

Research Article

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Resilience in Adversity: Motivations and Challenges of Early Childhood Education Teachers in Rural Indonesia

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Abstract

Background/purpose. Early childhood education (PAUD) teachers in rural Indonesia face chronic structural adversity, including severe resource scarcity and extreme financial insecurity, yet many exhibit remarkable professional commitment. This study aims to investigate this paradox by quantifying the structural challenges and exploring the underlying personal and contextual factors that foster teacher resilience and maintain long-term professional commitment in the rural PAUD setting.

Materials/methods. This study employed a Sequential Explanatory Mixed Methods design. The Quantitative Phase (Phase 1) involved a survey of 274 rural PAUD teachers to quantify challenges. This was followed by a Qualitative Phase (Phase 2) involving in-depth interviews with ten (N=10) experienced teachers selected via extreme case purposive sampling, utilizing the quantitative data as a basis for selection. The data were analyzed sequentially, combining descriptive statistics with thematic analysis.

Results. The quantitative analysis established the context of the financial crisis, showing that 75.19% of teachers earn less than IDR 300,000 (~USD 20) per month. This low income is often compounded by institutional policies that stop local salary payments upon the receipt of government professional allowances, alongside the widespread inadequacy of PAUD infrastructure. The qualitative thematic analysis identified that sustained professional commitment is anchored by a deep intrinsic motivation ("love for children") and a profound sense of social responsibility.

Conclusion. The core finding is the identification of a Resilience Paradox: the extraordinary persistence of these teachers functions as a necessary systemic coping mechanism that is structurally relied upon by the state, arguing that this Extreme Case Resilience is evidence of structural exploitation. This study contributes to the literature by reframing teacher resilience in resource-poor contexts, urging that it not be romanticized but viewed as a vulnerability. The findings necessitate urgent policy recommendations for guaranteed teacher welfare, institutional accountability, and targeted infrastructure funding to ensure the long-term sustainability and quality of rural PAUD.

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1. Introduction

Early Childhood Education (ECE) plays a pivotal role in fostering foundational development and is critical for mitigating educational disparities, particularly across rural landscapes (Betancur et al., 2024; Srivastava, 2020). In Indonesia, based on a report from BPS Indonesia (2025), rural ECE centres constitute a significant portion of nationwide early childhood provision. ECE provides the strong social, emotional, motor, and cognitive foundations essential for future academic success and healthy social integration, underscoring the necessity of rigorous attention to rural ECE to ensure equitable developmental opportunities (Almalki et al., 2024; Hancock, 2020).

However, Early Childhood Educators (ECE teachers), who are the operational backbone of this system (Murphy, 2023), confront complex and persistent challenges, particularly in underserved rural settings. These environments are frequently characterized by severe resource limitations, including inadequate infrastructure, minimal teaching materials, limited access to educational technology, and deficiencies in teacher training quality (Betancur et al., 2024; Dou et al., 2023; Hu et al., 2016). Furthermore, these educators often navigate structural barriers such as low compensation and restricted professional development, which significantly threaten the sustainability and quality of their service delivery (Matjokana, 2023; Yue & Li, 2023).

Despite these compounding structural and environmental pressures, many rural ECE teachers exhibit remarkable dedication and perseverance. This capacity to maintain commitment, effectiveness, and well-being despite chronic adversity is defined as teacher resilience (Helm et al., 2023). Resilience is a crucial psychological construct that determines whether an educator successfully persists and adapts or succumbs to professional burnout and eventual attrition (Katz et al., 2014; Machado, 2013). Consequently, investigating the specific psychological and contextual mechanisms that foster this strength is essential for enhancing teacher retention and improving ECE quality in these disadvantaged regions (Murphy, 2023; Rao et al., 2022).

In the rural Indonesian context, this persistence is notably sustained by factors beyond conventional professional incentives. Specifically, intrinsic commitment derived from a profound sense of responsibility for community children and reinforced by strong communal support functions as a powerful motivator (Jing, 2024; Li, 2025; Rahma Pratiwi et al., 2022). These unique, community-driven elements contribute significantly to the resilience profile of rural educators, enabling them to sustain their motivation and efficacy despite resource scarcity and systemic support deficits (Behera & Kumar Acharya, 2024; Rahaman et al., 2024).

Therefore, the purpose of this study is two-fold: (1) to quantify the level of professional motivation and identify the primary structural and resource-based challenges faced by ECE teachers in rural Indonesia (Phase 1); and (2) to explore in-depth the underlying personal and contextual factors that contribute to their extraordinary resilience in overcoming chronic adversity and maintaining their long-term professional commitment (Phase 2). By integrating empirical data from both phases, this research aims to generate targeted policy recommendations that effectively support teacher retention, strengthen resilience, and ultimately ensure high-quality ECE for children in remote areas.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Early Childhood Education

Early Childhood Education (ECE) refers to the education provided to children from birth to 6 years old, a critical period for physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development (S. Wortham, 2020). The field, rooted in the foundational concepts of Friedrich Fröbel and his emphasis on play-based learning (Johansson et al., 2018; Singer, 2015) and Jean Piaget's stages of cognitive development (Rabindran & Madanagopal, 2020), stresses holistic growth beyond mere academic

skills (S. C. Wortham & Hardin, 2021). ECE centers on fostering essential social abilities, character development, and creating conducive learning environments where children learn through direct experiences (Byrnes, 2009; Lathifah et al., 2025; Prima & Lestari, 2018). Extensive research confirms that investment in high-quality early education yields significant returns in cognitive and non-cognitive skill development and is vital for mitigating social disparities (Bernal Párraga et al., 2024). Thus, ECE is recognized globally as a critical foundation for successful formal schooling and social participation (Abrutyn & Goldman-Hasbun, 2022; Dahl et al., 2022).

2.2. Early Childhood in Rural Areas

Early Childhood Education (ECE) in rural areas often faces significant challenges related to facilities, teaching quality, and access to education (Hu et al., 2016; Mwaipopo et al., 2023). One of the main obstacles is the limited facilities (Hu et al., 2016). Many rural ECE centers lack basic infrastructure, such as adequate classroom space, educational toys, and access to educational technology (Mwaipopo et al., 2023). Research has shown that these centers often lack the learning materials necessary to support effective teaching, and some operate in buildings not designed for educational purposes, thereby hindering a conducive learning environment.

In addition, the quality of teaching in rural ECE centers is often affected by the lack of teacher training and professional development opportunities. This impacts teachers' ability to implement appropriate strategies and address diverse learning needs (Fadila & Saputri, 2024; D. Zhang & Dinamling, 2022). Furthermore, geographical and logistical barriers impede access, leading to inconsistent school attendance and sometimes causing families to prioritize economic activities over education (Bammou et al., 2024; Rather, 2024). These structural challenges significantly compromise quality and equitable access, highlighting the pressure under which rural ECE educators operate.

2.3. Teacher Motivation and Sustainability

Teacher motivation is a critical predictor of professional sustainability, especially in high-demand, low-resource sectors like rural ECE (Murphy, 2023). Motivation is commonly conceptualized through two key theoretical frameworks. First, Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan (2017), distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Luria, 2022; Stritch et al., 2022). Intrinsic motivation, derived from personal satisfaction and a sense of purpose (e.g., love for children), is associated with higher persistence. In contrast, extrinsic motivation stems from external rewards, such as salary. Research indicates that while external factors can initiate professional entry, sustained engagement relies heavily on internal, intrinsic drives (Sak, 2024; X. Zhang, 2025).

Second, Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene Theory provides a relevant lens for analyzing teacher welfare (Vijayakumar & Saxena, 2015). Herzberg posits that Motivators (e.g., achievement, the work itself) actively generate satisfaction. In contrast, Hygiene Factors (e.g., salary, institutional policy, working conditions) do not generate satisfaction but cause extreme dissatisfaction when inadequate (Mitsakis & Galanakis, 2022). This duality highlights a crucial paradox in rural teaching: high intrinsic motivation (a Motivator) often coexists with poor Hygiene Factors (low pay, poor policy), which severely undermine morale and threaten eventual attrition.

2.4. Teacher Resilience in Adverse Contexts

Teacher resilience is defined as the capacity to sustain commitment, effectiveness, and professional well-being despite experiencing chronic adversity and pressure (Helm et al., 2023; Katz et al., 2014). It is not merely the absence of stress but an active, ongoing process of adaptation and thriving (Machado, 2013).

However, in resource-poor settings, the concept of resilience requires critical analysis. International literature warns against the "romanticization of resilience," where the extraordinary

persistence of teachers is celebrated without addressing the structural roots of their hardship (Chen & Lee, 2022; Mu, 2022; Mu et al., 2024). When policy and funding fail to provide adequate support, teacher resilience functions not just as a personal trait but as a systemic coping mechanism that inadvertently masks deeper structural inequalities (UNESCO, 2023). Investigating extreme cases of resilient teachers who persist despite the most severe adversity can illuminate the specific, powerful mechanisms (such as intrinsic and social motivation) that prevent the collapse of the education system in vulnerable areas.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a Sequential Explanatory Mixed Methods design, consistent with the two-fold aims outlined in the introduction. The initial Quantitative Phase (Phase 1) involved surveying a larger sample of 274 rural ECE teachers to quantify their motivation levels and identify broad structural challenges. The key advantage of employing this mixed methods approach lies in its ability to achieve complementarity, ensuring a more comprehensive understanding that combines statistical breadth with narrative depth (Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Clark, 2011). Specifically, this design uses the subsequent Qualitative Phase (Phase 2) to provide rich, narrative context and deep explanation for the complex patterns and paradoxes identified in the initial quantitative data (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This paper, however, focuses exclusively on the findings from the subsequent Qualitative Phase (Phase 2), which aimed to explore the underlying mechanisms of teacher resilience in depth. The qualitative data are utilized to gain a rich, narrative understanding that complements and explains the statistical patterns found in Phase 1.

3.2. Participants and Sampling

The participants for the Qualitative Phase (Phase 2) consisted of ten (N=10) experienced rural ECE teachers. These individuals were selected using extreme-case purposive sampling, in which the initial survey data (Phase 1) were used to identify teachers who demonstrated the highest levels of persistence and commitment despite significant challenges. The final selection was refined based on three key criteria, ensuring participants possessed high-information value relevant to the study's focus on resilience: (1) a minimum of five years of service in a rural ECE setting; (2) consistent employment despite receiving below-average compensation; and (3) documented involvement in community-based initiatives, suggesting a high level of intrinsic commitment.

The 10 participants were drawn from the initial pool of teachers across 10 distinct districts within the target region of Indonesia (District A to J, as listed in the profile Table 1). This strategic selection across multiple districts was implemented to ensure geographical diversity and varied exposure to local challenges and levels of institutional support, thereby maximizing the potential for rich descriptive data.

Table 1. Characteristics of Respondents

Participant ID	Gender	Age	Years of Service	Highest Education	Primary District
T-01	Female	45	18	S1 (B.Ed)	District A
T-02	Female	39	12	S1 (B.Ed)	District B
T-03	Female	34	8	S1 (B.Ed)	District C
T-04	Male	51	25	High School	District D
T-05	Female	41	15	S1 (B.Ed)	District E
T-06	Female	32	7	S1 (B.Ed)	District F
T-07	Female	48	20	High School	District G
T-08	Male	36	10	S1 (B.Ed)	District H
T-09	Female	55	30	High School	District I
T-10	Female	40	14	S1 (B.Ed)	District J

3.3. Limitations and Sample Representative

The use of a small, purposive sample of 10 participants limits the generalizability of the findings to the wider population of rural Indonesian ECE teachers. This limitation is acknowledged. However, the chosen methodology prioritizes depth and richness of data over breadth. By selecting highly experienced and resilient teachers (extreme cases), the study successfully generated detailed, information-rich narratives that provide deep insights into the mechanisms and factors sustaining professional commitment amid chronic adversity, the core aim of Phase 2. The findings offer transferability to similar under-resourced educational contexts.

3.4. Data Collection Instrument and Procedure

Data collection was conducted in two distinct phases corresponding to the research design. The instrument for Phase 1 (Quantitative) was a structured survey administered to 274 teachers. This survey included closed-ended questions designed to quantify demographic information (Liu, 2012), measure motivation levels using a validated scale (Williams & Babbie, 2021) (e.g., adapted from SDT instruments), and quantify the severity of structural challenges (e.g., exact salary figures, infrastructure adequacy). The resulting data were used as the basis for the subsequent sampling strategy.

Before the full administration of the quantitative survey instrument, the scale underwent rigorous validation. Content Validity was established through a review by three subject-matter experts in ECE and educational psychology, ensuring that the questions accurately covered the required domains of motivation and structural challenges.

The procedure for Phase 1 (Quantitative) was as follows: the survey was administered electronically (e.g., via Google Forms) across the five participating provinces over 3 months in 2024, following institutional ethical clearance. Participation was voluntary, and digital consent was obtained before respondents could access the questionnaire.

The primary data collection instrument for Phase 2 (Qualitative) was a semi-structured interview protocol developed specifically to explore the drivers of resilience, coping strategies, intrinsic motivation, and perceptions of community support. The instrument's core questions were derived

from existing literature on teacher resilience (e.g., factors by Day et al., 2007) and adapted to the specific challenges of rural ECE in Indonesia.

The qualitative instrument underwent rigorous development, including pre-testing with three ECE teachers who met the criteria but were not included in the final sample. The instrument was primarily administered in Bahasa Indonesia. To ensure the validity of the concepts, the protocol underwent linguistic validity checks, including a double back-translation process: the English version was translated into Bahasa Indonesia and then independently translated back into English by a separate bilingual expert, confirming conceptual equivalence and consistency of meaning.

The procedure for Phase 2 (Qualitative) was Interviews with the 10 selected participants were conducted face-to-face in a private, quiet space at their respective ECE centers or at a neutral location, ensuring maximum confidentiality. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes, was conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, and was audio-recorded with the participant's explicit, written informed consent.

3.5. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted sequentially, corresponding to the two research phases. The Quantitative Data (Phase 1, N=274) were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) using appropriate statistical software. This analysis focused on quantifying demographic data, structural challenges (salary, infrastructure), and broad motivation themes to establish the context of chronic adversity. The findings from this phase were then used to identify the "extreme cases" of teachers demonstrating high commitment despite severe adversity, which informed the subsequent phase's sampling.

The Qualitative Data (Phase 2, N=10) collected from the interviews were analyzed using Qualitative Thematic Analysis, following the systematic six-phase procedure outlined by Braun & Clarke (2024). This process began with Data Transcription (all interviews were transcribed verbatim in Bahasa Indonesia), followed by Familiarization, in which the researchers read and re-read the transcripts to achieve deep familiarity. The third step involved Initial Coding of relevant data excerpts to capture the underlying meaning. Codes were then grouped during the Searching for Themes phase (e.g., 'Intrinsic Anchor,' 'Systemic Exploitation'). Next, the themes underwent Reviewing and Refining against the full data set to ensure coherence. Finally, the researchers engaged in Defining and Naming Themes, developing the final thematic structure directly linked to the core research question on extreme case resilience. To enhance trustworthiness, the final coding structure and thematic maps were subjected to peer debriefing by two independent qualitative researchers.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Before data collection, this study was conducted in strict accordance with the relevant institutional guidelines. Ethical oversight and approval were obtained from Prof. Dr. Harun, M.Pd., Head of the Doctoral Early Childhood Education Department, Faculty of Education, Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta. Crucially, all participants provided written informed consent after receiving a detailed explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality was strictly maintained: all interview data were transcribed and analyzed using pseudonyms (T-01 to T-10), and all identifying information, including specific school names and district details, was anonymized to protect participants' identities and privacy. Participation was entirely voluntary.

4. Results

The findings are structured into two main sections: the first presents the contextual data from the larger Quantitative Phase (Phase 1) and the key themes derived from the Qualitative Phase (Phase 2), focusing on teacher motivation and challenges.

4.1. Contextual Characteristics of the Respondent Pool (Phase 1)

This section provides the overall demographic and institutional background of the large respondent pool (N=274) from the initial survey. This data establishes the context for the extreme-case purposive sampling used to select the 10 interview participants in Phase 2, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Characteristics of Respondents (Phase 1)

Characteristic	Category	Percentage (%)
Province (N=274)	East Java	45.99
	Lampung	21.90
	Central Java	20.07
	Central Sulawesi	8.03
	West Java	4.01
Professional Role	Teacher	94.89
	School Principal	5.11
Years in ECE	>6 Years	50.00
	3-6 Years	35.04
	1-3 Years	14.96
Type of ECE	Formal ECE (e.g., TK)	74.45
	Non-Formal ECE (e.g., Kelompok Bermain)	25.55

The respondent pool shows a strong concentration in East Java (45.99%) but maintains representation across five provinces. Half of the participants (50.00%) reported having more than 6 years of experience, indicating a high level of professional engagement. The vast majority of the data was drawn from government-recognized formal ECE institutions (74.45%).

4.2. Motivation of Early Childhood Education (ECE) Teachers

The analysis of open-ended responses from the 274 participants revealed three main thematic drivers of motivation among rural ECE teachers (see Table 3).

Table 3. Motivations for ECE in Rural Indonesia

Theme	Percentage (%)
Love for Children	56.99
Desire to Improve ECE Quality in Rural Areas	28.50
Institutional Need for Teachers (Situational Entry)	14.51

4.2.1. Love for Children (Intrinsic Motivation)

The dominant motivation is a deep, intrinsic connection to children. Teachers expressed profound satisfaction in witnessing the intellectual and developmental growth of the young students. This emotional bond serves as the primary psychological anchor sustaining their long-term dedication.

"Seneng aja ngajar anak-anak, yang awalnya anak-anak gak tau apa-apa jadi tau segalanya, ada kepuasan tersendiri jadi guru TK." (I just enjoy teaching children. They start knowing nothing and eventually learn everything. There is an incredible fulfillment in being an ECE teacher.)

This intrinsic drive often overrides external factors like salary:

"Aku awalnya hanya diminta untuk ngajar, tapi lama-lama aku suka banget sama anak-anak, dunianya unik, dan bertahan sampai hampir 7 tahun di TK." (I was initially just asked to teach, but over time, I fell deeply in love with the kids; their world is so unique. I've stayed for almost seven years.)

4.2.2. Social Responsibility and Community Improvement

A significant number of teachers reported being motivated by a desire to drive social change and improve educational access for their community. This idealistic commitment is often rooted in their own educational background and a sense of duty.

"Memberikan yang terbaik aja buat ningkatin PAUD pedesaan dari hasil kuliahku di kota. Kalau kualitas PAUD bagus, nanti anak-anak juga mendapatkan pendidikan yang lebih bagus sesuai amanah konstitusi." (I just want to give the best I can to elevate rural ECE, based on what I learned in the city. If the quality of PAUD is good, the children will receive a better education, as promised by the constitution.)

4.2.3. Fulfilling Local Institutional Needs (Situational Motivation)

The smallest group entered the profession out of necessity due to teacher shortages in their village. However, the qualitative data showed that this situational entry often evolved into intrinsic commitment, driven by a realization of the community's vulnerability.

"Aku kan ini ngajarnya di desa, yang membuatku bertahan adalah kondisi ekonomi masyarakat, sedangkan masyarakat membutuhkan PAUD untuk anak-anak mereka, itu yang membuatku bertahan memilih menjadi guru PAUD." (I teach in this village, and what keeps me going is the economic condition of the people here. The community desperately needs ECE for their children, and that's why I chose to stay as an ECE teacher.)

4.3. Challenges Faced by ECE Teachers

The analysis of the larger survey pool (Phase 1) highlighted two major structural challenges hindering ECE service delivery: inadequate infrastructure and severe financial insecurity.

4.3.1. Inadequate Infrastructure and Facilities

Although a majority of institutions (77.01%) reported owning a building, interviews revealed that ownership does not guarantee adequacy. Institutions frequently lack essential supporting spaces or operate on vulnerable land (See Table 4).

Table 4. Building Ownership of PAUD Institutions

Categories	Percentage (%)
Own Building	77.01
No Building	22.99

Teachers reported using temporary or repurposed spaces, reflecting the precarity of the teaching environment:

"TK kami itu menumpang bangunannya di bangunan desa yang ruangnya tidak terpakai, untuk mempunyai gedung sendiri belum memiliki biaya, dan belum ada bantuan." (Our ECE borrows unused rooms in the village office building because we cannot afford to construct our own facility and have not received any assistance.)

In some cases, infrastructure constraints directly impacted teaching methods, requiring constant adjustment:

"Bangunannya cukup bagus kok, cuma kita belum punya tempat ibadah, jadi ya bongkar pasang kalau mau melaksanakan pembiasaan ibadah." (The building is fairly good... we just don't have a prayer room. We have to rearrange the space every time we want to hold religious practices.)

4.3.2. Rural ECE Teachers' Salary

The most pressing and widespread challenge is the extremely low and unstable salary, confirming the systemic financial insecurity faced by the rural ECE workforce (see Table 5).

Table 5. Rural ECE Teachers' Salary Categories

Categories	Percentage (%)
< IDR 100,000 (~USD 6.5)	40.15
IDR 100,000 - IDR 300,000 (~USD 6.5 - 20)	35.04
IDR 500,000 - IDR 1,000,000	10.22
> IDR 1,000,000 (~USD 67)	14.60

The survey shows that 75.19% of rural ECE teachers earn less than IDR 300,000 per month. Interview data highlighted the irregular nature of payment:

"Gajiku 135.000 perbulan, tapi diberikan 3 bulan sekali." (My salary is IDR 135,000 per month, but it is disbursed quarterly (once every three months).)

Salaries are often dependent on sporadic government subsidies or subject to delays. Furthermore, receiving government allowances often means the institution stops paying:

"Kalau di TK saya, kalau sudah terima tunjangan profesi dari pemerintah dari lembaga ya gak ada gaji sama sekali." (If we already receive the professional allowance from the government, then the school doesn't give any salary at all.)

This financial instability creates chronic stress, making the teachers' sustained professional commitment an extreme case of resilience, which will be discussed further.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study provide critical insights into the complex realities faced by Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers in rural Indonesia, highlighting a significant paradox between their extraordinary intrinsic commitment and the systemic structural adversity they endure.

5.1. Intrinsic Motivation is the Anchor of Professional Commitment

The study confirms that intrinsic and social values overwhelmingly drive the sustained professional engagement of rural ECE teachers. With the majority of respondents (56.99%) citing a "love for children" as their primary motivation, this finding strongly aligns with Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT). This aligns with (2022) and Stritch (2022), who found that SDT posits that internal satisfaction, specifically the joy derived from supporting children's growth and development, is a key driver of sustained professional dedication.

Furthermore, the significant proportion of teachers (28.50%) motivated by a desire to improve educational quality in their communities emphasizes their role as agents of social development. This socially oriented motivation resonates with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, confirming that these educators view their work as a micro-level contribution that shapes the broader social environment and development of their community (Hayes et al., 2022; Yang & Eunjoo Oh, 2024).

The dynamic nature of motivation is also evident, as the initial situational entry (14.51%) often evolves into deep intrinsic commitment over time, supporting the views from Sak (2024) and Zhang (2025) that teacher motivation is dynamic and highly context-driven. This intense intrinsic motivation acts as the foundational psychological resource these teachers draw upon to navigate chronic hardship.

5.2. Chronic Adversity and the Threat to Professional Sustainability

Despite this internal resource, the sustainability of the teaching profession in rural ECE is severely threatened by structural challenges.

5.2.1. Financial Insecurity is a Critical Hygiene Factor

Financial insecurity is the most pressing issue. The data revealed that three-quarters (75.19%) of teachers earn less than IDR 300,000 (approximately USD 20) per month. These conditions illustrate Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene Theory, where inadequate salary is only one facet of the broader "hygiene factor." Critically, the qualitative findings extend this adversity beyond mere low income, revealing severe issues in institutional governance and administrative policy. The reliance on minimal, irregular government subsidies, coupled with the institutional practice of stopping salary payments upon the receipt of government professional allowances, signifies a breakdown in job security and policy fairness—two critical hygiene dimensions. This administrative instability, rather than just the low figure, is what places chronic financial stress on the workforce and profoundly undermines morale and retention (Mitsakis & Galanakis, 2022; Vijayakumar & Saxena, 2015). In summary, the precarious and inconsistent nature of compensation, rooted in exploitative institutional policy, significantly heightens the chronic stress experienced by these educators, pushing their sustained professional commitment into the domain of extreme case resilience.

5.2.2. Infrastructure as an Ecological Constraint

The physical learning environment poses another critical challenge. Although 77.01% of institutions reported owning a building, the interviews revealed that many lack essential facilities (offices, adequate classrooms) or are vulnerable due to shared land or damage from natural disasters. This inadequacy underscores the vulnerability of rural ECE institutions. From the ecological perspective, insufficient learning environments affect not only children's immediate experiences but

also their long-term development (Burakgazi, 2024; Hayes et al., 2022). Specifically, the unstable physical facilities and the lack of essential supporting spaces directly degrade the quality of the ECE microsystem, introducing chronic stress and constraints that interfere with educators' ability to deliver an optimal curriculum (Murphy, 2023). Critically, this constraint is also pedagogical: the compromised physical environment inhibits the implementation of play-based methodologies advocated by Froebel. It restricts the experiential learning opportunities essential for the cognitive stages described by Piaget. Research in similar contexts has shown that these material and spatial limitations often constrain educators, forcing them to implement an adapted or limited curriculum (Betancur et al., 2024; Dou et al., 2023). These infrastructure limits directly impede the quality and continuity of the education these highly motivated teachers can deliver.

5.3. The Resilience Paradox and Study Contribution is Systemic Exploitation

The most compelling finding is the Resilience Paradox: ECE teachers in rural Indonesia possess extraordinary intrinsic motivation and social commitment, yet they continue to operate under structural constraints that systemically exploit this very dedication.

This duality aligns with international literature on ECE in resource-poor settings, where high teacher resilience often masks deeper structural inequalities (Chen & Chi-Kin Lee, 2022; Mu, 2022; Mu et al., 2024). By using extreme case purposive sampling, this study uniquely captures the narratives of the most persistent teachers, showing that their resilience is not merely a personal trait but a necessary coping mechanism against chronic systemic failure. Crucially, the system, through insufficient funding and policy gaps, effectively transfers the financial burden of ECE onto the personal sacrifice and goodwill of these intrinsically motivated educators.

This commitment prevents the collapse of the ECE system in vulnerable areas. Theoretically, this study reinforces the view that teacher motivation in developing countries is primarily intrinsic and socially grounded. However, this resilience is inseparable from, and indeed required by, adverse structural conditions.

5.4. Policy Implications for Moving Beyond Romanticizing Resilience

The sustained commitment of ECE teachers in rural Indonesia, demonstrated by their long service and high intrinsic motivation despite severe financial and infrastructural adversity, represents a powerful form of resilience. However, this study argues that this resilience must not be romanticized or treated as a substitute for systemic policy change. The ongoing reliance on teacher sacrifice is a form of structural exploitation that threatens the long-term viability of the profession. The implications derived from this study are threefold. Practically, there is an urgent need for concrete measures to ensure sustainable teacher welfare, including establishing guaranteed, fairer, and more reliable salary systems that move decisively beyond reliance on sporadic stipends. At the policy level, addressing these fundamental challenges is essential for Indonesia to meet its commitment to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4; this requires policies to explicitly address the structural vulnerabilities that currently allow teacher intrinsic motivation to be exploited, thereby ensuring a stable and supported ECE workforce. Theoretically, the findings contribute significantly to the resilience literature by demonstrating that in resource-poor contexts, the mechanisms of motivation and resilience must be studied together, as intrinsic drivers function as the primary factor mitigating chronic, exploitative structural risk.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Summary of Findings and Theoretical Contribution

This study confirms a profound paradox in rural Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Indonesia: teachers maintain their professional commitment, driven by deep intrinsic motivation ("love for

children") and social responsibility, consistent with Self-Determination Theory, despite navigating severe structural adversity. The analysis revealed that 75.19% of teachers receive extremely low, unreliable compensation, exacerbated by deficient institutional governance that exploits their dedication by halting salary payments upon the receipt of government allowances, a practice that contradicts Herzberg's Hygiene Factors. Furthermore, inadequate physical facilities severely compromise the quality of the ECE microsystem, directly inhibiting the implementation of essential pedagogical philosophies like those of Froebel and Piaget. The core theoretical contribution is the identification of this persistence as Extreme Case Resilience, a necessary systemic coping mechanism that the state structurally relies on. This finding argues that the resilience of these teachers must be viewed not as a virtue to be celebrated, but as evidence of structural exploitation, in which the individual's sacrifice bears the cost of ECE provision.

6.2. Recommendations and Policy Implications

The findings necessitate urgent, targeted policy interventions to dismantle the structural exploitation threatening ECE sustainability. Firstly, ensuring Guaranteed Teacher Welfare requires the Provincial and District Governments (Pemda) to establish a guaranteed, predictable floor salary or professional stipend for all rural ECE teachers, independent of existing sporadic subsidies (BOSP). This measure is critical for stabilizing Herzberg's Hygiene Factors and protecting the teachers' intrinsic motivation from burnout.

Secondly, establishing Institutional Accountability requires the Ministry of Education and Culture to enforce and monitor administrative policies that explicitly prohibit institutions from halting local salary payments upon a teacher's receipt of professional allowances. This administrative fix is essential to eliminate the current system of exploitation and ensure job security. Finally, Targeted Infrastructure Funding must prioritize not just building structures but also creating functional ECE microsystems by funding dedicated supporting spaces, such as offices and prayer rooms, and adequate play-based materials required to successfully implement child-centered curriculum philosophies, as detailed in the theories of Froebel and Piaget.

6.3. Limitations and Future Research

The study's primary limitation is the use of a small, extreme case purposive sample. While this methodology successfully generated deep, information-rich narratives, the findings are not generalizable to the wider population of rural Indonesian ECE teachers. The core strength, however, lies in the in-depth understanding of the mechanisms sustaining commitment amidst chronic adversity. For future research, it is recommended that a longitudinal study be conducted to track teachers' long-term mental health and eventual attrition rates as they navigate chronic adversity. Additionally, comparative studies of policy models between areas with proactive local government funding and those dependent solely on central subsidies are needed to inform sustainable and viable policy pathways.

This study found that the primary motivations of rural PAUD teachers in Indonesia are rooted in intrinsic and social values, such as a love for children and the desire to improve the quality of education in their communities. However, some initially entered the profession due to institutional needs. However, the sustainability of this profession is hindered by low and unstable salaries and inadequate infrastructure, which threaten both teachers' well-being and the quality of educational services. These findings highlight the urgent need for fairer and more reliable salary systems, greater investment in facilities, and stronger policy support, so that the dedication of ECE teachers is not merely a symbol of resilience but is supported within a framework of equitable and sustainable early childhood education.

Declarations

Author Contributions. Wildiani: Writing and Data Analysis. Sutapa and Syamsudin: Data Interpretation and Coding Data. Rosyida: Conceptualization, Data Collection, and Review Editing. Yusuf and Muliati: Data Collection and Literature Review. All authors have read and approved the published version of the article.

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Ethical Approval. This study did not require formal ethical approval in accordance with applicable legislation and institutional requirements. Nevertheless, permission to conduct the research was obtained from the relevant educational authorities. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their participation was voluntary. Informed consent was obtained from each respondent, and anonymity and confidentiality of the data were strictly maintained throughout the research process.

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