with religion. Therefore, the objective of education in Islam is to shape individuals as Allah's caliphs, responsible in the world, and fulfilling their role as obedient servants to all His commands (Yusmini & Awang, 2019). Thus, individuals who adhere strictly to religious teachings will have a more organized life, high work motivation, and a drive to improve their quality of life (Omar et al., 2021). In the study by Usaid and Al-Munzir (2020), the Islamic education module used was seen to be capable of forming human capital based on the spiritual values emphasized in Islam. In that study, the students trained not only had worldly knowledge and skills but also showcased high religious personality traits. This is supported by Salinda and Zulkifli (2022), who state that Islamic education aims to create complete individuals through the enhancement of knowledge, character building, and spiritual development. Moreover, according to Stamino (2014), and Stammino et al. (2012), in the study by David and Reynolds (2019), examining specific spiritual and religious profiles in the general population of the United States, it was found that disabled individuals use spirituality as a source of strength to

help them cope with life, foster hope for the future, give meaning to their disability, and gain access to social support through involvement with the religious community.

The Concept of Religious Life for Students with Special Educational Needs

In Islam, the right to learn and gain knowledge should not be neglected, including for the disabled (Omar et al., 2021). According to Arif Wahyudi and Huda (2019), the purpose of Islamic religious education for children with special needs is the comprehensive formation of student character to achieve maturity. The role of instilling Islamic values in this group should not be overlooked, as they still have the potential to be involved in social and moral issues (Yusmini & Awang, 2019). Although there are exemptions for this group in performing certain religious duties, their disabilities should not be an excuse for exclusion from religious life (Omar et al., 2021). According to Janius, Shahrizal & Azura (2021), despite their physical limitations, religious life can provide a sense of identity, guidance, and purpose, and can be a source of comfort and support. This view is supported by Hamid and Sahabudin (2022), who state that the challenges faced by MBPK in accessing religious knowledge and performing religious activities are due to physical, cognitive, or sensory disabilities that hinder their ability to engage in traditional religious education methods.

According to Salinda and Zulkifli (2022), the responsibility of parents and educators is to ensure that students with SEN receive the same level of religious education as their non-disabled peers. Adjustments to teaching methods, materials, and facilities are necessary to meet their needs (Zulkifli et al., 2022). According to Ahmad Usaid and Al-Munzir (2020), the use of technology and aids can be an effective strategy to support the religious education of students with SEN.

The Role of Parents in Religious Education

Parents play a crucial role in the religious education of students with SEN. According to Okello (2023), parents' active involvement in their children's religious education can positively impact their overall development and readiness for adult life. This is supported by the study conducted by Haris and Cahyadi (2021), which emphasizes the importance of parents using effective strategies and techniques to foster a positive attitude towards continuous learning among children with special needs.

The involvement of parents in the religious education of students with SEN includes teaching and understanding religious knowledge, observing and interacting with their children, and using aids like technology to facilitate religious learning (Noragayah & Farhah, 2023). According to Omar et al. (2021), parents' awareness of their responsibility and moral formation is crucial in shaping the religious life of students with SEN. The study by Zaiton & Gunasegaran (2017) highlights the importance of providing positive nurturing and building a harmonious family to support the religious development of children with special needs.

Methodology

The design of this study is a survey study using qualitative methods to explore religious life practices among students with special educational needs (SEN) according to the perspective of parents. The qualitative approach focuses on obtaining views and understandings of individuals' perceptions of events and situations (Busetto et. al. 2020). Through this approach, the researcher can explore the experiences and perceptions of respondents in depth through

interviews and observations. Five study respondents were purposefully selected based on the following criteria: parents with SEN children, those who care for and are with SEN children, and those who are willing to share their experiences and opinions. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews divided into five sections. Information obtained from the interviews was audio-recorded, and additional notes were taken. This interview approach allows the researcher to gain more detailed insights into parents' experiences and perceptions of their children's religious life practices. The summary of respondent information is as shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1

Summary of Respondent Information

Respondent	Relationship with students with SEN	Age of mother	Number of children	Category of child's disability	Age of child
R1	Mother	35	2	Down Syndrome	5
R2	Mother	48	5	Down Syndrome	10
R3	Mother	39	3	Autism	6
R4	Mother	36	4	Multiple	8
R5	Mother	60	4	Down Syndrome	22

The Epstein Involvement Theory (2010) guided the construction of interview questions for this study, focusing on parenting, communication, and home learning. The interview question protocol was discussed with the supervising lecturer for review and refinement. Additionally, the validity of the interview protocol was determined by three experts in the field before the actual study was conducted. Two experts were from the field of special education and one from the field of Malay, each with more than 10 years of experience. Validation from supervisors and field experts in qualitative research is crucial to ensuring the reliability of the data and the consistency of the study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003 in Azmi, 2012). Data were analyzed thematically to explore parents' knowledge and involvement in religious practices among students with SEN. The themes identified through thematic analysis were linked to the study objectives to provide an in-depth understanding of the data.

Findings And Discussion

The findings of this study are organized into two main aspects: parents' knowledge of the importance of religious life and parents' involvement in the religious life of their children with special educational needs. Based on these two aspects, a number of themes were identified and thoroughly described. The researcher also analyzed each finding and elaborated on them as follows:

Parents' Knowledge of the Importance of Religious Life

In this aspect, the researcher discusses parents' knowledge of the importance of religious life among students with special educational needs. Several questions regarding this aspect were asked during interviews with respondents. Three themes emerged from these interviews, which are as follows:

Theme 1: Need to Be Taught and Know Religious Knowledge

The findings revealed that all respondents agreed that students with special needs should be taught and understand religious knowledge. According to them, although students with special needs have limitations, exposing them to religious knowledge remains an essential aspect to be incorporated into their lives.

"Because, as we know, they can't think for themselves, but we can say, 'Sister, this is not allowed, this is allowed.' What's important is that we teach them..."
(R1)

"It doesn't matter what their physical condition is or how they were born. We teach them, but it's not the same as teaching our normal children. We have to teach them, even if it's just the basics." (R2)

"Yes, we have to follow their level, their level of understanding..." (R3)

"We shouldn't assume they don't need to know about religious matters. They need to be taught." (R4)

The findings of this theme show that parents are aware of the importance of providing religious education to children with special needs, despite their physical or mental limitations. A shared understanding among parents about the need to teach and introduce religious knowledge reflects a deep awareness of the role of religion in shaping personality and instilling positive values in their children's lives. Additionally, parents' awareness that religious education must be tailored to the children's level of understanding demonstrates the inclusive approach and adaptations necessary in educating students with SEN.

Theme 2: Awareness of Responsibility

The findings show that respondents express a sense of responsibility as parents to provide religious education to their children with special needs. R2 emphasizes that having a child with special needs is a gift from Allah and that they should receive the same education. This highlights their awareness that this is their responsibility. R4 also mentions that even though they may not have deep religious knowledge, they still strive to provide religious education to their child. This indicates a willingness to fulfill their responsibilities as parents.

"...it's our responsibility that Allah has given us, even though they are not as perfect as others. We must educate them, as Allah will ask us about this later"
(R2)

"Hmm, as parents, we don't know what our child's future will be like. Even if we don't fully understand religion, it is still our responsibility. We can teach the basics" (R4)

The findings for the second theme emphasize the moral and religious responsibility felt by parents when educating their children with special educational needs. This awareness shows that parents regard religious education not just as an obligation but as an *amanah* from Allah. It reflects a high level of commitment to ensuring their children receive religious

education on par with other children, even if the parents themselves may not have deep religious knowledge. The parents' willingness to strive to provide religious education demonstrates their active involvement in shaping their children's future, in line with the principle that parents are the first and foremost educators in their children's lives.

Theme 3: Moral Development of the Children

The findings for this theme indicate that parents understand the importance of religious values in shaping good morals. They expressed that children with special educational needs are also at risk of engaging in inappropriate behavior if they are not taught about right and wrong according to religious teachings.

"We want them to understand about morals, what is permissible and what is not..." (R1)

"...they can walk, they can see things, and they also have memory. Because they will interact with others. We don't want them to mock their friends... we don't want them to be like that. So, we teach them the basics... good and bad morals, we need to show them the difference between right and wrong" (R4)

The findings for the third theme highlight the crucial role of religious values in shaping the morals of children with special educational needs. Parents recognize that without religious guidance, their children may be inclined toward inappropriate behavior. By teaching them what is good and bad according to religious teachings, parents help their children build a clear understanding of moral and ethical boundaries. This is important to ensure that the children can interact well in society and avoid undesirable behaviors. The development of good morals through religious values shows how religion can serve as a guide in the daily lives of children with special educational needs, helping them to build a positive identity and behave well.

Parents' Involvement in the Religious Life of Their Children

In the second aspect, the researcher discusses the involvement of parents in the religious lives of children with special educational needs. Based on the interview results regarding this aspect, three themes have been identified. Among them are:

Theme 1: Children with SEN Follow and Observe Behavior

Respondents shared that their children often follow and observe the behavior they see from those around them. The behavior demonstrated by parents and family members can influence their children to emulate it and incorporate it into their daily routines.

"Whatever we do, he will follow. Like when we pray, he will invite and ask others to raise their hands and pray too. So, we can see that he actually understands and observes what the people around him are doing..." (R1)

"When we recite the Quran, he sometimes knows that when we finish praying, he sees us reading the doa and he will follow, he will bring us the Quran, and then he will follow reading his muqaddam." (R2)

"...Have you ever seen him, when he sees us shaking hands, he is busy wanting to shake hands too... he observes our actions." (R3)

"...When he sees his brother or sister reading or reciting the Quran, he will follow along." (R4)

"Sometimes at 3 a.m., he just falls asleep. Sometimes at night, at one o'clock, he recites the Quran, he prays... he follows what he sees his father doing." (R5)

This theme highlights how the actions of parents and family members serve as examples for children with special needs. These children tend to follow and observe the behavior of those around them, including religious practices. Active parental involvement in demonstrating daily religious practices, such as praying, reciting the Quran, and attending congregational prayers, provides a model for the child to emulate. This approach shows that observation and imitation are effective tools for educating children with special needs. By consistently displaying good behavior and religious practices, parents can help their children understand and adopt positive values in their daily lives.

Theme 2: Interaction (Parent-Child)

Respondents emphasize the importance of interaction between parents and children in creating a religious environment. Through ongoing interaction, parents can explain religious values and teach children how to practice them in their daily lives.

Sub-Theme 1: Discussing Religious Values

"We talk to them. We tell them stories while playing with them. Later, we repeat what we said earlier and ask them about it..." (R2)

Sub-Theme 2: Group Activities

"Sometimes we gather in a group with their older siblings or their father. We sit together and sometimes do activities like a sermon or recite Yasin. They join in." (R2)

"...sometimes we give them activities and ask them to follow their father to the mosque." (R3)

Sub-Theme 3: Emotional and Moral Support

"If they get upset, we need to give them support, hug them, and gently rub their back. We tell them 'Subhanallah, Subhanallah' and ask them, 'Why are you upset?' Then they will cry and eventually calm down... we need to manage their emotions carefully." (R2)

"We cannot force them; if they don't want to do something, we need to persuade them, manage their emotions, and invite them." (R5)

The findings for this theme emphasize that interaction between parents and children is crucial in creating a religious environment. Through continuous interaction, parents can instill religious values and teach their children how to practice them in their daily lives. Identified sub-themes include discussing religious values, group activities, and emotional and moral support.

Ongoing interaction allows parents to adjust their approaches according to their children's emotional states and abilities. This is important because children with special needs might require different methods of learning and experiencing religion. Through communication, joint activities, and emotional and moral support, parents create an environment that effectively supports religious learning and fosters a conducive atmosphere.

Theme 3: Educational Tools

The findings indicate that respondents believe the use of educational tools is very helpful in teaching children. These tools include various learning materials, such as picture books, educational videos, mobile apps, and interactive games related to religious teachings.

Sub-Theme 1: Use of Technology

Animated videos or apps that teach religious practices can make religious learning more interactive.

"Nowadays, with so much technology available, I often play zikr videos on YouTube or TV. Even though they might not say it correctly, they try to follow along. They enjoy the ones with musical elements." (R1)

"Social media is helpful. We show them things, like cartoons. For example, there are cartoons like Omar and Hana that teach good manners and other lessons. So, we use current technology and social media for this." (R4)

"They listen to zikr on the radio and follow along. Sometimes they watch TV and see the call to prayer, and they follow it. They know all the prayer times." (R5)

Sub-Theme 2: Providing Worship Tools

"Omar Hana also has stories about how to read the Quran, and learn to recite it with songs. There are religious stories that we can show them, and then we also provide real materials. For example, give them Iqra', Muqaddam, and show them the actual arrangement." (R4)

"...Encourage them to pray, and buy things like a prayer cap or prayer mat for them. They like to participate when we provide these items." (R5)

In this theme, the use of educational tools in teaching children with special needs about religious practices highlights the importance of parental involvement in providing appropriate and engaging resources. The use of technology adds an interactive dimension that facilitates religious learning for these children. Additionally, providing worship tools such as *Iqra'*, *Muqaddam*, and prayer equipment ensures that children have access to the materials needed to practice religious teachings. The combination of these approaches demonstrates that

parental involvement in utilizing and providing these tools not only helps children with special needs learn about religion but also reflects their commitment to guiding their children towards a religious life.

Discussion

This study aims to understand the religious practices among students with SEN from the perspective of parents. It focuses on aspects of parental knowledge and involvement in supporting the religious life of students with SEN. The findings highlight the crucial role of parents as primary figures in shaping the character of children with special needs. This research contributes to the literature by emphasizing that despite the physical and mental challenges faced by students with SEN, exposure to religious knowledge remains an essential aspect of their lives.

The study reveals that parents have a deep understanding of the importance of religious life for children with special needs. Three main themes identified in the aspect of parental knowledge about religious life are: the need to teach and understand religious knowledge, awareness of parental responsibilities, and the formation of children's morals through religious values. Respondents understand that, despite their children's disabilities, exposure to religious knowledge must be integrated into their daily lives. This aligns with the research by Zaiton and Gunasaran (2017), which states that religious education is a fundamental right for every individual, including children with special needs. This understanding shows that parents strive to ensure their children receive appropriate religious education, despite the challenges in its implementation. It also reflects the awareness that the responsibility of providing religious education is crucial, tailored to the physical or mental abilities of the child. This is supported by previous studies highlighting the important role of parents in religious education (Zaiton & Gunasaran, 2017; Yusoff & Awang, 2019). Other studies also emphasize the importance of religious education in shaping identity and positive behavior (Omar et al., 2021). Moreover, parents recognize that instilling religious values in their children can help them develop good morals in their lives. Understanding religion fosters continuous good practices accompanied by commendable behavior, becoming a habit in a Muslim's way of life (Mastura et al., 2020). Interviewed parents also show determination to teach religious basics even if they themselves may not have deep religious knowledge, demonstrating persistence in seeking reliable sources of knowledge. This proves that parents are committed to fulfilling their responsibilities and ensuring their children are equipped with adequate religious foundations.

Regarding parental involvement, three main themes are evident: children with special needs observing and imitating behavior, parent-child interaction, and the use of educational tools. Parents act as role models by demonstrating religious practices, which are then followed by their children, including daily activities such as prayer, *Quran* reading, and supplication. Continuous interaction between parents and children, through discussing religious values, group activities, and emotional and moral support, helps create a conducive religious environment. According to Mohamad (2018) in Ibrahim et al (2018), the effect of parents constantly providing support and encouragement leads to increased interest, enthusiasm, and confidence in children, enhancing their learning process. Additionally, parents use educational tools, such as technology and physical equipment, to teach their children about religious practices. The use of educational videos, mobile apps, and picture

books makes religious learning more interactive and engaging for children. Abdul Haris and Cahyadi (2021), note that using appropriate methods and techniques tailored to the needs of children with special needs is crucial for improving the quality of Islamic education. Overall, the findings indicate that active and consistent parental involvement is key to ensuring that children with special needs receive proper religious education and can practice these teachings in their lives.

Implications and Contributions

The findings of this study have several implications for improving religious education and support for students with SEN. Firstly, there is a need for tailored teaching strategies that accommodate the unique needs of students with SEN. Educators should receive training on how to effectively teach religious education to students with special educational needs, incorporating inclusive teaching methods, and using appropriate aids and technology. Additionally, practical guidelines and resources should be developed to support parents in their role as primary educators of their children's religious lives. Community and social support systems should also be strengthened to provide a supportive environment for students with SEN and their families. This includes creating inclusive religious education programs and activities that cater to the needs of students with SEN and fostering a supportive community network.

This study contributes to the field by offering practical insight and recommendations that can be utilized by educators, parents, and policymakers. The study underscores the importance of inclusive teaching strategies and community support, providing a foundation for future initiatives aimed at enhancing the religious education of SEN students. By addressing the specific needs of these students, the study not only enriches the academic discourse on religious education but also has the potential to inform policies and practices that promote a more inclusive and supportive educational environment for all students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has highlighted the critical role that parents play in the religious education of their children with special educational needs. Parents possess substantial knowledge of the importance of religious life and are actively involved in their children's religious education through direct teaching, observation, and the use of aids. The study's findings underscore the need for tailored teaching strategies, practical guidelines for parents, and strengthened community support to enhance the religious education of students with SEN. By addressing the needs in understanding how parents can be supported in this role, this study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on religious education and ensure that SEN students receive the support necessary for their moral and spiritual growth.

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