

Early Childhood Teachers' Experiences in Integrating the Free Nutritious Meal Program into Early Childhood Learning: A Phenomenological Study

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History

Submitted:

January 21, 2026

Revised:

January 21, 2026

Accepted:

January 21, 2026

Keywords

Early Childhood Education, Free Nutritious Meal Program, Phenomenology, Teachers' Experiences, Holistic Learning

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe and gain an in-depth understanding of early childhood education (ECE) teachers' experiences in integrating the Free Nutritious Meal Program into early childhood learning processes. The study employed a qualitative approach using a phenomenological method to explore the meanings and lived experiences of teachers as the primary implementers of the program at the classroom level. The research participants consisted of five kindergarten teachers in Bogor Regency, selected through purposive sampling based on the criterion of direct involvement in the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program. The study was conducted from January to March 2026. Data were collected through structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and key themes emerging from teachers' experiences. The findings revealed four fundamental themes: the Free Nutritious Meal Program as an integrated pedagogical practice; nutritional fulfillment as a foundation for children's learning readiness and emotional regulation; mealtime activities as a medium for character formation and social skills development; and the reflective and adaptive role of teachers in integrating policy into classroom learning practices. The findings indicate that the nutritious meal program not only impacts children's health but also contributes significantly to the quality of learning and the holistic development of young children. This study offers a novel contribution by conceptualizing the Free Nutritious Meal Program as a holistic pedagogical practice within early childhood education and by highlighting the strategic role of teachers in bridging national policy and classroom educational practices.



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Doi: <https://doi.org/10.66291/qr-ece.v1i1.5>

1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of nutrition in early childhood cannot be separated from the process of optimal physical growth and development, as this stage represents a golden period of rapid growth. Balanced nutritional intake plays a direct role in forming body structure, strengthening bones, developing muscles, and enhancing children's immune systems. Nutritional deficiencies in early childhood may lead to physical growth disorders such as stunting, which have long-term consequences. Beyond physical aspects, nutrition also plays a crucial role in early childhood cognitive development. A child's brain develops rapidly during early years and requires adequate nutrients to support thinking skills, concentration, and memory. Children who receive proper nutrition tend to demonstrate better learning readiness in early childhood education (ECE) settings. Conversely, malnutrition may cause children to become easily fatigued, less focused, and unable to actively participate in learning activities. These conditions directly affect the quality of children's engagement in classroom learning processes. Therefore, the provision of adequate nutrition serves as a fundamental foundation in supporting the goals of early childhood education. Thus, nutrition is not merely a health issue but an integral component of successful learning in ECE.

In addition to supporting physical and cognitive development, adequate nutrition significantly influences the social-emotional development of young children. Children whose nutritional needs are met tend to display greater emotional stability and are better able to interact positively with peers and teachers. A healthy physical condition enables children to be more active, confident, and ready to engage in various play-based learning activities. In the context of ECE, social interaction is a vital component of learning, which emphasizes learning through play. Nutritional deficiencies may cause children to become easily irritable, lack enthusiasm, and withdraw from their social environment. This can hinder the overall development of children's social and emotional competencies. Early childhood teachers are often the closest observers of behavioral changes related to children's physical and emotional conditions. Therefore, efforts to provide nutrition through programs such as the Free Nutritious Meal Program become highly relevant in ECE settings. This program not only supports children's health but also fosters a more conducive learning environment. By understanding the holistic importance of nutrition, ECE institutions can play an active role in shaping a healthy, intelligent, and well-charactered generation from an early age.

Over the past five years, early childhood nutrition issues in Indonesia have remained a major national concern, particularly regarding high rates of malnutrition and stunting, as well as limited access to healthy food for children. Many children across various regions of Indonesia continue to experience inadequate nutrition, which negatively affects their physical growth and cognitive development and has drawn attention from national education and health institutions. In response to these conditions, the Indonesian government, through the establishment of the National Nutrition Agency and other strategic policies, has promoted the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG), targeting students including those at the early childhood education level, as an effort to address nutritional problems from an early age directly within school environments. This program is positioned as part of a broader investment in human resource development to achieve the Golden Generation 2045 vision, aiming to ensure that children receive balanced and regular nutritious meals.

The government has gradually implemented the MBG program from ECE to senior high school levels, collaborating with various stakeholders to ensure logistics, nutritional quality, and food provision meet health standards. In addition to food distribution, government strategies include strengthening cross-sector coordination, providing nutrition education to parents and communities, and monitoring children's nutritional status to assess the program's impact sustainably. Although the program faces operational challenges during implementation, including criticism related to management and food quality supervision, the government continues to strengthen quality control mechanisms and technical adjustments. Through significant budget allocations and supporting presidential regulations, the MBG program has been established as a crucial component of national efforts to improve children's nutritional status from an early age. Therefore, the government's strategy through the Free Nutritious Meal Program demonstrates strong commitment to addressing national early childhood nutrition issues and highlights its relevance within the context of early childhood education as a foundation for healthy and productive development.

The novelty of this study lies in revealing the subjective experiences of early childhood education teachers in integrating the Free Nutritious Meal Program into early childhood learning processes through a phenomenological approach. Unlike previous studies that primarily focus on policy evaluation, children's nutritional status, or quantitative assessments of program impact, this study positions teachers as key actors who directly implement and interpret the program within classroom settings. This research views the nutritious meal program not only as a health intervention but also as an integral part of pedagogical practice in early childhood education. The novelty is further reflected in understanding how teachers perceive mealtime activities as opportunities for teaching values, healthy lifestyle habits, and strengthening children's social-emotional development. Additionally, the study explores the dynamics of integrating nutritious meals into play-based learning routines characteristic of early childhood education. The phenomenological approach enables the researcher to capture teachers' meanings, reflections, and adaptive strategies that have been largely unexplored in previous research. This study also presents a contextual perspective highlighting the interaction between national policy and educational practices at the micro level. Therefore, this research contributes new insights to early childhood education studies by holistically linking nutrition issues, teachers' experiences, and learning practices.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach using a phenomenological method to gain an in-depth understanding of early childhood education (ECE) teachers' experiences in integrating the Free Nutritious Meal Program into early childhood learning processes. The phenomenological approach was selected because it allows researchers to explore participants' subjective meanings and lived experiences related to the phenomenon under investigation. The focus of the study was directed toward how teachers interpret, implement, and reflect on the execution of the nutritious meal program within the context of kindergarten learning. This study did not aim to measure the program's effectiveness quantitatively; rather, it sought to understand the contextual realities experienced by teachers. The phenomenon under study was viewed as teachers' conscious experiences within their daily educational practices. Through this approach, the researcher sought to capture the essence of

teachers' experiences in a holistic manner. The research process was conducted in a naturalistic setting in accordance with field conditions. This approach enabled the collection of rich and authentic data.

The research participants consisted of five kindergarten teachers in Bogor Regency who had implemented the Free Nutritious Meal Program in their respective schools. A purposive sampling technique was employed, with criteria including teachers who were directly involved in the planning and implementation of the nutritious meal program in the classroom. Participant selection was based on their capacity to provide relevant and in-depth information aligned with the research objectives. All participants had experience teaching in early childhood education and were actively involved in daily learning activities. The study was conducted between January and March 2026. The research location was selected because Bogor Regency is one of the regions that has implemented the Free Nutritious Meal Program at the kindergarten level. The researcher established a positive rapport with participants to create an open and trusting interview atmosphere. This was essential to obtain honest and reflective data.

Data were collected through structured interviews developed based on the focus and objectives of the study. The interview guide was designed to explore teachers' experiences related to the planning, implementation, and integration of the nutritious meal program into early childhood learning. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in a conducive environment to ensure participant comfort. Each interview was audio-recorded with participants' consent to maintain data accuracy. In addition, the researcher documented important observations that emerged during the interview process. The interviews were conducted in depth to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Data collection was carried out gradually according to an agreed schedule. All data were collected until data saturation was achieved.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis to identify patterns, themes, and meanings emerging from teachers' experiences. The analysis process began with verbatim transcription of the interview data. Subsequently, the researcher conducted initial coding to categorize data based on relevant issues. These codes were then organized into major themes representing teachers' experiences. The analysis was performed iteratively to ensure consistency and depth of interpretation. The researcher sought to maintain accuracy of meaning by referring directly to participants' statements. Data validity was ensured through the researcher's rigor and persistence throughout the analytical process. The results of the thematic analysis are presented descriptively to comprehensively depict the essence of teachers' experiences.

Research Flow of the Study

Understanding PAUD Teachers' Experiences in Integrating Free Nutritious Meal Program

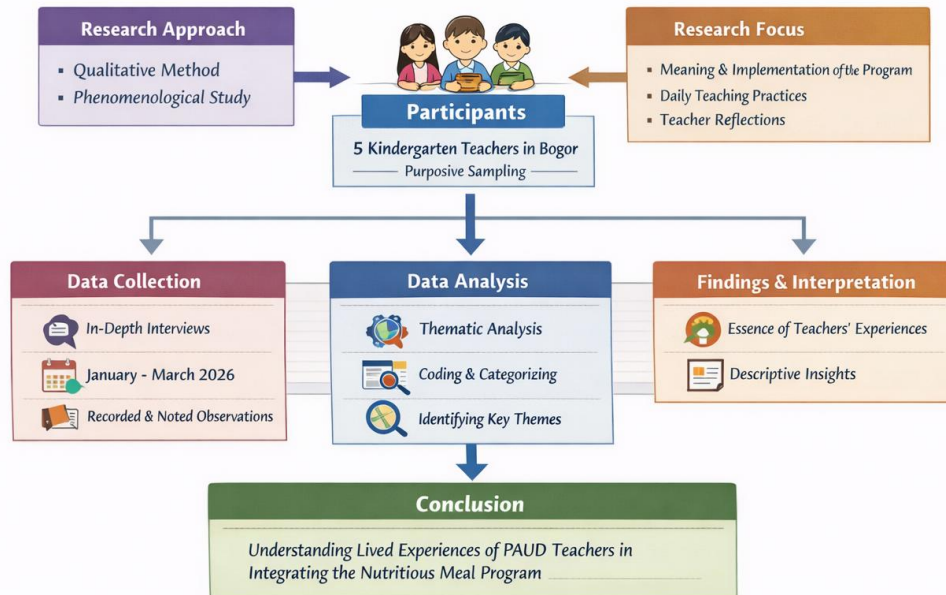


Figure 1. Phenomenological Research Flow

3. FINDINGS

Theme 1. The Free Nutritious Meal Program as an Integrated Pedagogical Practice in Early Childhood Education

The first theme indicates that teachers do not perceive the Free Nutritious Meal Program merely as an additional activity, but rather as an integral part of the learning process in early childhood education (ECE). Teachers interpret mealtime as a contextual and meaningful learning space for young children. Mealtime activities are integrated with learning objectives that include healthy lifestyle habits, independence, and environmental awareness. Teachers consciously design activities before, during, and after meals as part of the learning process. This reflects an expanded understanding of learning that is not limited to academic activities alone. Learning is understood as a holistic experience embedded in children's daily routines. Teachers believe that children learn most effectively through direct experience. Thus, the nutritious meal program becomes an authentic learning medium in ECE.

This pedagogical integration is evident in how teachers connect food with daily learning themes. Teachers use food as a medium to introduce colors, shapes, tastes, and types of healthy foods. Mealtime is also utilized to support language development through simple conversations and the introduction of new vocabulary. Teachers perceive that children grasp concepts more easily when learning is concrete. This approach aligns with the play-based and experiential learning characteristics of early childhood education. Teachers do not rigidly separate learning time from mealtime. Instead, both are naturally blended into classroom routines. This reflects the pedagogical flexibility of ECE teachers. The nutritious meal program thus serves as a means of reinforcing thematic learning.

These findings are supported by Teacher 2, who stated, “I often use the food provided as a learning medium, such as introducing colors, shapes, and tastes.” Teacher 5 also noted, “Mealtime becomes a fun learning moment; children learn which foods are healthy and unhealthy.” These statements demonstrate that teachers actively utilize the meal program as part of their instructional strategies. Teachers do not merely implement the program administratively but integrate it with educational objectives. This confirms that program integration depends largely on teachers’ creativity and pedagogical awareness. Teachers play a central role in linking nutrition and learning. Consequently, teachers’ pedagogical practices become a key factor in the program’s success, transforming the nutritious meal program into a learning medium.

Fundamentally, this theme reflects a paradigm shift in ECE practices. The nutritious meal program is no longer positioned solely as a health intervention but as part of the early childhood learning ecosystem. Teachers understand that learning can occur at any time and through any activity. This understanding enriches the concept of holistic learning in ECE. The integration also strengthens the program’s relevance to early childhood education goals. The nutritious meal program becomes a tangible example of life-based learning. These findings contribute new insights to ECE studies, positioning teachers as agents who integrate policy and pedagogical practice. This represents the first fundamental finding of the study.

Theme 2. Nutritional Fulfillment as a Foundation for Learning Readiness and Emotional Regulation

The second fundamental theme concerns teachers’ interpretation of nutrition as the foundation of young children’s learning readiness. Teachers consistently observe changes in children’s physical and emotional conditions after participating in the Free Nutritious Meal Program. Children who have eaten appear calmer, happier, and more prepared to engage in learning activities. Teachers perceive that adequate nutritional intake directly influences children’s concentration and stamina during learning sessions. Children become more active and less irritable in the classroom. These conditions create a more conducive learning environment. Teachers experience more effective learning processes when children’s basic needs are fulfilled. Thus, nutrition is viewed as a prerequisite for optimal learning.

Nutritional fulfillment also has a significant impact on young children’s emotional regulation. Teachers observe that children are better able to manage their emotions after eating together. Children become more patient, less easily frustrated, and more cooperative during group activities. Teachers associate this with children’s improved physical comfort and stability. Effective emotional regulation facilitates classroom management. Children are easier to guide and more willing to follow classroom rules. This reinforces the close relationship between physical well-being and children’s psychological readiness. Teachers perceive nutrition and emotional regulation as closely interconnected. The nutritious meal program plays a crucial role in supporting this balance.

These findings are supported by Teacher 1, who stated, “After eating, they appear calmer and more ready to participate in the next learning activities.” Teacher 4 also noted, “Children seem happier and less irritable since the nutritious meal program was introduced.” These statements reflect teachers’ direct experiences in observing the impact of nutrition on children’s behavior. Teachers’ conclusions

are not based on assumptions but on daily classroom observations. These experiences strengthen teachers' belief in the importance of nutrition. The nutritious meal program is perceived as a practical solution to learning readiness challenges. Teachers experience its impact directly in their teaching practice. As a result, nutrition is positioned as an educational issue rather than merely a health concern.

Fundamentally, this theme emphasizes that the success of early childhood education cannot be separated from the fulfillment of children's basic needs. Nutrition serves as the foundation that supports the learning process as a whole. Teachers believe that even well-designed teaching methods cannot achieve optimal outcomes without children's physical well-being. The nutritious meal program functions as an intervention that supports educational goals. These findings reinforce a holistic approach to early childhood education, in which education is understood as an integration of health and learning. Teachers serve as direct witnesses to this relationship. This constitutes the second fundamental finding of the study.

Theme 3. Mealtime Activities as a Medium for Character Building and Social Skills

Development

The third theme indicates that shared mealtime activities are interpreted by teachers as a medium for character building and social skills development in early childhood. Teachers utilize mealtime moments to instill values such as discipline, togetherness, and responsibility. Children are taught to queue, pray, and respect their peers. Mealtime also serves as a context for learning etiquette and manners. Teachers observe that these values are more effectively instilled through direct practice. Children learn through modeling and habituation. This process occurs naturally within classroom routines. Consequently, the nutritious meal program becomes an effective space for character education.

In addition, shared mealtime activities strengthen social interactions among children. Teachers observe that children become more open and communicative during mealtime. Children learn to share and cooperate with their peers. These interactions foster a sense of togetherness within the classroom. Teachers also use this moment to build emotional closeness with children. Teacher-child relationships become warmer and more egalitarian. Children feel cared for and valued. This has a positive impact on the overall classroom climate. The nutritious meal program thus strengthens the social dimension of learning in early childhood education.

These findings are supported by Teacher 3, who stated, "Children learn social values such as togetherness and discipline during shared meals." Teacher 5 also stated, "I often invite children to have light discussions about the food they eat." These statements demonstrate that teachers consciously use mealtime as a medium for character education. Teachers view mealtime as a strategic moment for social learning. Values are not taught solely through verbal instruction but through direct experience. Teachers act as facilitators and role models. Children learn through real interactions, thereby strengthening the effectiveness of character education.

Fundamentally, this theme demonstrates that the nutritious meal program makes a significant contribution to the social-emotional development of young children. Teachers interpret character education as something that can be fostered through simple yet meaningful activities. The nutritious meal program becomes part of values- and attitude-based learning. These findings emphasize the importance of a holistic approach in early childhood education. Learning is not focused solely on

cognitive aspects but also on character and social development. Teachers play a central role in this process. National programs find their meaning in early childhood classrooms. This represents the third fundamental finding of the study.

4. DISCUSSION

This discussion places the research findings in dialogue with early childhood education (ECE) theories and previous studies to strengthen the scholarly contribution and emphasize the novelty of the research. Based on early childhood development theory, learning is understood as a holistic process encompassing physical, cognitive, social, and emotional aspects. Piaget's constructivist theory emphasizes that children learn most effectively through direct experience and interaction with their environment. The findings of this study align with this perspective, as teachers utilize mealtime as a concrete learning experience. The Free Nutritious Meal Program is practiced as part of contextual learning rather than as a separate activity. This reinforces the idea that learning in ECE is not limited to formal academic activities. Previous studies have tended to position nutritious meal programs as health interventions. This study expands that perspective by framing the program as a pedagogical practice. Thus, the findings support the development of holistic learning concepts in ECE, with novelty reflected in the shift in program meaning from health to pedagogy.

The findings regarding the integration of the Free Nutritious Meal Program as a pedagogical practice support experiential learning theory. According to Kolb, learning occurs through a cycle of concrete experience, reflection, and application. Teachers in this study consciously link mealtime activities with simple reflection and thematic learning. This indicates that children do not merely receive food but actively engage in learning experiences. Previous research has largely evaluated program effectiveness using indicators such as nutritional status or student attendance. In contrast, this study reveals how teachers interpret and manage the program in classroom practice. Teachers act as designers of meaningful learning experiences. These findings reinforce the role of teachers as pedagogical actors rather than mere policy implementers. The novelty lies in the focus on teachers' subjective experiences, opening new avenues for examining the integration of policy and pedagogy.

In the context of learning readiness, the findings of this study align with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which places physiological needs as the foundation for fulfilling higher-level needs. Teachers observe that children are more ready to learn once their nutritional needs are met. Previous studies have quantitatively demonstrated the relationship between nutrition and children's academic achievement. However, this study provides qualitative insights into how teachers experience and interpret this relationship in everyday practice. These findings emphasize that learning readiness is not solely a matter of teaching methods. Children's physical and emotional conditions are decisive factors in learning success. Teachers observe tangible changes in children's concentration and emotional regulation. This reinforces the theory that children's well-being supports the learning process. This study extends the discourse by presenting teachers' voices as direct observers. The novelty lies in the phenomenological approach to nutrition issues, thereby supporting the integration of health and education.

The emotional regulation aspect identified in the findings also aligns with theories of early childhood social-emotional development. According to Erikson, young children are in stages of initiative and autonomy development. Teachers in this study observe that children are better able to

regulate their emotions after eating together. Previous studies have rarely explicitly linked meal programs with emotional regulation. These findings demonstrate that nutritional fulfillment contributes to children's emotional stability. Teachers experience a more conducive classroom atmosphere as a result. This reinforces the view that emotion and learning are closely interconnected. The nutritious meal program contributes to a positive learning climate. This study provides empirical evidence from teachers' perspectives. The novelty lies in directly linking nutrition and emotional regulation within the ECE context, thereby enriching studies on early childhood social-emotional development.

Findings related to character building through mealtime activities support character education theories based on habituation. According to Lickona, moral values are most effectively instilled through daily practice. Teachers in this study use mealtime as a medium for habituating values such as discipline, togetherness, and responsibility. Previous studies have largely focused on character education through play or storytelling. This study demonstrates that routine activities such as eating possess substantial pedagogical potential. Children learn values through direct experience rather than verbal instruction alone. Teachers serve as role models during these activities, strengthening the effectiveness of character education. These findings expand understanding of character education strategies in ECE. The novelty lies in utilizing a nutritious meal program as a medium for character development, contributing to the advancement of character education practices.

Social interactions that occur during mealtime also align with Vygotsky's theory of social learning. Vygotsky emphasized that social interaction is a key driver of children's cognitive and social development. Teachers observe that children learn to share and communicate during shared meals. Previous studies have emphasized social interaction in play contexts. This study shows that mealtime also serves as a meaningful space for social interaction. Children learn through natural interactions with peers. Teachers facilitate this process reflectively. This enriches understanding of social learning spaces in ECE. The nutritious meal program becomes part of the social learning ecosystem. The novelty lies in expanding the context of social interaction. These findings support a social-constructivist approach in early childhood education.

The role of teachers as reflective practitioners in this study supports theories of ECE teacher professionalism. Teachers do not merely follow policy instructions but adapt programs according to classroom contexts. Previous research has often positioned teachers as technical implementers of programs. This study portrays teachers as agents of policy interpretation and integration. Teachers employ creativity and reflection in their teaching practices. This reinforces the view that ECE teacher professionalism is contextual and reflective. These findings highlight the importance of teachers' reflective competencies. The novelty lies in emphasizing teachers' experiences as sources of knowledge. This study contributes to research on teachers' roles in education policy, positioning teachers as active subjects in educational innovation.

Overall, this discussion demonstrates that the research findings support and extend existing ECE theories. The study also complements previous research by offering a phenomenological perspective. The primary novelty lies in reconceptualizing the Free Nutritious Meal Program as a holistic pedagogical practice. The findings integrate issues of nutrition, learning, character development, and teacher agency within a unified framework. This study provides both conceptual

and practical contributions to the development of early childhood education. Furthermore, it enriches education policy studies by presenting insights from classroom-level practice. By amplifying teachers' voices, this study offers a new perspective that is highly relevant to the development of ECE policy and practice. Ultimately, the novelty of this research lies in the holistic integration of teachers' experiences, nutrition, and pedagogy.

5. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that the Free Nutritious Meal Program in early childhood education does not function solely as an effort to fulfill young children's nutritional needs, but is also interpreted and implemented by teachers as an integral component of the learning process. Through a phenomenological approach, this study reveals that teachers play an active role in integrating mealtime activities into pedagogical practices that support learning readiness, emotional regulation, character formation, and children's social-emotional development. Nutritional fulfillment is shown to be a crucial foundation for creating a conducive and meaningful learning environment in early childhood education. Shared mealtime activities are utilized by teachers as a form of contextual learning that fosters values such as independence, discipline, and togetherness. The findings emphasize that the success of the Free Nutritious Meal Program largely depends on teachers' interpretations and creativity in connecting national policy with classroom learning practices. Thus, this study offers a novel contribution to early childhood education research by positioning the nutritious meal program as a holistic pedagogical practice that strengthens the integration of health and education in early childhood.

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