



Teacher Burnout as a Barrier to Social-Emotional Support in Early Childhood Education: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT Burnout among early childhood education (ECE) teachers significantly affects teacher-child interactions and the quality of social-emotional support. This study aimed to examine how teacher burnout functions as a barrier to the provision of social-emotional support in early childhood education by identifying its forms, underlying causes, and consequences for teacher-child interactions. This qualitative case study explores the forms, triggers, and consequences of burnout among eight purposively selected ECE teachers in Rao Selatan District, Pasaman Regency, Indonesia. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis involving coding, categorization, and theme development. Trustworthiness was strengthened through source triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. Findings revealed four key barriers: diminished relational sensitivity, psychological disengagement, helplessness in managing dual roles, and parental pressure arising from unrealistic academic expectations. These barriers collectively weakened teachers' ability to provide effective social-emotional support. The study highlights the importance of systemic interventions, including administrative reform, teacher mental health support, and contextual professional development programs to improve teacher well-being and educational quality. Keywords: <i>Teacher Burnout, Early Childhood Education, Teacher Well-Being, Social-Emotional Development</i>			

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INTRODUCTION

Burnout is an individual's response to work-related stress that develops gradually and can eventually become chronic, leading to health problems (Valsania et al., 2022). From a psychological perspective, this syndrome has negative effects on cognitive, emotional, and attitudinal levels, which are reflected in negative behaviors toward work, coworkers, service users, and the professional role itself. However, this is not a personal issue but rather a consequence of specific characteristics of work activities, describing burnout as a state of exhaustion, fatigue, and frustration resulting from professional activities that fail to meet expected expectations (Kozina & Pivec, 2026). Due to their work, these workers experience a progressively worsening decline in energy until they reach a point of exhaustion and

demotivation, as well as aggressive attitudes toward service users. These conditions contribute to the phenomenon of burnout, characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a sustained decline in personal fulfillment, (Pratiwi & Ayriza, 2023).

Burnout among early childhood education teachers not only affects the teachers' individual well-being but also has direct implications for the quality of their relationships and their engagement in supporting children's social-emotional development (Khadijah et al., 2023). Social-emotional support refers to teachers' ability to provide emotional responsiveness, relational warmth, behavioral guidance, and psychological security for young children. In the context of early childhood education, such burnout can hinder the process of internalizing social values, emotional regulation, and a sense of security all of which are crucial for children during their early developmental stages (Narea et al., 2022). Psychological absence refers to teachers' physical presence accompanied by emotional disengagement and reduced pedagogical responsiveness, while relational sensitivity denotes teachers' capacity to empathetically recognize and respond to children's emotional needs (Sinaga & Merdiaty, 2025). This issue is further complicated by the fact that teacher burnout is often not systematically identified and tends to be viewed as a normal part of the teaching profession.

Teachers are required not only to teach and manage classrooms but also to complete administrative tasks, participate in institutional activities, and organize community-based programs involving parents. Inadequate economic conditions further compel some teachers to engage in additional work such as farming or informal labor, increasing multitasking demands and prolonged psychological strain. The accumulation of these demands has the potential to cause physical and psychological exhaustion, which can affect teachers' mental health as well as the quality of their performance in supporting students.

Numerous studies have been conducted on teacher burnout, particularly at the elementary and secondary education levels, with a primary focus on its impact on academic performance, job satisfaction, and the intention to leave the profession (Satria et al., 2025). Burnout is understood as a psychological syndrome characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a decline in personal accomplishment resulting from chronic work-related stress (Pratiwi & Ayriza, 2023). In an educational context, this condition can reduce teachers' pedagogical effectiveness, worsen the quality of interactions with students, and increase the risk of psychological well-being issues among teachers (Wiltshire, 2023). However, there is a significant gap in the literature that specifically highlights burnout among Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers, particularly in the context of their role as facilitators of children's social-emotional development. In fact, according to prosocial classroom theory, teachers' social-emotional competencies are crucial for fostering supportive, safe, and responsive relationships in early childhood learning (Stein et al., 2022).

Given the urgency and complexity of these issues, this study explores early childhood education teachers' experiences of burnout and examines how prolonged psychological stress disrupts their capacity to provide social-emotional support for young children. Using a qualitative approach, this study investigates teachers' perceptions, emotional experiences, and coping strategies within the challenges of rural educational settings. Using a qualitative approach, this study seeks to understand the subjective dynamics experienced by teachers, including their perceptions, emotions, and coping strategies in fulfilling their professional

roles amidst the challenges of burnout. The ultimate goal of this study is to provide empirical and contextual contributions to the scientific discourse on teacher well-being and the quality of early childhood education, as well as to serve as a foundation for the development of policies and interventions that prioritize the mental health sustainability of early childhood education teachers. Despite increasing attention to teacher burnout, limited studies have specifically explored how burnout disrupts teachers' relational roles in supporting children's social-emotional development within rural early childhood education contexts (Stephens et al., 2026).

In Rao District, Pasaman Regency, early childhood educators frequently face intersecting structural pressures, including excessive administrative demands, limited access to professional development, inadequate technological literacy support, geographic isolation, and socioeconomic burdens that often require teachers to engage in supplementary agricultural or informal labor (Fitri et al., 2025). These contextual challenges are further intensified by sociocultural pressures from parents who prioritize premature academic achievement over social-emotional development, thereby increasing teachers' emotional strain. Preliminary field observations and participant narratives consistently indicate that these systemic pressures significantly compromise teachers' relational sensitivity, emotional responsiveness, and pedagogical engagement (Wartenberg et al., 2026).

Despite growing global recognition of teacher burnout, limited studies have specifically examined how burnout functions as a developmental barrier within under-resourced rural early childhood education contexts in Indonesia. This study extends existing burnout literature by positioning burnout not solely as an occupational health issue but also as a relational barrier that disrupts children's developmental support systems. Using a qualitative case study approach, this study provides methodological and theoretical contributions by situating burnout within broader ecological, relational, and sociocultural systems that shape educational quality and children's social-emotional development.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the experiences of burnout among early childhood education (ECE) teachers and its impact on their ability to provide social-emotional support for children. This approach was chosen to capture the complexity of teachers' subjective experiences within the specific sociocultural context of rural early childhood education in Rao Selatan District, Pasaman Regency, Indonesia.

Participants and Sampling

Participants consisted of eight ECE teachers selected through purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) a minimum of three years of teaching experience, (2) active involvement in children's social-emotional development, and (3) willingness to participate openly in the study.

The selection of the number of participants was based on the principle of data saturation, whereby the data collection process was halted when the information obtained became repetitive and no new significant themes were identified (Guest et al., 2020).

Participants were drawn from multiple institutions with varied professional and socioeconomic backgrounds to enhance contextual diversity and strengthen transferability. The number of participants was determined based on thematic saturation, where data collection ceased once no substantial new themes emerged.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews using an interview protocol developed from burnout theory, social-emotional development frameworks, and preliminary contextual observations. Interview questions focused on key operational constructs, including emotional exhaustion, relational sensitivity, psychological disengagement, dual-role pressure, and institutional support. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online, audio-recorded with participant consent, and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework, including familiarization with data, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and interpretation. This process enabled systematic identification of recurring patterns while differentiating structural factors, such as administrative burden and limited institutional support, from individual coping limitations.

Trustworthiness, Research Rigor, and Study Limitations

To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed source triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and researcher reflexivity. Reflective memoing was conducted throughout the analytical process to minimize researcher bias and enhance interpretive rigor. Despite its strengths, this study is limited by its small sample size, reliance on self-reported data, and absence of observational or longitudinal methods. Nevertheless, the design provides a rich contextual understanding of how burnout functions as a significant barrier to effective social-emotional support in under-resourced rural early childhood education settings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the data analysis indicate that the burnout experienced by early childhood education teachers has a significant impact on the quality of their social-emotional support for children. From in-depth interviews with participants, three main themes were identified that describe the forms of barriers arising in support practices due to burnout, namely: emotional exhaustion that reduces relational sensitivity, decreased motivation and psychological absence in interactions, and feelings of helplessness in facing the demands of dual roles.

Emotional Exhaustion That Reduces Relational Sensitivity

Most teachers report that high work-related stress, particularly due to administrative demands and non-instructional workload, leads to prolonged emotional exhaustion. Teachers feel they lack the energy to respond to children's emotional needs with warmth and patience.

Under these conditions, interactions that should be supportive tend to become mechanical and rushed. This weakens the quality of the affective bond between teachers and students, which is, in fact, the core of social-emotional support.

“Sometimes I know that child needs a hug, needs to be comforted, but I feel like crying myself... I’m just too tired.” (Early childhood education teacher, 6 years of experience)

Early childhood education teachers in this region complain of a heavy workload, not only in terms of classroom activities but also due to administrative burdens they perceive as disproportionate. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that some teachers must also take on side jobs, such as gardening or farming, to support their families. The emotional exhaustion they experience leads to a decline in the quality of their rapport and responsiveness when interacting with children.

“Sometimes I come home from the garden and go straight to teaching; I’m exhausted, and when the children cry, I get angry quickly.” (Early childhood education teacher, Rao Selatan Subdistrict)

This phenomenon aligns with the findings that emotional exhaustion is at the core of burnout and directly impacts an individual’s ability to form positive relationships (Thi et al., 2024). Teachers experiencing emotional distress tend to have stiffer interactions and are less responsive to children, which ultimately hinders the formation of secure and supportive relationships a crucial element in children’s social-emotional development (Rahman, 2007). Furthermore, responsive and sensitive interactions from adults foster the development of secure attachment, which serves as the foundation for social and emotional development in building healthy and happy relationships. Conversely, rigid, inconsistent, or unresponsive interactions such as those exhibited by teachers experiencing emotional exhaustion—can trigger the formation of insecure attachment, characterized by withdrawal, anxiety, or difficulty in forming relationships with others (Donker et al., 2020).

Decreased Motivation and Psychological Absence in Interactions

Burnout also affects teachers’ psychological engagement. Some teachers report being physically present in the classroom but emotionally and mentally disengaged from teaching and mentoring activities. They tend to perform their duties with a minimal effort, lacking the positive energy that typically accompanies early childhood education.

“I still come to work and teach, but my mind isn’t in the classroom I’m just going through the motions.” (Early childhood education teacher, 8 years of experience).

Limited access to professional development and training leaves many teachers feeling left behind and lacking confidence in applying the latest pedagogical approaches. Compounded by limited technological proficiency, teachers often feel disconnected from the latest educational innovations, which ultimately dampens their enthusiasm and engagement in the teaching process.

“If I’m asked to fill out an online form, I get confused and don’t do it. Instead of focusing on the children, I end up busy with administrative tasks.” (Early childhood education teacher, 7 years of experience).

This phenomenon indicates a state of disengagement that has the potential to reduce the effectiveness of relationship-based social-emotional learning processes and the full presence of a significant adult. This is supported by previous studies showing that teacher

burnout is strongly correlated with emotional disengagement a state in which teachers lose their enthusiasm and sense of purpose in teaching (Javadi & Khatib, 2013). This decline in engagement is also associated with a decline in the quality of teacher-child relationships, in which children become more socially and emotionally passive. In early childhood education settings, where empathetic interactions are key to social-emotional learning, teachers' psychological absence becomes a major obstacle to achieving educational goals.

A decline in teachers' emotional engagement also has a direct impact on the quality of pedagogical interactions. According to Lev Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development, children's learning is highly dependent on the presence of responsive and supportive adults; when teachers experience burnout, the scaffolding function becomes suboptimal, causing children to lose opportunities to develop to their full potential in social and emotional aspects (Sandilos et al., 2020). Furthermore, these findings are supported by research from John Pianta, which emphasizes that the quality of the teacher-child relationship is a primary predictor of successful social-emotional development in young children. Teachers experiencing burnout tend to exhibit stiffer, less sensitive, and less affectionate interactions, which ultimately impact children's emotional security in the learning environment (Gilar-corbi et al., 2024).

A Sense of Helplessness in the Face of the Demands of Juggling Multiple Roles

Early childhood educators do not merely serve as teachers, but also as caregivers, emotional support providers, and often even as surrogate parents. Burnout exacerbates the feeling of being unable to fulfill all these roles effectively. Some teachers express feelings of guilt for not being able to give the children enough attention, yet they do not know whom to turn to for help.

"I know the children need me, but I also need support. I feel alone." (Early childhood education teacher, 5 years of experience).

This situation highlights the importance of an institutional support system for teacher well-being, as emphasized in previous research on the concept of the prosocial classroom, which states that teacher well-being is the foundation for creating a socially and emotionally healthy learning environment (Pratiwi & Ayriza, 2023). Teachers who feel they have no control over their workload and do not receive emotional support from the institutional environment tend to experience higher levels of burnout. Teachers' inability to manage work-related stress can lead to emotional contagion, which is the transmission of stress to children through daily interactions (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). In the long term, this can disrupt the development of children's emotional security and reduce the effectiveness of the learning environment.

These findings indicate that teacher burnout is not only triggered by individual factors but is also significantly influenced by perceived job control and the quality of social support in the workplace. From the perspective of Robert Karasek's work stress theory through the Job Demand-Control Model, individuals facing high job demands but having low control over their work are more vulnerable to prolonged stress leading to burnout (Kim et al., 2021). In the context of early childhood education teachers, limitations in determining learning

strategies, administrative pressures, and a lack of decision-making autonomy reinforce feelings of powerlessness in fulfilling their professional roles.

The Pressure of Unrealistic Parental Expectations

One significant obstacle faced by early childhood education teachers in supporting children's social-emotional development is pressure from parents whose expectations are not aligned with the principles of early childhood education. Many teachers complain that most parents in Rao Subdistrict still view kindergarten education primarily as a means to teach literacy and numeracy skills—reading, writing, and arithmetic—rather than as a foundation for character development and emotional intelligence. The pressure for children to quickly master reading, writing, and arithmetic makes teachers feel they must “force” children to learn beyond their developmental capacity.

“Parents come in angry, saying their child still can’t read. But in preschool, we focus more on building character and emotional resilience first. Still, in the end, we end up getting stressed out too.” (Early childhood education teacher, Rao Selatan Subdistrict).

This situation not only creates tension between teachers and parents but also hinders the emotional connection that should be central to the early childhood learning process. Teachers feel constrained in providing a warm and empathetic approach because they are under pressure to deliver immediate academic results. Misunderstandings between parents and teachers regarding the goals of early childhood education have the potential to lower the quality of co-parenting and increase the emotional burden on teachers (He et al., 2025). In this context, unrealistic academic expectations from parents can be a major contributor to work-related stress, which ultimately weakens the teacher's ability to provide social-emotional support to children. Meanwhile, relational tension between teachers and parents can lower the quality of the classroom social climate and increase the risk of emotional withdrawal among teachers (Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Hatton et al., 2023).

While participants demonstrated varying levels of individual coping capacity, burnout experiences were more consistently associated with structural pressures than with personal resilience limitations. Teachers across multiple institutions reported relatively similar challenges, including excessive administrative responsibilities, limited professional development opportunities, insufficient institutional support, and socioeconomic burdens requiring supplementary employment (Franco et al., 2025). However, variations emerged in the intensity of these pressures depending on school resources and local community expectations. For example, teachers from institutions with weaker administrative infrastructure reported greater bureaucratic fatigue, while those in economically vulnerable households described stronger financial-role conflicts. Despite these contextual differences, the overarching pattern suggests that burnout was broadly shaped by systemic institutional constraints rather than solely by individual inability to manage stress (Hossain, 2025). This broader contextual comparison strengthens the conclusion that teacher burnout in rural early childhood settings is a widespread structural phenomenon rather than an isolated personal challenge.

Overall, the results of this study indicate that the quality of early childhood education is closely linked to teachers' psychological well-being. Teachers experiencing burnout are at risk of a decline in the quality of their interactions, which can ultimately affect children's

social-emotional development (Osterholm et al., 2025). Burnout not only affects teachers internally but also impacts how they build relationships, provide emotional support, and create a safe classroom environment for children (Zhang et al., 2023). In the context of early childhood education, where emotional bonds form the foundation of learning, this becomes a critical issue. In the case of Rao Subdistrict, geographical isolation, limited access to training, multiple layers of workload, and a stressful socioeconomic context create suboptimal working conditions for fostering high-quality social-emotional support.

These findings support the notion (Handayani, 2023) that teachers' well-being and happiness are the foundation of successful social-emotional interventions in the classroom. Pressure from parents demanding early academic achievement in their children reveals a serious gap in understanding regarding the role of early childhood education. When teachers are pushed to prioritize literacy and numeracy skills, attention to strengthening children's emotional, character, and social development is neglected. This imbalance creates dual psychological pressure on teachers, which ultimately exacerbates burnout and undermines the core essence of early childhood education (Nadyastuti et al., 2021).

Thus, interventions to address burnout among early childhood education teachers in regions such as Pasaman must not be limited to individual-level approaches but must be accompanied by systemic policies that include easily accessible training, professional support, administrative streamlining, and the promotion of a positive caregiving culture through partnerships with parents. These findings indicate that burnout among early childhood education teachers, particularly in regions such as Pasaman, is an issue that cannot be understood solely as an individual's inability to manage work-related stress. Burnout actually arises from the accumulation of structural pressures involving high workloads, limited resources, minimal access to professional development, and complex social demands (Narea et al., 2022).

Early childhood education teachers in remote areas often face a lack of relevant training, insufficient professional supervision, and energy-sapping administrative burdens, which reduce their ability to focus on the quality of their interactions with children (Carey & Sutton, 2024). This situation indicates that burnout is largely influenced by a work system that does not yet fully support teachers' well-being and happiness. Additionally, family environment and community parenting patterns are also important aspects in the discussion of early childhood education teacher burnout (Purper et al., 2023).

In some regions, including Pasaman, West Sumatra, parenting practices that tend to be harsh are still prevalent due to parents' limited knowledge of child development. This adds to the emotional burden on teachers, as they are not only responsible for educating children but also often have to act as mediators between children's developmental needs and family parenting styles that are not in alignment. Therefore, strengthening a culture of positive parenting through active partnerships between schools and parents is a strategic step in reducing the pressure on teachers (Stein et al., 2022).

Unlike previous burnout studies that primarily focus on urban educational settings, general teacher populations, or occupational outcomes such as job satisfaction, this study offers a distinct contribution by examining burnout within a rural early childhood education context through a qualitative case study approach. In Rao Selatan District, burnout is shaped

not only by occupational stress but also by geographic isolation, limited professional development access, socioeconomic burdens, administrative overload, and strong parental pressure emphasizing early academic achievement over social-emotional development. These localized sociocultural and structural pressures create a unique pattern of burnout that differs from broader educational contexts. Therefore, this study extends existing burnout literature by positioning burnout as a systemic relational and developmental barrier influenced by rural inequalities, institutional limitations, and community educational expectations.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the burnout experienced by early childhood education teachers in Rao Subdistrict, Pasaman Regency, is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. Burnout emerges as a response to both structural and cultural work pressures, ranging from emotional exhaustion due to workloads and side jobs, limited access to training and technology, burdensome administrative demands, to parental expectations that are inconsistent with the principles of early childhood education. The three main forms of barriers identified in children's social-emotional support namely, declining relational sensitivity, psychological absence in interactions, and feelings of helplessness regarding dual roles are all exacerbated by a work environment that is unsupportive both emotionally and professionally. The inclusion of a subtheme related to parental pressure reinforces the finding that public misconceptions about the role of early childhood education directly contribute to an increased psychological burden on teachers. Excessive expectations that children quickly master literacy and numeracy skills shift educators' focus away from an approach that should be humanistic and affection-based toward an academic approach that is not appropriate for the children's developmental stage.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature on early childhood education by highlighting the importance of teachers' emotional well-being as a key element in creating a socially and emotionally supportive learning environment. From a practical perspective, these findings emphasize the need for systemic and sustainable interventions, such as: (1) Reducing administrative burdens for early childhood educators so they can focus more on their pedagogical and affective roles. (2) Improving access to professional development, particularly in areas far from urban centers, through contextual training models that are easily accessible online. (3). Community-based parenting literacy programs that can educate parents about the goals and approaches in early childhood education. (4). Emotional support systems for teachers, such as psychosocial counseling, reflective forums, and supportive teacher community networks. Taken together, these findings point to one key conclusion: high-quality early childhood education cannot be achieved without ensuring that teachers are emotionally healthy, structurally supported, and understood by the surrounding community.

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