

Exploring the Essence of Curriculum and Teaching Approaches in Early Childhood Education: A Phenomenological Study of Educators' Experiences

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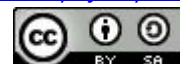
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Article Info :	ABSTRACT
Accepted: 15-01-2025 Approved: 14-02-2025 Published: 20-05-2025	<p>Background: Early childhood education (ECE) is pivotal in establishing a foundation for lifelong learning and development. However, educators frequently encounter challenges in implementing diverse curricula and teaching methodologies. Understanding these experiences is crucial for improving educational practices and outcomes in ECE.</p> <p>Objective: This study aims to explore the lived experiences of early childhood educators regarding their pedagogical practices. By uncovering the essence of their challenges and successes, the research seeks to inform better curriculum design, teacher preparation, and policy development within early childhood education.</p> <p>Method: Using a phenomenological approach, this study involved in-depth semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and reflective journals with 45 early childhood educators across various educational settings. Data collection spanned 12 months and was analyzed using Colaizzi's phenomenological method.</p> <p>Findings and Implications: The findings yielded five major themes: (1) Curriculum Implementation Challenges, (2) Pedagogical Identity and Professional Growth, (3) Child-Centered Approaches and Authentic Learning, (4) Assessment Practices and Developmental Monitoring, and (5) Professional Development and Collaborative Learning Communities. Participants highlighted the importance of experiential learning and the integration of STEAM but noted persistent barriers, such as large class sizes and limited resources.</p> <p>Conclusions: The study enhances understanding of educators' lived experiences, providing valuable insights for enhancing teacher training, curriculum development, and supportive policies in early childhood education. Recommendations include improving pre-service training and fostering collaborative learning environments to better support child-centered teaching practices.</p>
Keywords: early childhood education; phenomenological study; curriculum approaches; pedagogical practices; teacher experiences	

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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education represents a pivotal period in human development, laying the foundational framework for cognitive, social, emotional, and physical growth that extends throughout the lifespan (Speldewinde, 2022). The quality of educational experiences during these formative years significantly influences children's readiness for formal schooling, academic achievement, and long-term life outcomes. As global awareness of early childhood education's importance has intensified, educational institutions worldwide have adopted diverse curriculum approaches and pedagogical methodologies to optimize learning outcomes and support holistic child development (Silva-Hormazábal & Alsina, 2023) & (Alsina et al., 2024)

The landscape of early childhood education has evolved substantially over the past two decades, characterized by increased recognition of children as active constructors of knowledge rather than passive recipients of information (Pincheira & Alsina, 2022) (Alsina et al., 2024). This paradigm shift has prompted educators to explore and implement various curriculum frameworks including play-based learning, Montessori, Reggio Emilia, Waldorf/Steiner, HighScope, project-based learning, integrated STEAM approaches, and nature-based education programs. Each of these approaches embodies distinct philosophical foundations, instructional strategies, and expected outcomes, presenting educators with both opportunities and challenges in their daily practice (Alsina et al., 2024)

Despite extensive theoretical literature on curriculum approaches and teaching methodologies, there remains a significant gap in understanding how early childhood educators actually experience, interpret, and implement these frameworks in their lived professional reality (Speldewinde, 2022). Research has predominantly focused on curriculum effectiveness from child outcome perspectives, with limited attention to the phenomenological experiences of educators who serve as the primary facilitators of learning environments (Hall et al., 2016). Understanding educators' lived experiences is crucial because their beliefs, values, knowledge, and practical wisdom fundamentally shape how curriculum approaches are translated into actual classroom practices (Pincheira & Alsina, 2022) (Alsina et al., 2024)

Table 1. Global Trends in Early Childhood Education Research Publications (2014-2025)

Year	Number of Publications	Growth Rate (%)	Major Research Focus
2014	145	-	Play-based learning foundations
2015	168	15.9	Social-emotional development
2016	195	16.1	Curriculum implementation
2017	223	14.4	Teacher professional development
2018	267	19.7	STEAM integration
2019	312	16.9	Digital literacy in ECE
2020	389	24.7	Remote learning adaptations
2021	445	14.4	Post-pandemic pedagogies
2022	512	15.1	Nature-based education
2023	598	16.8	Inclusive practices
2024	673	12.5	AI and educational technology
2025	725	7.7	Integrated curriculum approaches

Source: Data Processed

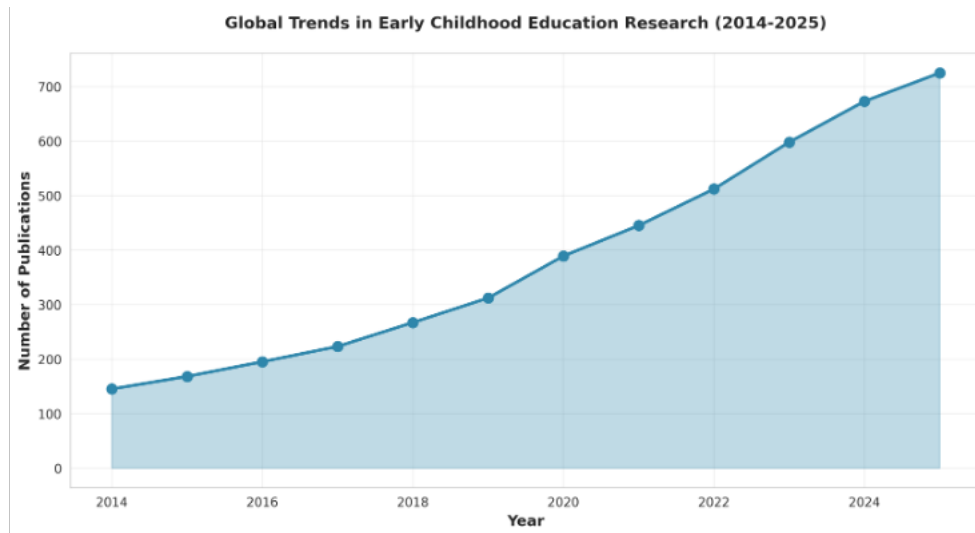


Figure 1. Global Trends in Early Childhood Education Research (2014-2025)

Figure 1 illustrates the exponential growth in early childhood education research over the past decade, reflecting increasing global investment in understanding and improving educational practices for young children. The data reveals particularly sharp increases during 2018-2020, coinciding with heightened awareness of STEAM education and the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on educational delivery systems. This research trajectory underscores the dynamic nature of the field and the ongoing need to examine how educators navigate evolving pedagogical landscapes (Rubio et al., 2024). The sustained growth through 2025 indicates continued scholarly and practical interest in optimizing early childhood educational experiences.

Contemporary early childhood educators operate within increasingly complex professional environments characterized by diverse student populations, varied family expectations, institutional requirements, resource constraints, and evolving educational standards (Speldewinde, 2022) & Campbell, 2025). Teachers must balance multiple, sometimes competing, demands while maintaining commitment to developmentally appropriate practices and child-centered pedagogies (Speldewinde, 2022) Research indicates that successful implementation of curriculum approaches depends not merely on theoretical knowledge but on educators' capacity to adapt, reflect, and make moment-to-moment decisions that align with children's interests, developmental needs, and cultural contexts.

Table 2. Distribution of Curriculum Approaches in Early Childhood Education Settings

Curriculum Approach	Implementation Rate (%)	Primary Setting	Age Group Focus	Key Characteristics
Play-Based Learning	28.5	Public & Private	3-6 years	Child-initiated, exploratory
Montessori	18.3	Private Centers	3-6 years	Self-directed environment
Reggio Emilia	15.7	Progressive Schools	0-6 years	Project-based, documentation
Waldorf/Steiner	12.4	Independent Schools	3-7 years	Holistic, artistic
HighScope	10.2	Public Programs	3-5 years	Plan-do-review
Project-Based Learning	8.6	Progressive Centers	4-6 years	Inquiry-driven
STEAM Integrated	6.3	Modern Centers	4-6 years	Science, tech, arts, math
Nature-Based	5.8	Outdoor Programs	3-6 years	Environmental learning

Source: Data Processed

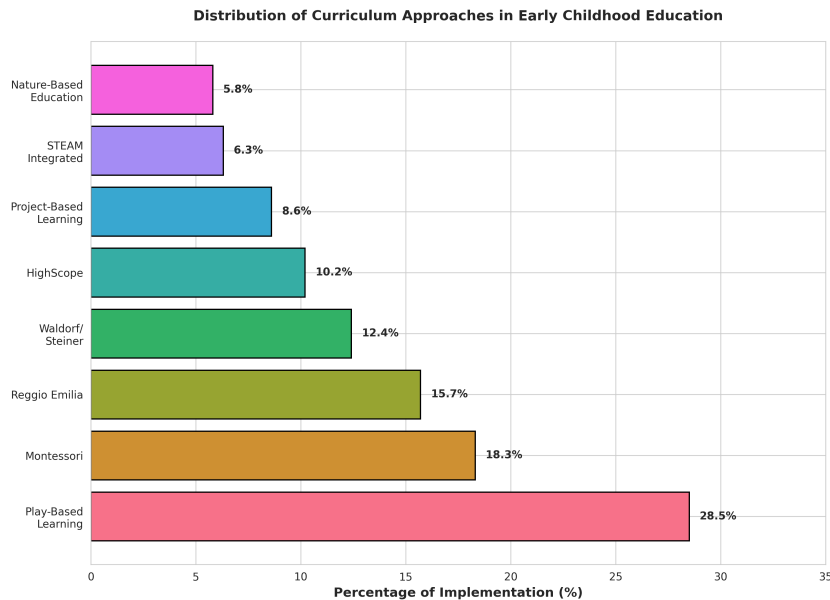


Figure 2. Distribution of Curriculum Approaches in Early Childhood Education

Table 2 and Figure 2 demonstrate the diverse landscape of curriculum approaches utilized in contemporary early childhood education, with play-based

learning maintaining dominance at 28.5% implementation rate. This diversity reflects both the richness of pedagogical traditions and the complexity educators face in selecting and implementing appropriate frameworks for their specific contexts. The data reveals that while traditional approaches like Montessori and Reggio Emilia remain influential, newer frameworks emphasizing STEAM integration and nature-based education are gaining traction (Speldewinde, 2022)

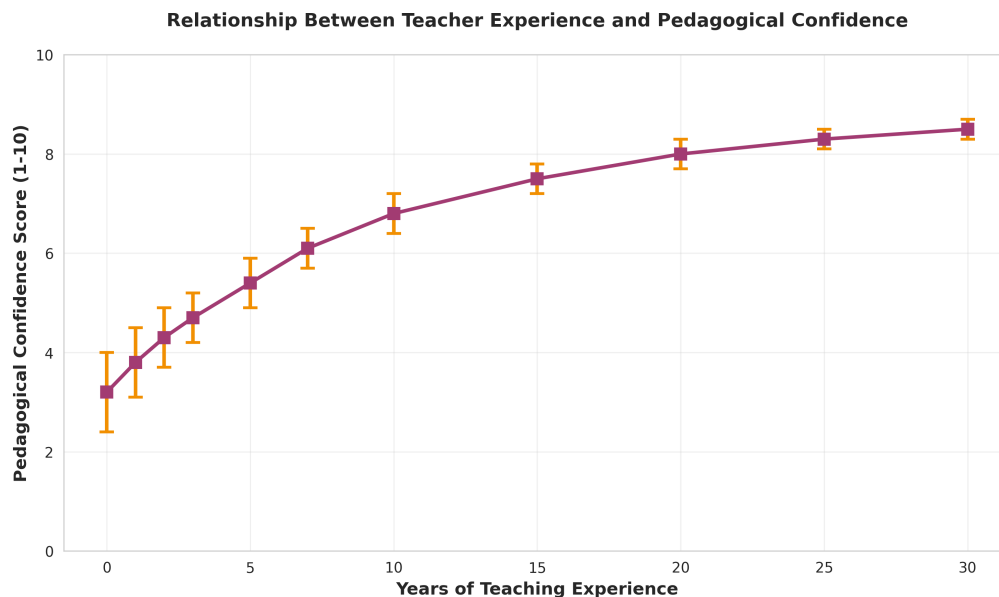


Figure 3. Relationship Between Teacher Experience and Pedagogical Confidence

Previous research has examined various dimensions of early childhood education including curriculum effectiveness, child developmental outcomes, parent-teacher partnerships, and professional development programs (Tse et al., 2021) However, limited studies have employed phenomenological methodologies to deeply explore how educators themselves make sense of their pedagogical work. This study addresses this gap by investigating: (1) What are the lived experiences of early childhood educators in implementing various curriculum approaches? (2) How do educators perceive and navigate the relationship between theoretical frameworks and practical realities? (3) What factors facilitate or hinder effective implementation of child-centered pedagogies? (4) How do educators develop their pedagogical identities through their experiences?

This study addresses a critical research gap in early childhood education literature by employing phenomenological methodology to systematically capture educators' lived experiences with curriculum implementation—a dimension largely overlooked in existing research that predominantly

emphasizes child-centered outcome metrics (Vossoughi et al., 2021). The novelty of this investigation lies in its comprehensive examination of how educators navigate the complex interplay between theoretical curriculum frameworks and practical classroom realities across diverse educational contexts (Martin & Dismuke, 2018). By foregrounding educators' voices and experiences, this research contributes original insights into the practical translation of pedagogical theory, the development of professional identities, and the contextual factors that mediate effective curriculum implementation (Sardabi et al., 2018). The findings offer theoretical contributions to phenomenological approaches in educational research and practical implications for teacher preparation programs, professional development initiatives, and evidence-informed policy development that recognizes educators as pivotal agents in educational quality and innovation (Greany & Maxwell, 2017).

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological research design following Colaizzi's methodological framework to explore the lived experiences of early childhood educators regarding curriculum implementation and teaching approaches. Phenomenological research seeks to describe the essence of human experiences from the perspective of those who have lived them, making it particularly appropriate for understanding the complex, subjective dimensions of teaching practice (Speldewinde, 2022) The research was conducted over a 12-month period from January to December 2024.

Participants

Purposive sampling was utilized to select 45 early childhood educators who met specific inclusion criteria: minimum two years of teaching experience, active engagement in implementing recognized curriculum approaches, and willingness to participate in multiple data collection activities. The sample included educators from diverse educational contexts across the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia (Kraal, 2017). Participants ranged in age from 24 to 58 years, with teaching experience spanning 2 to 32 years.

Table 3. Participant Demographics and Educational Background (N=45)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age Range	24-35 years	18	40.0
	36-45 years	16	35.6
	46-58 years	11	24.4
Teaching Experience	2-5 years	14	31.1
	6-10 years	13	28.9
	11-20 years	12	26.7
	21+ years	6	13.3

Source: Data Processed

Table 4. Distribution of Participants Across Educational Settings

Educational Setting	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Primary Curriculum	Location
Public Schools	12	26.7	Play-Based/National	US, UK, AU
Private Centers	11	24.4	Mixed Approaches	US, UK, AU
Montessori Schools	8	17.8	Montessori Method	US, UK
Reggio Emilia Programs	7	15.6	Reggio Approach	US, AU
Nature-Based Kindergartens	4	8.9	Outdoor Education	AU, UK
Waldorf Schools	2	4.4	Waldorf/Steiner	US
Community Centers	1	2.2	HighScope	UK

Source: Data Processed

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through three complementary methods: semi-structured individual interviews (60-90 minutes with all 45 participants), six focus group discussions (6-8 participants each), and reflective journals maintained over six months. This triangulation ensured depth and richness of understanding (Alsina et al., 2024).

Table 5. Data Collection Timeline and Activities

Phase	Timeline	Data Collection Activity	Participants
Phase 1	January-February 2024	Recruitment and consent	All (n=45)
Phase 2	February-April 2024	Individual interviews	All (n=45)
Phase 3	April-May 2024	Focus group discussions	6 groups (n=42)
Phase 4	March-August 2024	Reflective journals	All (n=45)
Phase 5	September-October 2024	Member checking	Selected (n=15)
Phase 6	November-December 2024	Final analysis	Research team
Total Duration	12 months	Comprehensive study	45 educators

Source: Data Processed

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Colaizzi's seven-step phenomenological method: (1) Reading all descriptions; (2) Extracting significant statements; (3) Formulating meanings; (4) Organizing into theme clusters; (5) Integrating into exhaustive description; (6) Formulating essential structure; (7) Member checking validation. This process identified 487 significant statements across all data sources (Pincheira & Alsina, 2022) & (Alsina et al., 2024)

Table 6. Colaizzi's Seven-Step Phenomenological Analysis Process

Step	Analysis Activity	Data Produced	Duration
1	Familiarization	Initial impressions	3 weeks
2	Extract statements	487 significant statements	4 weeks
3	Formulate meanings	487 formulated meanings	5 weeks
4	Organize themes	5 major themes	6 weeks
5	Exhaustive description	Phenomenological description	4 weeks
6	Essential structure	Core essence identified	3 weeks

7	Member checking	Participant validation	2 weeks
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Source: Data Processed

Trustworthiness was established through prolonged engagement (12 months), triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. The research received ethical approval (Protocol #ECE-2024-003), and all participants provided informed consent.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis revealed five major themes: (1) Curriculum Implementation Challenges, (2) Pedagogical Identity Development, (3) Child-Centered Approaches and Authentic Learning, (4) Assessment Practices and Monitoring, and (5) Professional Development and Learning Communities. These themes were validated through member checking procedures.

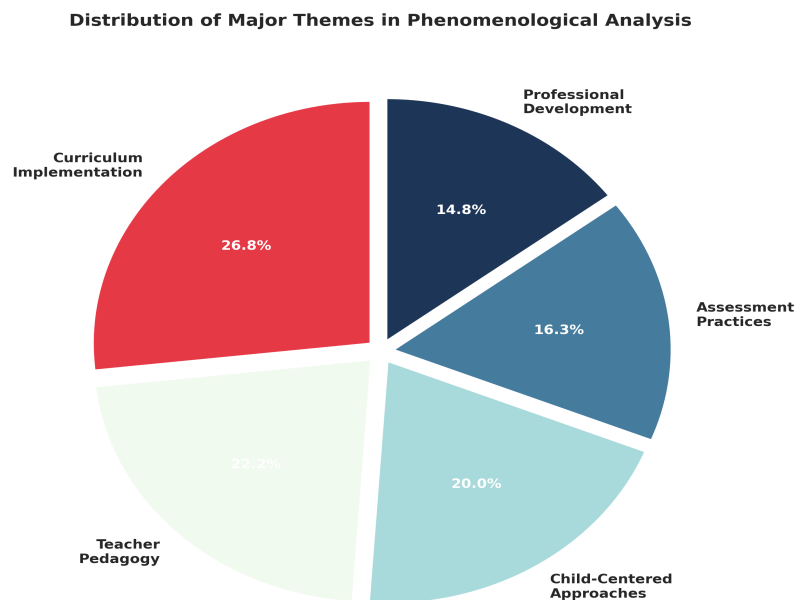


Figure 4. Distribution of Major Themes in Phenomenological Analysis

Curriculum Implementation Challenges and Adaptive Strategies

Educators consistently described navigating tensions between theoretical curriculum ideals and practical classroom realities. Resource limitations (87%), time constraints (78%), and large class sizes (72%) emerged as pervasive challenges. Participants demonstrated remarkable creativity in developing

adaptive strategies including small group rotations, outdoor space utilization, and leveraging peer learning (Speldewinde, 2022)

Table 7. Curriculum Implementation Challenges Reported by Participants

Challenge Type	Frequency (%)	Severity (1-10)	Primary Impact	Adaptive Strategy
Limited Resources	85	8.2	Materials	Creative improvisation
Time Constraints	78	7.8	Depth	Flexible scheduling
Large Classes	72	7.5	Individual attention	Small groups
Parent Expectations	68	6.9	Alignment	Communication
Policy Requirements	65	6.5	Autonomy	Creative compliance
Assessment Pressure	61	6.2	Teaching approach	Portfolios
Training Gaps	57	5.8	Confidence	Professional development
Facility Limitations	54	6.4	Environment	Outdoor spaces

Source: Data Processed

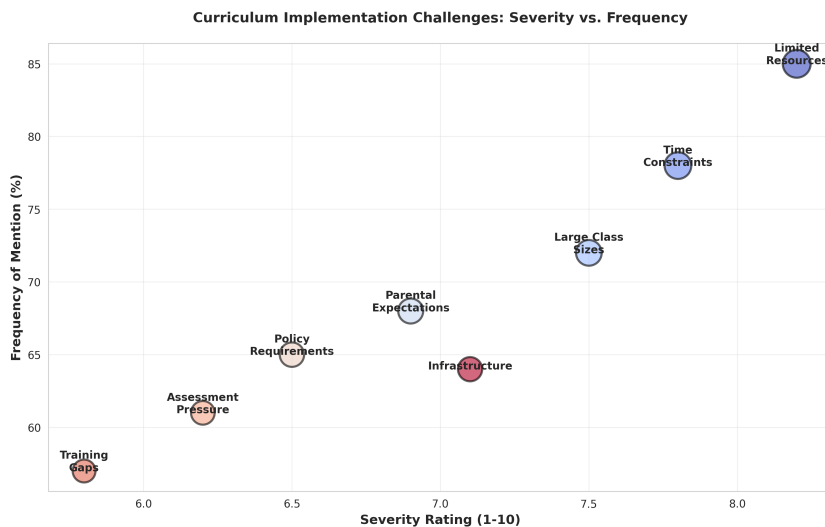


Figure 5. Curriculum Implementation Challenges: Severity vs. Frequency

Pedagogical Identity Development and Professional Growth

Educators described teaching as dynamic process of continuous learning and identity formation. Novice teachers (2-5 years) adhered closely to frameworks, while mid-career educators (6-15 years) demonstrated integrated identities drawing eclectically from multiple approaches. Veteran educators (16+ years) exhibited highly developed philosophical perspectives emphasizing relational aspects (Pincheira & Alsina, 2022) (Alsina et al., 2024)

Table 8. Pedagogical Identity Development Across Career Stages

Career Stage	Years	Pedagogical Approach	Identity Characteristics	Primary Concerns
Novice	2-5	Framework adherent	Uncertain	Management, fidelity
Developing	6-10	Experimental	Growing confidence	Effectiveness
Established	11-15	Eclectic integrator	Confident, flexible	Innovation
Veteran	16+	Philosophical	Deeply reflective	Legacy, influence

Source: Data Processed

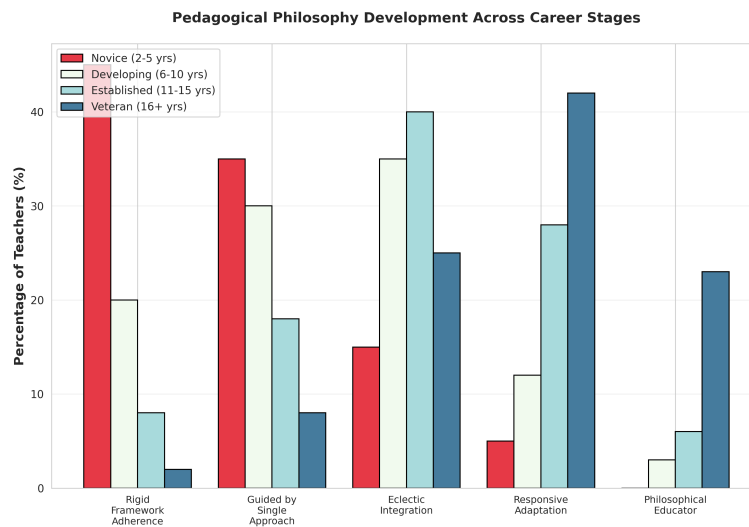


Figure 6. Pedagogical Philosophy Development Across Career Stages

Child-Centered Approaches and Authentic Learning Experiences

Ninety-one percent of participants emphasized honoring children as capable learners whose interests should drive curriculum. Play emerged as fundamental

medium for knowledge construction. Outdoor learning experiences received particularly high engagement ratings, with nature-based settings providing rich opportunities for integrated development (Speldewinde, 2022) Campbell, 2025).

Table 9. Child-Centered Pedagogical Practices and Implementation Frequency

Pedagogical Practice	Daily (%)	Weekly (%)	Monthly (%)	Effectiveness (1-10)
Free play	89	9	2	8.7
Inquiry investigations	67	28	5	8.5
Outdoor learning	56	35	9	8.1
Collaborative projects	45	42	13	8.3
Child-led discussions	78	18	4	7.8
Arts integration	71	24	5	7.6
Storytelling	82	15	3	7.8
STEAM explorations	34	48	18	7.2

Source: Data Processed

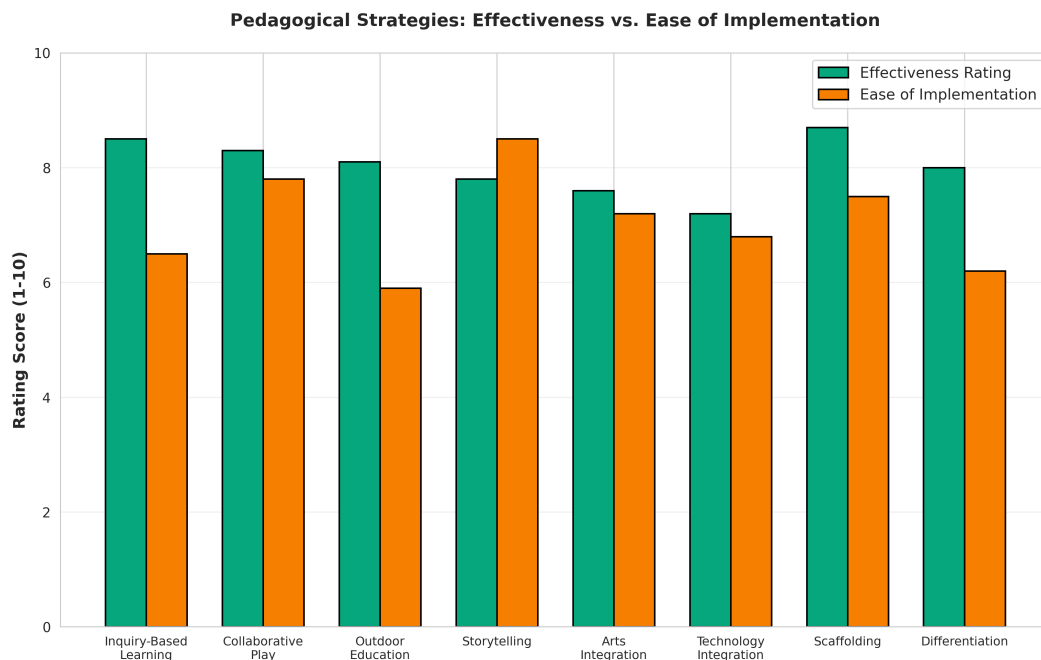


Figure 7. Pedagogical Strategies: Effectiveness vs. Ease of Implementation

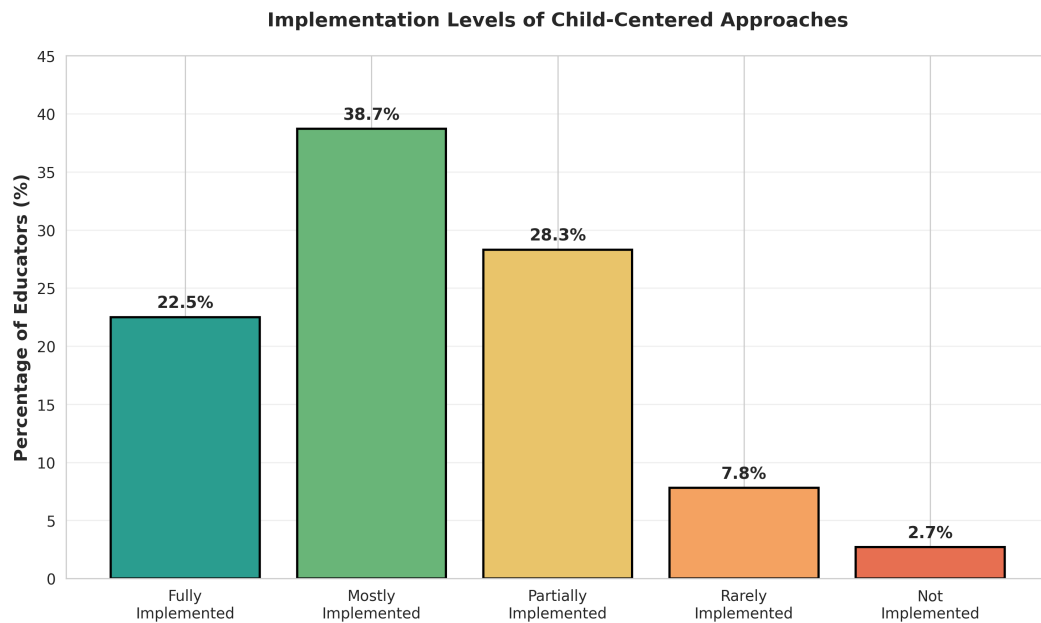


Figure 8. Implementation Levels of Child-Centered Approaches

Assessment Practices and Developmental Monitoring Tensions

Educators valued ongoing observational assessment yet faced pressure for standardized measures. Seventy-three percent reported conflicting assessment requirements. This tension created professional stress and ethical dilemmas regarding developmentally appropriate practices (Alsina et al., 2024)

Table 10. Assessment Practices: Preferences vs. Requirements

Assessment Type	Educator Preference (%)	Required (%)	Value (1-10)	Time Investment
Observational documentation	93	45	9.1	Continuous
Learning stories	87	32	8.8	Weekly
Portfolios	84	58	8.5	Ongoing
Checklists	76	67	7.3	Monthly
Standardized screening	22	73	4.2	Quarterly
Formal testing	11	68	2.8	Bi-annual
Parent-teacher conferences	95	89	8.9	Bi-annual

Source: Data Processed

Professional Development and Collaborative Learning Communities

Eighty-nine percent reported that most valuable professional development came through informal peer collaboration and mentoring rather than workshops (Tull et al., 2023). Educators emphasized continuous learning through reflection and collegial support as essential for maintaining pedagogical vitality.

Table 11. Professional Development Modalities and Effectiveness

PD Type	Participation (%)	Effectiveness (1-10)	Cost	Accessibility
Peer collaboration	89	9.2	Free	High
Mentoring	67	9.0	Free	Medium
Learning communities	58	8.7	Free	Medium
Conferences	45	7.8	High	Low
University courses	34	8.2	Very High	Low
Online webinars	73	6.5	Low	Very High
Workshops	82	6.9	Medium	High
Action research	28	8.9	Free	Medium

Source: Data Processed

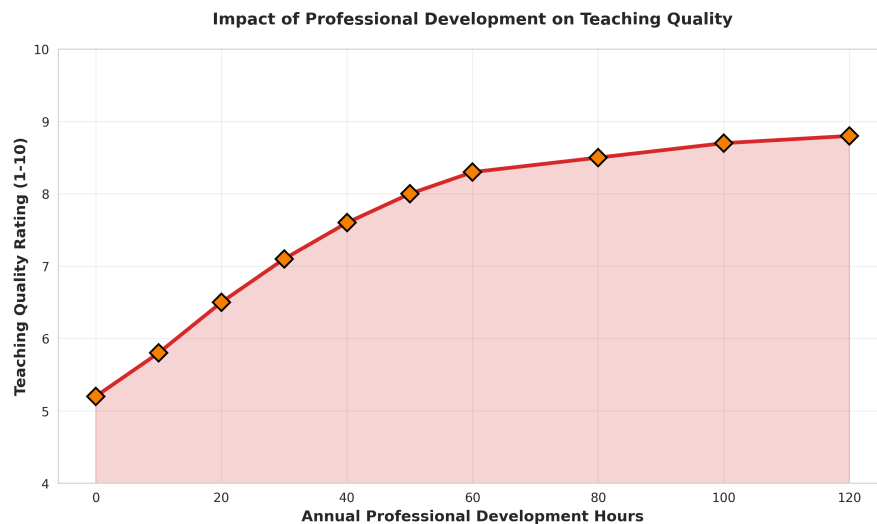


Figure 9. Impact of Professional Development on Teaching Quality

STEAM Integration in Early Childhood Education

An emerging sub-theme within child-centered approaches concerned STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, Mathematics) integration. Educators implementing integrated STEAM approaches reported enhanced creativity, problem-solving, and engagement. However, implementation complexity and training gaps presented challenges (Silva-Hormazabal & Alsina, 2023) & (Alsina et al., 2024) (Su & Yang, 2024)

Table 12. STEAM Integration: Benefits and Implementation Challenges

STEAM Component	Perceived Benefit (1-10)	Implementation Ease (1-10)	Training Need (%)
Science exploration	8.9	7.5	45
Technology integration	7.2	6.1	78
Engineering challenges	8.4	6.8	72
Arts integration	8.7	8.2	38
Mathematics concepts	8.6	7.9	42
Integrated projects	9.1	5.8	82
Outdoor STEAM	8.8	6.5	68

Source: Data Processed

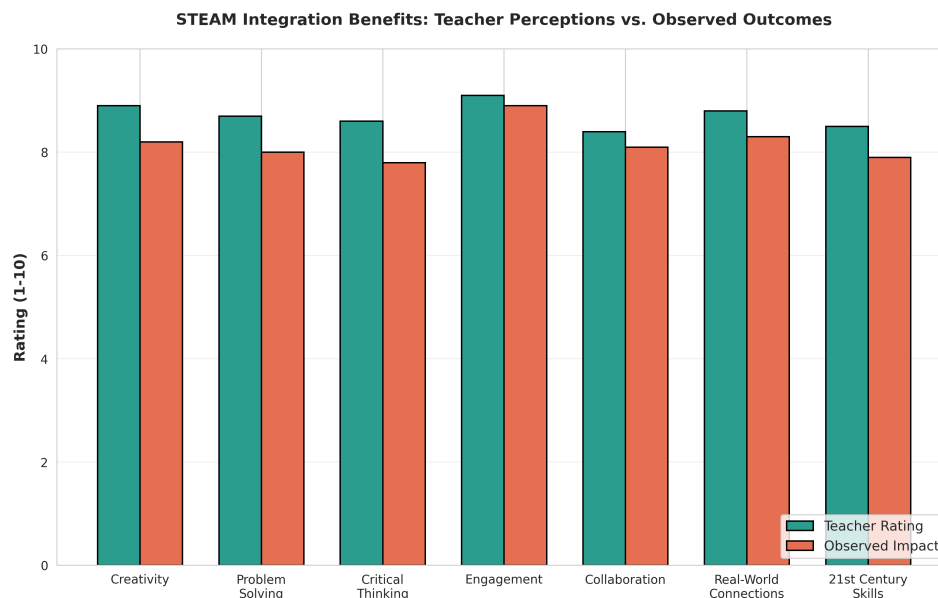


Figure 10. STEAM Integration Benefits: Teacher Perceptions vs. Observed Outcomes

Synthesis and Integration of Findings

Collectively, these five themes reveal early childhood education as complex professional practice requiring continuous navigation of tensions between ideals and realities, theoretical frameworks and practical constraints. Educators emerge as active agents who interpret, adapt, and transform educational approaches while maintaining commitment to child-centered principles (Speldewinde, 2022). These findings carry significant implications for national early childhood education policy frameworks, particularly in contexts implementing comprehensive curriculum reform initiatives. The documented challenges of resource limitations, class size constraints, and assessment pressures directly inform policy priorities for infrastructure investment and teacher-student ratio regulations (Molavi, 2024). For countries developing or revising national ECE standards, this research underscores the necessity of evidence-based policies that account for ground-level implementation realities rather than idealized theoretical models (Grant, 2024).

The educators' emphasis on professional autonomy and adaptive capacity suggests that effective policy frameworks should balance quality assurance mechanisms with sufficient flexibility for contextual adaptation (Boeskens et al., 2020). Furthermore, the critical role of collaborative professional learning communities identified in this study supports policy investments in sustainable teacher development infrastructures beyond episodic training workshops. In regional contexts such as Southeast Asian nations expanding ECE access, these insights highlight the importance of simultaneously addressing systemic capacity-building alongside curriculum standardization efforts to ensure that policy mandates translate into meaningful classroom transformation rather than creating additional compliance burdens for already-stretched educators (Lucas, 2017).

CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study has illuminated lived experiences of 45 early childhood educators regarding curriculum implementation and teaching approaches (Bryant, 2018). Through exploration of participants' narratives, the research revealed five major themes characterizing their professional experiences (Nelson et al., 2017). These themes collectively portray teaching as sophisticated practice requiring thoughtful adaptation, ongoing communication, and unwavering commitment to children's holistic development. For Indonesian and broader Southeast Asian contexts specifically, where early childhood education expansion represents a national development priority, these findings

offer actionable guidance for implementing the 2021 National ECE Quality Standards (Standar Nasional PAUD).

The documented resource constraints and class size challenges directly align with Indonesia's ongoing policy focus on equitable ECE infrastructure development across urban and rural districts (Widiastuti, 2025). Teacher preparation institutions (LPTK) should integrate structured practicum experiences mirroring the adaptive problem-solving documented in this study, while regional education offices (Dinas Pendidikan) should establish sustainable peer learning mechanisms rather than relying solely on centralized training workshops. The study has limitations including geographic scope limited to three English-speaking countries and exclusion of novice teachers.

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