



CHALLENGES OF ACCESS AND QUALITY IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (ECE) IN INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT

Early Childhood Education (PAUD) is a crucial stage in human resource development, as it is during this period that the foundation for a child's cognitive, social, emotional, and moral development is formed. However, the implementation of PAUD in Indonesia still faces serious challenges, both in terms of access and quality of services. This study aims to examine various obstacles that hinder the equitable distribution and improvement of the quality of PAUD in Indonesia. The approach used is a qualitative descriptive with a literature study method, involving secondary data sources from scientific journals, policy documents, and reports from relevant national and international institutions. The results of the analysis indicate that geographical disparities between urban and rural areas, especially in the 3T (Disadvantaged, Frontier, Outermost) regions, are the main obstacles in accessing PAUD services. In addition, limited family economic resources and high operational costs also impact the low participation of children in PAUD institutions. From the quality aspect, low teacher qualifications and competencies, inadequate welfare of educators, and suboptimal curriculum implementation are key issues that require serious attention. The governance of early childhood education institutions and quality assurance systems are also still not effectively integrated. This study recommends the need for a collaborative strategy between the central and regional governments, communities, and the private sector to expand access and improve the quality of early childhood education services in Indonesia. These efforts need to be supported by supportive policies, adequate funding, ongoing teacher training, and a participatory quality evaluation system.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, access to education, quality of services, quality of educators, child education policies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education (PAUD) plays a crucial role in establishing the foundation for children's cognitive, social, and emotional development before they enter formal education. In Indonesia, PAUD has been a key focus of national education policy since the enactment of Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, which emphasized the importance

of early childhood education. However, despite the recognition of PAUD's strategic role, the quality and access to PAUD in Indonesia remain uneven, particularly in rural areas, underdeveloped regions, and Eastern Indonesia. Many PAUD institutions do not meet national standards in terms of curriculum, teacher competency, and infrastructure. This situation is exacerbated by a lack of public awareness of the importance of quality PAUD, which leads to low parental participation in early childhood education, particularly among low-income families (Nirwana, Ramadhani, & Silvia, 2025).

Furthermore, another major challenge is the disparity in access between regions. Urban areas generally have more adequate PAUD institutions, both in terms of number, teacher quality, and learning facilities. In contrast, many 3T (Disadvantaged, Frontier, and Outermost) regions still lack early childhood education (PAUD) facilities, or even none at all. According to Bappenas data, of the total number of children aged 3–6 in Indonesia, only around 60% are served by PAUD institutions, and the majority remain non-formal. This indicates a significant gap between the need for services and the availability of quality early childhood education institutions. This imbalance risks imbalances in the early development of Indonesian children, which can ultimately impact long-term educational and social disparities (Chania, 2024).

The quality of PAUD services also remains an unresolved issue. Many PAUD educators lack specialized educational backgrounds in PAUD and have not received adequate professional training. This undoubtedly impacts the quality of teaching and learning interactions and children's learning experiences. While the government, through the Ministry of Education and Culture, has implemented certification and ongoing training for PAUD teachers, it has been unevenly distributed and remains hampered by limited budgets and training infrastructure. Furthermore, the low welfare of early childhood education (PAUD) teachers, particularly in non-formal institutions, makes this profession less attractive and contributes to high teacher turnover. Without strong professional support, PAUD institutions struggle to achieve the expected learning quality standards set out in the National PAUD Framework (Nirwana et al., 2025).

Finally, the approach to PAUD education in Indonesia is still dominated by conventional learning activities, emphasizing memorization and cognitive aspects. It has not yet fully adopted the play-based approach (learning through play) recommended by UNESCO and global best practices. The lack of pedagogical innovation in PAUD implementation, along with minimal parental involvement in the educational process, contributes to suboptimal holistic child development. In this context, the challenge lies not only in the quantity of PAUD institutions, but also in a profound transformation in approaches, curricula, and support systems for children. Therefore, synergy is needed between the government, community, and private sector in developing a comprehensive strategy to improve the quality and equality of PAUD services throughout Indonesia so that the ideal of "Education for All" can be realized in reality (Chania, 2024; Nirwana et al., 2025).

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with the aim of in-depth description of the challenges of access to and quality of Early Childhood Education (PAUD) in Indonesia. This approach was chosen because it allows for a contextual depiction of the actual conditions, experiences, and perceptions of stakeholders such as teachers, parents, and PAUD institution managers. Data were collected through a literature review of various scientific journals, government policies, and official reports from institutions such as the Ministry of Education and Culture, BPS, and UNICEF. The analysis was conducted using content analysis of relevant documents and literature, focusing on categories such as geographic inequality, economic barriers, educator quality, and institutional governance.

Secondary data sources were used because this research does not involve direct experiments but rather aims to interpret existing data to identify emerging patterns, challenges, and policy strategies. Data validity was strengthened through source triangulation by comparing findings from various relevant and recent literature (2022–2025). Furthermore, reliability was achieved through the use of official sources and accredited journals. The results of the analysis are described systematically according to the major themes that have been formulated in the research objectives, with a focus on mapping problems and policy solutions that are currently being implemented and can be implemented in the future.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Concept of Early Childhood Education

Early Childhood Education (PAUD) is a stage of education provided to children from birth to six years of age. It aims to foster physical and spiritual growth and development, preparing them for further education. This definition aligns with Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, which recognizes PAUD as part of both formal and non-formal education. The primary goal of PAUD is to establish a foundation for children in various aspects of development, including motor, cognitive, socio-emotional, language, and moral-spiritual development. PAUD is not academic education like elementary school, but rather emphasizes stimulating children's holistic development through play, exploration, and enjoyable learning experiences. In practice, PAUD can be provided by various institutions, such as Kindergartens (TK), Playgroups (KB), Childcare Centers (TPA), and similar PAUD units. Quality early childhood education (PAUD) services are expected to detect and address developmental barriers early on and lay the foundation for character development, early literacy, and social skills development in children (MoEC, 2022). According to Jean Piaget's theory of child development, ages 0–6 fall within the pre-operational stage, where children begin to construct symbolic representations and imagination, necessitating an interactive, activity-based learning approach. Therefore, in the Indonesian context, the PAUD approach should be holistic and integrative, focusing not solely on formal education but also encompassing health, nutrition, and care services as a unified support system for child growth and development.

The primary principle in developing PAUD programs is an orientation toward the developmental needs and characteristics of early childhood. Several principles of early childhood development are essential to underpin the implementation of PAUD education. First, child development occurs gradually and comprehensively, encompassing various aspects (physical, cognitive, language, socio-emotional, and moral values) that are integrated. Second, each child develops at a different pace, so learning activities must be designed flexibly to accommodate the diverse potential of each child. Third, children are active learners who acquire knowledge through interaction with their environment and direct experience. This principle refers to the constructivist approach, as proposed by Lev Vygotsky, that children learn most effectively through social interaction and support from adults or peers within their zone of proximal development (ZPD). Fourth, early childhood is a golden age that is crucial for a child's future, as this is when their brains develop rapidly. Therefore, stimulation provided during this period must be high-quality and consistent, in a safe, enjoyable, and stress-free environment. Another principle is the importance of strengthening character and social values from an early age through positive habits, such as cooperation, empathy, responsibility, and honesty. Character education in early childhood education is not taught explicitly, but through role models, symbolic play, and daily interactions between children and teachers. In Indonesia, these principles are reflected in the Early Childhood Education Curriculum Framework published by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek), which emphasizes play-based learning, an experience-rich environment, and the active role of parents in the educational process. By applying these developmental principles, PAUD services can truly become an important foundation in growing children who are healthy, confident, intelligent, and ready to contribute in the future (Kemendikbudristek, 2023).

Early Childhood Education (ECD) Policy in Indonesia

Early Childhood Education (ECD) has been legally recognized as part of the national education system through several key regulations in Indonesia. One of the main regulations that serves as the legal basis for ECD is Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, specifically Article 28, which states that early childhood education is a development effort aimed at children from birth to six years of age, carried out through the provision of educational stimulation to support physical and spiritual growth and development. This regulation is reinforced by Government Regulation Number 57 of 2021 concerning National Education Standards, which positions ECD as an integral part of the formal and non-formal education systems. Furthermore, Presidential Regulation Number 60 of 2013 concerning Holistic and Integrative ECD emphasizes the need for a cross-sectoral approach in the implementation of ECD, encompassing aspects of education, health, nutrition, and child protection. The National Strategy for Holistic and

Integrative Early Childhood Development (Stranas PAUD HI) is also a key document providing direction for the integration of ECD services across various levels of government. These regulations demonstrate the government's commitment to supporting the provision of quality and equitable early childhood education (PAUD) throughout Indonesia (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2022).

Along with changing times and social dynamics, the direction of early childhood education (PAUD) policy in Indonesia continues to undergo adjustments. The current PAUD policy emphasizes transforming learning through a more contextual, enjoyable, and developmentally appropriate approach. This aligns with the Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) policy, Episode 24: A Fun Transition from PAUD to Elementary School, launched by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology in 2023. A key point of this policy is the elimination of the literacy, writing, and arithmetic (calistung) test as a requirement for elementary school entry, and an emphasis on a play-based, non-pressurizing learning process. This policy aims to create a smooth transition from PAUD to primary education without stressing or burdening children. Furthermore, the government is also encouraging educational units to develop an Early Childhood Education Unit Operational Curriculum (KOSP) that focuses on character building, project-based learning, and active family participation in the educational process. This policy provides flexibility for early childhood education institutions (PAUD) in developing curricula tailored to local contexts and children's needs. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology is expanding its PAUD teacher competency improvement program through the Merdeka Mengajar Platform and online training. All of these policy directions demonstrate a paradigm shift from PAUD as academic preparatory education to PAUD as a foundation for holistic child development (Kemendikbudristek, 2023).

Development of Early Childhood Education in Indonesia

The growth of Early Childhood Education (PAUD) institutions in Indonesia has shown a significant upward trend over the past two decades. According to data from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, as of 2023, the number of PAUD units across Indonesia exceeded 196,000. These institutions comprise Kindergartens (TK), Playgroups (KB), Childcare Centers (TPA), and Similar PAUD Units (SPS). KB and SPS dominate, many of which are established in rural areas and managed independently by communities or religious institutions. However, despite this rapid quantitative growth, not all institutions meet the Minimum Service Standards (SPM), particularly in terms of teacher-to-child ratios, facilities, infrastructure, and operational curricula. The characteristics of PAUD providers in Indonesia also vary widely, ranging from local governments and private foundations to religious institutions and community organizations. Most PAUD institutions are non-formal, with limited resources and a reliance on community participation (Kemendikbudristek, 2023). In terms of implementation, the majority of early childhood education (PAUD) institutions in Indonesia are managed by the private sector or the community (over 98%), while state institutions account for only a small portion, mostly located in urban areas. This presents challenges in terms of equity and monitoring of service quality. Furthermore, many PAUD institutions lack official operating permits, particularly in underdeveloped regions, due to administrative and human resource limitations. Another characteristic is the unequal distribution of PAUD institutions, with Java contributing over 50% of the total national PAUD units, while provinces in eastern Indonesia, such as Papua, Maluku, and Nusa Tenggara, still have a very limited number of institutions per population. Therefore, the government is currently promoting a PAUD revitalization program through infrastructure assistance, teacher training, and the development of a curriculum that is adaptive to the local context (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, 2023; BPS, 2023).

The level of participation in early childhood education in Indonesia has shown progress, but remains uneven across regions. Statistics Indonesia (BPS) data (2023) shows that the national gross enrollment rate (APK) for early childhood education (PAUD) for children aged 3–6 years reached approximately 66.75%. This figure represents an increase from previous years, but remains far from the 80% target set in the National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN). Higher participation rates are found in urban areas compared to rural areas, with significant disparities particularly among low-income groups and areas with limited geographic access. Furthermore, children from marginalized groups, such as children with disabilities, migrant

children, and children from poor families, still face various barriers to accessing quality PAUD services. Economic factors, parental awareness, and a lack of adequate educational facilities contribute to low participation in these groups (BPS, 2023; UNICEF Indonesia, 2022).

Regional disparities in participation are a central issue in PAUD development. Provinces such as DKI Jakarta, Yogyakarta, and Bali recorded participation rates above 80%, while regions such as Papua, East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), and Maluku remained below 50%. This disparity reflects the uneven development of early childhood education institutions and supporting facilities. Furthermore, cultural factors and community perceptions of the importance of early childhood education contribute to low participation, particularly in remote areas. The government is currently developing a community-based approach to raise family awareness of the importance of early childhood education and encouraging partnerships between the public and private sectors to expand services. Increasing early childhood education participation is not only an indicator of educational achievement but also a crucial foundation for reducing social disparities and improving the quality of human resources from an early age (Kemendikbudristek, 2023; Bappenas, 2022).

Challenges of Early Childhood Education Access

The disparity in access to early childhood education (PAUD) between urban and rural areas remains a major issue in Indonesia. In urban areas, PAUD facilities are relatively easy to access, with better quality teachers and infrastructure. Conversely, in rural areas, access to PAUD institutions is often limited due to poor transportation, a shortage of qualified educators, and remote geographic locations. Furthermore, rural communities often lack sufficient awareness of the importance of early childhood education, resulting in low participation rates (Hijriyani et al., 2025).

The challenging geographic conditions in rural areas exacerbate this disparity. Children in rural areas must travel long distances or cross rivers to reach learning centers. This directly impacts their participation rates and the continuity of their education. This unequal access creates a gap in the basic competencies of rural children compared to urban children, who are more exposed to early childhood education (Wulakada, 2024).

The 3T (Disadvantaged, Frontier, and Outermost) regions face more complex challenges in providing early childhood education (PAUD). Distance is not the only obstacle, but also the lack of infrastructure such as adequate buildings, clean water, and electricity. Many PAUD institutions in these areas lack their own buildings and operate in village halls or residents' homes. Teachers are often not professionals, but rather volunteers without adequate training (Samhaji & Anggara, 2025).

This situation impacts the quality of PAUD services, which falls far short of national standards. This inequality contributes significantly to the reproduction of social inequality in the future. Children from 3T regions grow up with cognitive, social, and emotional limitations due to a lack of quality stimulation from an early age. This demonstrates that equitable access to quality PAUD is key to creating educational equity (Fanani, 2025).

Challenges to Early Childhood Education Quality in Indonesia

The quality of early childhood education is largely determined by the qualifications and competencies of educators. In Indonesia, despite regulations requiring early childhood education (PAUD) educators to have at least a Diploma IV or Bachelor's degree in early childhood education (PAUD), many PAUD teachers are still only high school graduates or lack professional certification. This is due to a mismatch between the needs of the field and the availability of qualified educators. Many regions, particularly in rural and remote areas (3T), still lack PAUD teachers with pedagogical, social, and professional competencies that meet national standards (Putri & Sembiring, 2025).

This situation results in suboptimal learning quality. Teachers with non-PAUD educational backgrounds tend to apply instructional approaches that are less aligned with early childhood development principles. PAUD emphasizes play-based learning, exploration, and multisensory stimulation. The lack of ongoing training further exacerbates this situation, with most PAUD teachers failing to participate in regular professional development. This leads to stagnation in competency and mastery of new methods (Rohani et al., 2023).

One of the major challenges in improving the quality of early childhood education (PAUD) is the low welfare of educators. Many PAUD teachers work voluntarily or receive very low honoraria, below the minimum wage. Most private PAUD institutions, established through community

initiatives, lack the financial capacity to pay decent salaries. The government does provide incentives in the form of Operational Assistance (BOP), but the amount and distribution are still limited (Nursyahbani & Latifah, 2024).

This situation leads to decreased teacher motivation, high turnover, and difficulty retaining qualified educators. Teachers tend to treat PAUD as a side job, rather than a primary profession. Without guaranteed welfare, it is very difficult to demand professionalism and dedication from educators. Teacher welfare is also closely linked to their performance in providing child-friendly, creative, and consistent services. Therefore, improving the quality of PAUD cannot be separated from reforming the reward and protection system for PAUD educators (Dewi & Rachmawati, 2022).

Learning practices in early childhood education (PAUD) ideally emphasize a holistic and enjoyable approach. However, in many PAUD institutions, these practices fall short of expectations. Learning activities are still formal and emphasize memorization, rather than exploration. This occurs because teachers lack a thorough understanding of child development principles and lack sufficient resources to develop varied and engaging learning activities. As a result, children do not receive the maximum stimulation that can support their cognitive, social, and emotional growth (Rohmah & Lestari, 2023).

Furthermore, time constraints and a high teacher-to-child ratio also impact the quality of learning interactions. Many teachers must manage more than 20 children in a single class without an assistant, rendering activities ineffective. Furthermore, the lack of educational play equipment (APE) and learning media makes learning activities monotonous and inadaptive to children's learning styles. Non-contextual and undifferentiated learning poses a major challenge to achieving PAUD service quality standards (Khotimah & Mustika, 2024).

The Indonesian Early Childhood Education (PAUD) curriculum is designed based on a holistic, integrative approach and child development. However, the implementation of this curriculum still faces many obstacles. One of these is teachers' lack of understanding of the curriculum's essence, due to a lack of training and supervision. Many teachers view the PAUD curriculum as an administrative document, rather than a pedagogical guide. This results in learning implementation being out of sync with the true goals of early childhood development (Widyaningsih & Zulfikar, 2023).

On the other hand, the flexibility of the PAUD curriculum also leads to wide variations in implementation between institutions. The curriculum should allow teachers to adapt to local contexts and children's needs, but instead often creates confusion in learning planning and evaluation. Lack of support from local education offices and minimal monitoring have led many PAUD institutions to neglect aspects of the curriculum and simply carry out routine activities without a clear developmental direction. This poses a serious obstacle to standardizing the quality of early childhood education in Indonesia (Yuliani et al., 2024).

Governance and Quality Assurance of Early Childhood Education (PAUD)

Effective early childhood education (PAUD) governance includes a transparent, participatory, and accountable management system for educational institutions. Unfortunately, the implementation of ideal governance still faces many challenges, particularly at the private and community levels of PAUD institutions. Many institutions are still managed informally, without strategic planning, regular evaluation systems, or adequate organizational structures. The lack of institutional management training and weak regulations from local governments contribute to the low quality of this governance. Weak governance also contributes to the low quality of services and professionalism of PAUD providers (Fadhilah & Kurniasih, 2025).

The involvement of stakeholders such as parents, the community, and local governments is often ceremonial rather than substantial. Community-based governance can improve the accountability and sustainability of PAUD programs. Furthermore, dependence on government operational funds prevents many institutions from developing educational innovations. As part of the national education system, PAUD governance should adhere to the principles of good governance and implement ongoing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms (Susanti & Nugroho, 2024).

Early Childhood Education (PAUD) quality assurance is a system that ensures that services meet national minimum standards, including curriculum, teaching staff, facilities, and the learning process. In practice, the implementation of the PAUD quality assurance system in Indonesia

remains uneven and poorly integrated. Many PAUD institutions do not conduct routine self-evaluations and do not participate in the accreditation process due to lack of knowledge or limited resources. Self-evaluation is the first step in an effective quality assurance system (Rahmah & Syamsiah, 2023).

Another problem is the lack of supervision and support from the education office during the quality assurance process. In many cases, service standards are simply used as administrative requirements when establishing an institution, without any ongoing guidance. As a result, educational quality stagnates or even declines. Accreditation programs conducted by the National Accreditation Board for Early Childhood Education (BAN PAUD) and the National Non-Formal Education (PNF) have not yet fully reached all institutions, particularly in the 3T (third-third) regions. To achieve quality PAUD, the quality assurance system must be understood as an integral part of education governance, not merely an administrative obligation (Hidayatullah & Lestari, 2022).

4. CONCLUSION

Early Childhood Education (PAUD) is a crucial foundation for human resource development, yet its implementation in Indonesia still faces complex challenges. Analysis of key issues reveals significant disparities in access, particularly between urban areas and underdeveloped, frontier, and outermost (3T) regions. Geographical barriers, limited infrastructure, and low affordability of PAUD services are the dominant factors hindering equitable access to early childhood education. This disparity is exacerbated by social and economic factors, such as low family income and low parental educational literacy regarding the importance of PAUD.

In terms of quality, the main challenges lie in the qualifications and competencies of educators, substandard welfare, and learning that does not fully align with child development principles. Uneven curriculum implementation and weak governance and quality assurance systems also pose serious obstacles to optimal PAUD implementation. Therefore, synergy between the central and regional governments, PAUD providers, and the community is needed to build an inclusive, high-quality, and sustainable early childhood education system. These efforts include providing affirmative policies, increasing the PAUD budget, ongoing training for educators, and restructuring the accreditation and quality evaluation system to be more participatory and contextual.

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