Surviving the Enrollment Crisis: *Challenges and Strategies of an Early Childhood Education Provider in Lampung*

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***Abstract*— This qualitative study examines how a community-based early childhood education (ECE) provider in Lampung, Indonesia, namely TK Darul Ma'arif, is navigating an ongoing enrollment crisis. Against the backdrop of nationwide declines in ECE participation and growing competition from free public institutions, the study investigates the perspectives of four key stakeholders: the principal, a teacher, the institution committee member, and a representative of the founding family. Using thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and translated into English, four major themes were identified: (1) perceived causes of enrollment decline, (2) financial and emotional impact, (3) strategies for institutional survival, and (4) resilience rooted in faith, history, and community. Findings suggest that while the school faces real financial pressures due to its reliance on tuition-based income, its ability to continue operating stems from non-material resources such as long-standing community relationships, historical legitimacy, and a deep sense of moral responsibility among staff and leadership. Participants also described adaptive strategies including door to door visits around the area, shared budgeting, wide promotion regardless the limited budget, and maintaining emotional motivation through spiritual and social commitment. The study contributes to the literature on ECE sustainability by highlighting the importance of relational trust and institutional identity as well as supportive community in shaping how schools survive in uncertain conditions. It calls for more inclusive and localized approaches in educational policy that support not only infrastructure but also the cultural and moral ecosystems sustaining community-based education.**

Keywords: Community, Early Childhood Education, Enrollment, History, Trust

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, many educational providers including the early childhood education (ECE) level in Indonesia have faced growing uncertainty due to a nationwide decline in student enrollment and financial instability. These challenges can be linked not only to demographic shifts but also to changes in family priorities, rising cost of education, and the lingering after effects of the pandemic (UNESCO, 2022; World Bank, 2021; Arza & Roeslan, 2021). This struggle is especially hard for small, community-based early childhood education institutions that rely heavily on local trust, modest tuition, as well as volunteer labor and commitment. While national policies has emphasized expanding equal access and quality in ECE (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020), the lived realities of grassroots early educational providers navigating demographic shifts, increased competition, and economic strain remain underexplored.

One such example is TK Darul Ma'arif, an early childhood educational unit that is part of a long-established Islamic educational foundation (*yayasan*) in Lampung, Indonesia. Although the *yayasan* also manages elementary and secondary school levels, the kindergarten has been particularly vulnerable to declining enrollment in recent years, rising concerns about the sustainability of its early childhood services. Once a vibrant hub for community learning, the kindergarten has experienced a sharp decline in enrollment especially compared to last year. As also happen almost everywhere in the country, local educators attribute this downturn to similar factors such as falling birth rates, increased competition from free public and Islamic schools, evolving parenting practices, and the long-term effects of the COVID-19. As elsewhere in Southeast Asia, families are becoming more

selective or hesitant about investing in early childhood education, especially when financial insecurity is high and the perceived value of preschooling is low (Tan, 2017; Bray & Koo, 2004).
Research on ECE in Indonesia has largely focused on teacher competence, curriculum quality, and access (UNESCO, 2015; Suryani, 2019; Widuri & Handayani, 2022). However, less attention has been paid to how ECE providers themselves respond to institutional fragility, including financial pressures, teacher burnout, and threats of closure. Understanding how educators and school leaders (in this context, the member of the founding family of the *yayasan* Darul Ma'arif and also the school committee in the *yayasan*) make sense of and adapt to such challenges is critical for shaping more responsive and equitable education policies, especially for schools outside of major urban centers.
This qualitative study explores the lived experiences of educators and ECE practicioners at TK Darul Ma'arif as they perceive and respond to the ongoing enrollment crisis. It investigates their views on the causes behind the decline in student numbers, the challenges they face in their professional roles, and the strategies they employ to sustain the school amid financial and institutional pressure. In doing so, it also examines how they make sense of their work during a period of uncertainty and change. By centering the voices of teachers and practitioners, this study highlights not only the difficulties faced by grassroots ECE institutions, but also their resilience, creativity, and moral commitment to sustaining learning for young children.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

II.1 *Community-based and Faith-rooted Early Childhood Education*

Early childhood education plays a foundational role in child development and long-term educational equity, laying the basis for lifelong learning, well-being, and social participation (OECD, 2017; UNESCO, 2021). Scholars also emphasize that good quality ECE can improve educational outcomes and fosters equitable development, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Heckman, 2006; Naudeau et al., 2011). In Indonesian context, ECE is formalized under the *Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini* (PAUD) framework and includes various providers such as TK (kindergartens), RA (Islamic kindergartens), and other community-based institutions. Particularly, according to the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture (Kemdikbud, 2020), access to ECE has actually significantly expanded in the past two decades especially driven by both governmental and private sector initiatives. However, community-based, faith-rooted and privately managed ECE institutions, particularly in rural or semi-urban areas, still continue to face systemic challenges particularly related to funding, enrollment, sustainability, and access disparities (World Bank, 2018; World Bank, 2021). Unfortunately, these issues have become even more pressing during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted enrollment patterns and highlighted inequalities between public and private education sectors (UNESCO, 2022).

Nevertheless, Community-based and faith-rooted ECE providers such as *madrasah* or *pesantren*-affiliated kindergartens, consistently play particularly vital roles especially in rural and religious communities' area. These institutions often integrate religious values, community norms, and cultural identity within their pedagogical practices, especially when they often emerge from local initiatives rather than state planning (Rohman, 2021; Latif, 2016). Their mission typically combines academic goals with moral and religious development as their sustainability also highly depends on parental trust, local leadership, and the alignment of educational values with community identity.

II.2 *Enrollment Decline and Sustainibility*

The phenomenon of **enrollment crisis** in ECE refers to a sustained drop in the number of children attending preschool or kindergarten programs. Researches indicate that contributing factors of this crisis are often include the **declining of birth rates, economic constraints,** urbanization**, parental preferences for public options**, financial insecurity, broader demographic transitions, and so on

(Arza & Roeslan, 2021; UNICEF, 2021; World Bank, 2021). In Indonesia, this trend is mirrored in the increasing number of small kindergartens that have closed or downsized, particularly those operating privately or under community initiatives (Tanoto Foundation, 2022).

Recent data from Statistics Indonesia (BPS, 2022) indicates that in several provinces, ECE participation has plateaued or declined, with cost and distance cited as major barriers. Particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic, many fee-based kindergartens reported losing students to state-sponsored programs that offer free tuition and more formalized curricula since publicly funded kindergartens with free tuition and government support have become increasingly favored by parents (World Bank, 2021; UNESCO, 2022; Yuliani, 2022). When enrollment drops, financial stress follows, leading to staff reduction, reduced programs, and even closure (Putri, 2021). However, some small schools survive through flexible budgeting, volunteerism, and community solidarity (Nugroho & Rahayu, 2020), making sustainability for private and semi-formal ECE institutions highly contingent on community support, historical legitimacy, and trust-based operations (Arza & Roeslan, 2021; Nilan, 2009).

II.3 *The Role of Community, Trust, and Legacy*

While enrollment numbers are often viewed through a policy or economic lens, researchers have emphasized the importance of **non-material factors** in shaping school survival. Studies in both Western and Southeast Asian contexts have shown that **community trust, historical continuity, moral legitimacy,** familiarity, and long-term presence in the community, serve as intangible but powerful assets for schools that lack formal infrastructure or financial backing (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Eck, 2007; Azra, 2006). In many cases, the school's presence in the community becomes symbolic, representing intergenerational memory, shared responsibility, or religious duty. These dynamics are particularly evident in Islamic-affiliated or faith-based ECE institutions, where bonds and continuity is often reinforced by shared religious identity and moral obligation (**amanah)** (Rohman, 2020; Sahin, 2013).

This sense of **institutional identity**, grounded in spiritual or familial legacy, frequently serve as multigenerational custodians of community education while blending formal learning with religious and social capital, can generate resilience, especially when formal support is lacking (Azra, 2006; Nilan, 2009). In a study on Islamic education, Sahin (2013) highlights how emotional commitment and spiritual meaning-making among educators can fuel perseverance despite low resources. Similarly, Lloyd and Hallet (2010) note that while financial challenges in early childhood education can contribute to burnout, many teachers stay motivated through strong emotional bonds and community values.

II.4 *Teacher Motivation and Institutional Adaptation*

The emotional and ethical commitments of ECE teachers play a crucial role in maintaining institutional continuity, especially under conditions of uncertainty. Studies show that in low-resource environments, teachers often engage in what is termed as "affective labor" which is understood as the unpaid emotional effort of caring, motivating, and sustaining the school climate (Kelchtermans, 2009; Tobin et al., 2013). In Islamic or community-based schools, this is especially frequently amplified by spiritual motivation and a sense of social responsibility (Sahin, 2013; Zuhdi, 2022).

Many times, despite a very small amount of honoraria, teachers often remain committed out of a deep belief in the school's mission and the value of serving the local *ummah* (community). This aligns with Freire's (1996) view of educators as moral agents who teach with conviction even in oppressive or unstable systems. Research on teacher identity in underfunded or community schools shows that

emotional resilience, shared sacrifice, and collective care are often central to their survival (Kelchtermans, 2009; Tobin et al., 2013). Yet these important elements still rarely appear in enrollment figures or budget reports, even though they are crucial for understanding how schools adapt in times of uncertainty.

II.5 *Positioning This Study*

Although research on this topic is growing, most prior research emphasizes structural or policy solutions to school sustainability and there is still little qualitative work that centers the voices of practitioners facing enrollment decline, particularly in Islamic-affiliated or community-based kindergartens in Indonesia. Few studies capture the lived experiences and meaning-making of those working within these schools who navigate crises daily. This study addresses that gap by focusing on the perspectives of teachers and staff at TK Darul Ma'arif, a long-standing ECE provider in Lampung, during a period of institutional uncertainty. By highlighting people's voices, values, and local knowledge and wisdom, the research offers deeper insight into how trust, history, community, and identity can help early childhood institutions remain resilient in difficult times.

III. METHODS

III.1 *Research Design and Approach*

This study adopted a qualitative study design to understand and look closely at how early childhood education practitioners deal with crisis especially related to the declining of student enrollment. The case study approach was chosen because it allows issues to be explored more in depth and within their real-life settings (Yin, 2014), moreover, it can also capture rich and contextual insights into how educators and stakeholders make sense of the challenges they face, the strategies they use to overcome it, and the institutional changes that come within such a situation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Semi-structured interviews were applied so that participants could speak freely in their own words while also still giving space for follow-up questions when more detail information or clarification needed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2006). The study also observed basic ethical principles of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and respect for participant voices that is in line with common standards in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

III.2 *Research Site and Context*

The research was conducted at TK Darul Ma'arif, a long-standing kindergarten that operates under a larger Islamic educational foundation in Lampung Selatan, Indonesia. Nowadays, the school has faced a drop in enrollment, falling significantly from more than 50 students last year to just 29 that are officially registered by this year. However, despite these challenges, the school has been able to manage and maintain its vibrant learning environment. This research site was purposively selected because it represents many other community-based schools in Indonesia that rely on both faith and collective trust for their survival. The school's long-standing presence within the community and its reputation as part of an Islamic foundation has also made it an ideal study case for understanding how relational and moral dimensions intersect with educational sustainability.

III.2.1 Context of the Institution

TK Darul Ma'arif is part of Yayasan Lembaga Pendidikan Islam (LPI) Daarul Ma'arif, an Islamic educational foundation located in Banjar Negeri, Natar, Lampung Selatan, Indonesia. The foundation

was established by KH. Abu Abdillah bin Alwi Assegaf in 1965 as an effort to meet the growing local demand for the need of Islamic education during a time of major social and political change in Indonesia. Since then, the institution has expanded into a more comprehensive educational institution that offers programs from early childhood (TK) through Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI) or at elementary school level, Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs) or at junior high school level, and Madrasah Aliyah (MA) or at senior high school level, finally providing a full PK–12 Islamic academic pathway. Until today, the *yayasan* maintains a dual focus not only on academic excellence but also on Islamic character formation with extracurricular programs they have such as Qur'an recitation and memorization (*tahfidz*), community services, and even drum band. Although most available data about the institution relates more to the MI level and above, this background can still provide important context for understanding TK Darul Ma'arif's current situation. As the youngest part of a long-standing educational chain, the kindergarten also have the benefits from the foundation's historical legacy, multigenerational leadership, strong community trust, and integrated Islamic values, all of which have played a key role in sustaining its resilience during the ongoing challenges (MI Darul Ma'arif, n.d.).

III.3 *Data Collection and Research Participants*

The data for this study were gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted in *Bahasa Indonesia* and each lasting no more than 60 minutes. With participants' consent, all interviews were recorded, transcribed, and later translated into English for analysis. The interview questions explored and included several key areas such as the participants' educational and teaching experiences and backgrounds, their views on the causes of declining enrollment, the challenges they faced during this period, the strategies they used to keep the school running, and their concerns and hopes for the school's future.

To capture diverse perspectives, **four participants** were purposively selected based on their familiarity with the institution and their roles and involvement in the school:

1. The school principal,
2. A teacher,
3. A committee representative, and
4. A member of the founding family.

Although the sample size was small, their different roles and experiences provided valuable insights into the school's strategies, its emotional resilience, and the community support that continues to sustain it during the enrollment crisis, and as Creswell and Poth (2018) noted, it was considered appropriate for a qualitative case study that aiming for depth of understanding rather than generalization. In addition to interviews, the study also uses supplementary data that were collected through a review of the school's official website and other relevant online resources in order to provide more contextual information about the institution.

III.4 *Data Analysis*

The collected data were analyzed using **thematic analysis that** was both systematic and flexible in order to trace and identify recurring ideas, patterns, and meanings in participants' narratives across the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After multiple listening of the interview and the reading of the interview transcripts, it were then **coded inductively**, allowing themes to emerge naturally from the data rather than being restricted by pre-existing theoretical frameworks. The analysis process included **open coding**, grouping similar codes into **categories**, and finally synthesizing these categories into four major themes: *(1) intersecting social and economic pressures behind enrollment decline, (2) coping with financial strain through emotional commitment, (3) relational and community-based strategies for survival, and (4) resilience rooted in faith, history, and community.*

The analysis remained grounded in participants' lived experiences, emphasizing both convergence and variation across accounts.

III.5 *Ethical Consideration*

Before starting the interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and all gave verbal consent to participate in the research. At the same time, they are also informed that their names and identifying information will be anonymized to protect confidentiality. The study was also conducted in accordance to ethical principles of voluntary participation and respect for individuals.

III.6 *Trustworthiness*

To keep the study reliable and grounded, I drew on the well-known criteria of trustworthiness from Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity.

III.6.1 Credibility

Credibility was supported by listening to voices from different roles—the principal, a teacher, a committee member, and a member of the founding family. Each of them gave a unique lens. For example, the teacher explained, *"It's actually harder to manage fewer children sometimes, they move around more and expect more one-on-one attention."* (Ibu Sakinah). Insights like this, grounded in everyday practice, added depth to the interpretation. Semi-structured interviews also gave participants room to speak in their own way, while still allowing space for clarification when needed.

III.6.2. Transferability

To help readers see how the findings might connect to other cases, the study described the school's history, its link with the foundation, and the local setting. As one participant put it, *"This school is a legacy and long history. If it closes, it's not just about education, it's like losing a part of the community."* (Ibu Indah). Such context makes it possible for readers to judge whether these experiences echo what happens in other community-based or faith-rooted ECE institutions.

III.6.3 Dependability

A clear trail of documentation was kept, including interview guides, transcripts, notes, coding and analysis, and so on. This record not only shows how the analysis was built but also leaves a basis for others who may want to study similar schools.

III.6.4. Confirmability

To avoid drifting too far from participants' meanings, findings were supported with direct quotations. As one committee member said, *"Parents tend to compare schools, especially about cost and what's provided. They make choices based on practicality."* (Pak Wahyu). By letting such voices guide the analysis, the study sought to reflect participants' perspectives rather than the researcher's assumptions. Reflexive checks and repeated comparisons across data also helped minimize bias.

III.6.5. Authenticity

Authenticity was about showing the range of emotions people expressed, from resilience to fatigue. As the principal reflected, *"Even though the money is small, we are here because we care. We feel responsible. It's not just a school, it's our legacy."* (Ibu Marwah). Including such expressions helped paint a more honest and human picture and struggle of how the school has been navigating the crisis.

III.7 *Limitations*

While this design provided rich and contextualized insights, several **limitations** are acknowledged. The small number of participants and the single-site focus limit the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, since the interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and later translated, some nuances of expression might have been lost in translation despite careful cross-checking.

IV. FINDINGS

This section shares the findings from the interviews and thematic analysis with four key stakeholders at TK Darul Ma'arif: the principal, a teacher, a committee representative, and a member of the founding family. Together, their perspectives offer a broad and nuanced picture of how the school is facing and responding to its ongoing enrollment decline, and how these local challenges connect to wider community trends. From the analysis, four main themes emerged: (1) the causes of enrollment decline, (2) financial and emotional impacts, (3) survival strategies, and (4) resilience rooted in faith, history, and community. These themes capture not only the struggles of the institution but also the values that continue to sustain it.

IV.1 *Intersecting Social and Economic Pressures behind Enrollment Decline*

Reharding the first theme which is the causes of the enrollment decline, participants consistently identified multiple intersecting factors contributing to it. These included demographic changes, such as declining birth rates; increasing competition from free government and Islamic schools; and shifting parental attitudes toward early childhood education. Some respondents also noted that digital habits and post-pandemic economic changes may be reshaping how families perceive the necessity of preschool.

"Now people don't have as many kids… and there are a lot of other kindergartens nearby, even ones that are free."
— *Pak Wahyu, School Committee Chairperson*

"Some parents give lots of access for their kids to play and learn from gadgets or from home, this can also be a consideration for them to see the effectiveness of kindergarten."
— *Ibu Indah, member of the founding family*

"Parents tend to compare schools, especially about cost and what's provided. They make choices based on practicality."
— *Ibu Marwah, Principle*

"Interestingly, parents also consider about the many local vendors and people selling food or '*jajanan*' around the school. They are thinking about how much many their children will spend if there are many food sellers around the school."
— *Ibu Sakinah, Teacher*

These responses suggest that the enrollment decline is not due to any single factor, but rather a combination of economic, cultural, and competitive forces influencing parental decision-making.

IV.2 *Coping with Financial Strain through Emotional Commitment*

The drop in student numbers has certainly affected the financial structure of TK Darul Ma'arif, since teacher honoraria are directly tied to student fees. However, participants emphasized that despite these constraints, the school has continued operating smoothly and honoraria are still distributed regularly, thanks to careful budgeting and shared commitment with students' parents also. Rather than expressing pessimism, most participants highlighted the school's ability to adapt, even with limited resources.

"We only receive what's left after the monthly fee is divided… and when there are fewer students, it's very little, but Alhamdulillah, it's still manageable, and everyone gets paid regularly every month."
— *Ibu Marwah, Principal*

"The committee and the *yayasan* both feel responsible. Even if it's difficult, we still try to find a way to support the school even if the resources are very limited."
— *Pak Wahyu and Ibu Indah*

Emotionally, participants described their commitment as rooted in love for the children and a shared sense of moral responsibility. For example, Ibu *Sakinah* reflected on the unexpected challenges of teaching fewer students, especially as smaller groups can sometimes be more active and require greater individual attention.

"It's actually harder to manage fewer children sometimes, they move around more and expect more one-on-one attention."
— *Ibu Sakinah, Teacher*

Overall, while financial limitations were acknowledged, the emotional tone of participants leaned more toward pragmatic hopefulness than despair. Their commitment to keeping the school running stemmed not just from necessity, but from a deep belief in the school's value to the community.

IV.3 *Relational and Community-based Strategies for Survival*

In the face of declining enrollment, the school community has adopted a variety of low-cost and relationship-driven strategies to remain operational and relevant. Participants emphasized the importance of personal outreach, including visiting families directly and leveraging local networks through community gatherings or religious events.

"We try to invite neighbors or acquaintances who have kindergarten-age children, even going door to door if needed."
— *Ibu Marwah and Ibu Sakinah*

In addition, the *yayasan* (institution) also occasionally promotes the school at public events such as *pengajian* (Islamic gatherings) or community fairs. These promotions also subtly advertise the school's values and environment. Furthermore, through the interview, the teacher also mentioned that while digital outreach, especially via social media, was attempted, its impact has been minimal due to limited technical skills and resources.

"We have a school Facebook account, but it's rarely updated because no one is assigned to manage it other than the principle herself and probably her daughter."
—*Ibu Sakinah*

Despite these challenges, the school's continued reliance on personal relationships, long-standing community trust, and grassroots promotion illustrates its adaptive strategies in the absence of formal marketing. Rather than adopting large-scale digital campaigns, the school prioritizes interpersonal approaches that align with its communal values and history.

IV.4 *Resilience Rooted in Faith, History and Community*

Underlying each interview was a strong sense of commitment to the school, rooted in personal relationships, emotional investment, and the legacy of the school's founder. While many ECE institutions in the area and even nationwide have closed due to declining enrollment and financial instability, participants repeatedly emphasized the reasons why TK Darul Ma'arif continues to endure. Several key factors were mentioned, that include but not limited to the school's strategic location near the main road and residential areas, its long-standing presence and reputation in the community, the deep trust it has built over time, and the personal sense of responsibility held by members of the founding family and school leadership. For many, this Darul Ma'arif kindergarten represents more than just an educational institution, rather, it also serves as a symbol of identity, history, and moral purpose of the community.

"Even though the money we receive is small, we are here because we care. We feel responsible. It's not just a school, it's our legacy, it's something we were entrusted with."
— *Ibu Marwah, Principle*

"This school is a legacy and long history. If it closes, it's not just about education, it's like losing a part of the community."
— *Ibu Indah, member of the founding family*

"The school has a long history. Many of today's parents were once students here. Including me. So there's a strong emotional connection around the community here and parents also want their children to receive same education as them."
— *Pak Wahyu, School Committee*

"Even when the income is small, the teachers are loyal, and the principal also manages everything carefully. Thus, there's trust here, between the teachers, the *yayasan*, and also the parents, that all are supporting each other. We keep close communication among others."
— *Ibu Sakinah, Teacher*

This sense of **collective responsibility, historical continuity, and relational trust** are some of important points that seem to distinguish TK Darul Ma'arif from other schools that have shut down. Its survival appears not only to be logistical, but also moral, representing a reflection of deep-rooted commitment, not just strategy. The emotional and spiritual significance of the school also provides a sense of purpose that extends far beyond mere financial considerations and helps sustain the institution during its difficult times.

Taken together, these findings portray more than just simply a story of declining and surviving, instead, they illustrate how values, relationships, and community trust can shape the school's responses to crisis and adversity. While each theme highlights different aspects of the school's experience, at the same time, collectively they also reveal about the dynamic relationship between moral purpose and institutional resilience. This following discussion connects the study's findings with existing literature and wider educational perspectives, positioning TK Darul Ma'arif's experiences within both national and global dialogues on the sustainability of community-based and faith-rooted early childhood education.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show how a locally driven early childhood education institution in Indonesia navigates enrollment crisis through values of trust, moral commitment, and collective care of the stakeholders and community. Rather than relying on formal interventions or external aid alone, TK Darul Ma'arif's persistence reflects what Eck (2007) describes as *relational legitimacy*, which is understood as the ability of an institution to remain relevant and respected because of the familiarity and relationships it sustains within the existing community.

This relational foundation makes the school's survival less about a mere economic efficiency and more about social meaning. The participants' accounts reveal that even as enrollment declines and financial resources become constrained, the school remains symbolically significant for its surroundings. Parents and local residents see it not only as a learning center but more importantly, also as part of the community's identity, which can be understood that faith-based education in Indonesia often embodies not only pedagogical goals but also the continuity of moral and cultural life.

V.1 *Institutional Vulnerability and Collective Strength*

While economic limitations are undeniable, the study highlights more on how vulnerability and resilience can coexist. Teachers and committee members described feelings of worry, exhaustion, and financial strain, yet, at the same time, they also spoke of commitment, gratitude, and shared purpose. This echoes the notion that sustainability in small-scale schools is not merely a technical issue but a deeply human one. The teachers' emotional engagement demonstrates what Davies (2004) calls as *moral resilience*, that is, the strength to persist amid uncertainty through faith and collective values.

The study also shows that resilience develops through relationships and shared history. The founding family's continued involvement and the community's long-term familiarity with the school provide a moral backbone that helps the institution remain stable. These findings support the idea that social capital and community trust can function as protective mechanisms for small educational institutions facing structural challenges (Coleman, 1988).

V.2 *Implications for Policy and Practice*

Through the findings, it is suggested that policies supporting ECE sustainability should consider not only funding mechanisms or enrollment targets but also the *relational dimension* of schooling. Small community-based schools like TK Darul Ma'arif rely heavily on trust and participation. Therefore, future ECE programs and local government initiatives should recognize and strengthen these relational resources. Capacity-building efforts could focus on leadership, community partnerships, and the integration of digital outreach strategies to help schools adapt to demographic and cultural changes.

Furthermore, teacher development programs should address emotional well-being and motivation. As this study shows, the emotional labor of teachers, which are balancing limited resources with moral responsibility, play a key role in sustaining school life. Supporting teachers' professional and emotional resilience can contribute significantly to long-term institutional stability.

V.3 *Limitations and Future Research*

Since this study focused only on one case, it may provide depth but limited generalizability. Therefore, future research could expand the study toward multiple community-based or faith-rooted schools across regions to explore how different local dynamics can shape institutional resilience. Comparative studies between urban and rural ECE settings may also help clarify how social capital may function under varying economic conditions. Longitudinal studies could as well further illuminate how community trust evolves over time as schools adapt to shifting contexts.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study explored how a community-based and faith-rooted early childhood education provider in Lampung, Indonesia, has been navigating their current challenges of declining student enrollment. Through the perspectives of the four key stakeholders (a principal, a teacher, a committee representative, and a member of the founding family), the research looked beyond the surface of institutional struggles in order to sustain a kindergarten in the midst of uncertain demographic and economic shifts. What emerged was not only about a picture and story of financial and organizational difficulty, but also about the enduring values and relationships that have allowed the school to keep going through their time of crisis and vulnerability.

The findings show that while the school indeed faces real enrollment decline, financial limitations as well as growing competition from free public institutions around, its endurance is grounded in trust, historical presence, community familiarity, and moral responsibility. These non-material assets that are often invisible in policy metrics, are the essential parts in the struggle of sustainability of many community-based and faith-rooted ECE institutions across Indonesia, especially, those that are locally driven and not fully embedded within state systems (Arza & Roeslan, 2021; World Bank, 2021). As such, educational policies should go beyond funding formulas and enrollment targets to recognize the social and cultural foundations that underpin school resilience (Eck, 2007).

From a practical standpoint, this study suggests that efforts to strengthen ECE access and quality in Indonesia should include support for community-based schools, not only through financial mechanisms, but also through platforms for collaboration, visibility, and recognition (UNESCO, 2022). Policymakers should be encouraged to engage with grassroots educational actors, understanding their needs beyond enrollment numbers or infrastructure, and acknowledging the importance of relational trust and local identity in educational sustainability (Eck, 2007).

For researchers, this case contributes to a growing body of literature on resilience in education, particularly within under-resourced or transitional contexts (Lloyd & Hallet, 2010). It underscores the need to study ECE not only through large-scale statistical trends, but also through the everyday experiences of educators and communities who continue to teach, lead, and serve despite systemic uncertainty.

While this study offers rich insight into one school's experience, its **single-site design limits broader generalization**. Nonetheless, it highlights valuable directions for **future research**, particularly comparative or longitudinal studies that explore how social capital and moral identity contribute to resilience in other community-based and faith-oriented schools.

Ultimately, the survival of TK Darul Ma'arif is a story of quiet resilience, where continuity is not driven by policy or profit but by care, conviction, and community. Recognizing and learning from such examples, challenges us to reframe how we define what educational sustainability and success in early childhood education means, emphasizing not only institutional survival but also the moral and relational foundations that make learning endure.

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