

The Eurasia Proceedings of Health, Environment and Life Sciences (EPHELS), 2025

Volume 17, Pages 65-72

ICGeHeS 2025: International Conference on General Health Sciences

Building Eco-Awareness in Preschool Children

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Abstract: Environmental education plays a vital role in fostering ecological awareness and sustainable behavior from an early age. In Indonesia, preschool education offers a strategic platform to cultivate ecoconsciousness among young learners. However, its integration faces significant challenges, including limited resources, inadequate teacher training, and the absence of structured curricula. This study explores how Indonesian preschool teachers implement environmental education by examining their strategies, obstacles, and key success factors. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were gathered through online semistructured interviews with 15 preschool teachers from various regions, along with curriculum and lesson plan analyses. Thematic analysis revealed that while teachers highly value environmental education, their efforts are often hindered by insufficient training, lack of materials, and rigid curricular frameworks. Despite these barriers, many teachers adopt innovative approaches such as project-based learning, outdoor exploration, and collaborative activities to engage students. Key enablers of effective environmental education include teacher motivation, strong school leadership, and parental involvement. This study highlights the urgent need for enhanced teacher preparation, better resource provision, and more structured curricular support. Addressing these areas is essential for fostering environmental stewardship in young Indonesian children. The findings offer practical insights for educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers committed to advancing early childhood environmental education.

Keywords: Eco-Awareness, Environment, Environmental education

Introduction

Environmental education in early childhood is widely recognized as a crucial foundation for developing ecological awareness, responsible behavior, and sustainable mindsets from a young age. Early childhood, particularly the preschool years, is a formative period where values, attitudes, and habits toward the environment begin to take shape (Lamanauskas, 2023; Lithoxoidou et al., 2017). Educating children about nature and sustainability during this stage not only enhances their understanding of the natural world but also nurtures empathy, respect, and a sense of responsibility for the environment (Ernst et al., 2023; Sihvonen et al., 2024; Zhai et al., 2025; Ernst et al., 2023; Sihvonen et al., 2024; Zhai et al., 2025). Early exposure to these principles lays the foundation for children to grow into environmentally conscious individuals, equipped to make informed decisions and contribute positively to the sustainability of the planet.

Teachers play a central role in integrating environmental education into preschool curricula. Equipping educators with the knowledge and tools to teach environmental topics is essential for fostering young learners' understanding of sustainability and the natural world (Roussou et al., 2025). Effective strategies include hands-on activities,

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⁻ Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of the Conference

storytelling, play, and child-centered pedagogical approaches. Early exposure to nature-based learning experiences, such as outdoor play, gardening, and recycling activities, has been shown to positively influence children's environmental attitudes and behaviors (Luo & Li, 2024). These activities not only teach children about ecological concepts but also cultivate empathy, curiosity, and a sense of responsibility toward the natural world.

Scaffolding, a method of providing structured guidance, enables young learners to grasp complex ecological concepts in a step-by-step manner (Zurek & Torquati, 2014). For example, using simple recycling tasks or nature-themed stories allows children to connect abstract environmental ideas to their everyday experiences. Additionally, interdisciplinary approaches, such as integrating environmental themes into science, math, and language activities, enhance cognitive and emotional development. The readiness and attitudes of teachers significantly impact the success of environmental education initiatives. Studies reveal that educators with higher levels of environmental literacy are more likely to adopt innovative and engaging teaching methods (Turkoglu, 2019). Professional development programs that focus on sustainability and environmental awareness equip teachers with the skills and confidence to implement effective eco-education strategies (Mliless et al., 2024). Moreover, fostering a collaborative learning environment where teachers and children explore environmental topics together promotes a shared sense of purpose and engagement (Kangas et al., 2017).

Sustainability can also be embedded into early childhood curricula through global perspectives and localized approaches. Across various countries, educators adopt unique strategies to address environmental challenges, offering valuable models for adaptation. Community and parental involvement further amplify the impact of environmental education. Encouraging families to participate in sustainable practices and supporting cmmunity-based initiatives creates a holistic learning ecosystem that reinforces lessons taught in the classroom. The benefits of early environmental literacy extend beyond ecological understanding. Research demonstrates that environmental education in early childhood enhances problem-solving skills, creativity, and social-emotional development (Carter, 2016). Children exposed to these concepts are more likely to adopt environmentally friendly behaviors, such as conserving water and reducing waste, from a young age (Fortino et al., 2014). Furthermore, these foundational experiences lay the groundwork for developing environmentally conscious and responsible adults. In conclusion, building eco-awareness in preschool children through thoughtful teaching approaches is essential for fostering a generation committed to environmental sustainability. By combining effective pedagogical strategies, teacher training, and community collaboration, early childhood education can serve as a powerful platform for promoting environmental stewardship and shaping a sustainable future.

Environmental education (EE) is essential in fostering eco-consciousness and sustainable practices from an early age. In Indonesia, preschool education (ECE) provides a critical opportunity for young children to develop these values. However, the integration of environmental education into preschool curricula remains challenging due to factors like limited resources, lack of specialized teacher training, and inadequate environmental curriculum structures. Despite these barriers, the role of preschool teachers is central to promoting eco-awareness among young learners. Environmental education in early childhood plays a critical role in developing eco-awareness and sustainability attitudes that persist throughout life. Teachers in preschool settings are key facilitators of this early engagement, influencing young learners' attitudes toward nature, conservation, and environmental responsibility.

Research indicates that early experiences with nature can significantly shape children's attitudes toward the environment, promoting lifelong environmental stewardship. Various pedagogical approaches have been identified to effectively promote environmental awareness among young children. These include transformative and participatory methods, collaborative learning, and hands-on experiences. Professional development for educators, parental involvement, and community engagement are also essential components in successfully implementing environmental education in early childhood settings (Mliless et al., 2024).

Recent studies show that early childhood environmental education (ECEE) is vital for promoting eco-friendly behaviors and developing environmental citizenship (Poje et al., 2024; Rahmania, 2024). Teachers' approaches to this subject vary, but successful methodologies include hands-on learning, outdoor exploration, and thematic integration of environmental issues into daily activities (Davis, 2019). For instance, ECEE programs that incorporate local ecological systems and address climate change help instill a deeper sense of responsibility in children (Bennett & Daly, 2018). Furthermore, eco-conscious curricula often employ storytelling, games, and nature walks to connect children to their surroundings, strengthening their environmental knowledge and fostering empathy towards living creatures (Acar & Coskun, 2021).

Teachers' attitudes toward sustainability also shape the effectiveness of eco-awareness initiatives. Studies highlight that professional development and teacher training in environmental education enhance educators' confidence in integrating eco-conscious topics into the classroom (McNaughton, 2021). However, challenges remain, such as

time constraints and a lack of resources, which can limit the scope of environmental topics covered (Ellis & Hunt, 2022). Overall, building eco-awareness at the preschool level is not only an educational strategy but a proactive means of cultivating a generation of environmentally responsible individuals. As teachers implement and adapt various teaching methods, they provide crucial insights into how early childhood education can act as a foundational stage for environmental stewardship.

While environmental education is recognized as crucial for fostering eco-awareness, its effective integration into preschool education in Indonesia faces various challenges. Little is known about how preschool teachers implement environmental education in the classroom, the obstacles they encounter, or the factors that influence the success of these initiatives. This study aims to:

- 1. Investigate the strategies employed by preschool teachers to teach environmental education.
- 2. Identify the challenges teachers face when integrating environmental education into preschool settings.
- 3. Explore the factors that influence the effectiveness of environmental education in preschool classrooms.

This research provides valuable insights into how environmental education can be more effectively integrated into preschool education in Indonesia. It also offers guidance for policymakers, educators, and curriculum developers in improving teacher training and resource allocation for environmental education.

Method

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to gain comprehensive insights into the experiences of preschool teachers in Indonesia. Utilizing online semi-structured interviews alongside document analysis, the research captures the personal perspectives of teachers as well as the contextual framework provided by educational materials. To ensure a diverse representation of teaching practices and experiences, 15 preschool teachers from different regions of Indonesia were selected based on their expertise in teaching preschool-aged children and their active participation in environmental education initiatives.

Data Collection Methods

To comprehensively gather insights and contextual understanding, this study utilized two primary data collection methods:

- 1) Online Semi-Structured Interviews: Interviews were conducted with preschool teachers through platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet. These interviews aimed to explore the teachers' approaches to environmental education, the challenges they encounter, and the strategies they implement to engage children in eco-friendly practices.
- 2) Document Analysis: Relevant curriculum materials, lesson plans, and school reports on environmental education were examined to understand how environmental education is structured within preschool settings and how teachers incorporate it into their teaching practices.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data obtained from interviews and document analysis were processed through thematic analysis to identify significant patterns and overarching themes. This analytical approach entailed several systematic stages, including familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining these themes, and finalizing the thematic framework. The analysis specifically focused on categorizing key themes, such as effective teaching strategies, challenges faced by preschool educators, and influential factors contributing to the implementation of environmental education. By employing this iterative method, the study ensured a comprehensive and contextual interpretation of the findings, offering valuable insights into the practices and perspectives of preschool teachers in integrating environmental education into their teaching methodologies.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical guidelines to ensure the rights and welfare of all participants were protected. Informed consent was obtained prior to their involvement, with participants fully briefed on the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Confidentiality was rigorously maintained by anonymizing participants' identities and securely storing data to prevent unauthorized access. All responses were utilized solely for research purposes, ensuring transparency and adherence to ethical principles throughout the research process.

Results and Discussion

Teaching Strategies Used by Preschool Teachers

Preschool teachers utilize various strategies to integrate environmental education into their classrooms, emphasizing hands-on and experiential learning to spark curiosity, exploration, and active participation. They often introduce environmental concepts by focusing on the child's immediate surroundings, such as their home, school, and local community. For instance, children are encouraged to observe and explore their environment through activities like nature walks, observing plants and animals in their school or nearby areas. By anchoring lessons in familiar contexts, teachers help children build a sense of connection and responsibility toward their surroundings. Preschool children especially enjoy learning through direct, real-life experiences. Activities such as observing tangible objects in the school environment—like firsthand encounters with a drum (bedug) or a mosque dome are particularly engaging. Contextual, thematic, and project-based approaches, alongside role-playing activities, are among the most favored learning processes for young children. By directly interacting with their environment, children better comprehend the concepts being taught.



Figure 1. Preschool children actively participating in a planting activity

Early childhood education curricula are typically tailored to developmental stages, ensuring themes and subthemes are age-appropriate and relevant. Teachers create safe and stimulating learning environments where children feel comfortable to explore and actively participate. These environments are organized to make learning spaces accessible, fostering independence and curiosity in children. Group activities, such as cleaning the classroom or schoolyard, are frequently implemented to instill environmentally conscious behaviors. Actions like proper waste disposal are reinforced through daily reminders, while eco-friendly habits, such as conserving energy and water, are practiced and modeled collectively. Teachers also introduce gardening and plant care to help children understand the importance of nurturing the natural world.

Storytelling with environmental themes is another effective method for teaching complex concepts like sustainability and conservation in a way that is engaging and age-appropriate. Interactive tools, such as recycling stations and eco-themed crafts, enable children to actively participate in environmentally friendly practices, turning abstract concepts into tangible experiences. Teachers often integrate local cultural values, such as *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), to promote collective responsibility for environmental care.

To evaluate the effectiveness of these activities, teachers commonly use observations, checklists, and anecdotal records. Key indicators of success include children's enthusiasm during activities, their discipline, independence (such as throwing trash away without prompting), and the outcomes of their school environment-related projects. These assessment practices are designed to support and reflect each child's developmental progress comprehensively.

Through these thoughtfully designed learning experiences, preschool teachers nurture meaningful habits that resonate with children's developmental need for active and concrete learning. By embedding environmental themes into daily activities and lessons, educators lay a solid foundation for lifelong environmental awareness and responsibility in children.

Challenges Faced by Preschool Teachers

Preschool teachers encounter a multitude of challenges when attempting to integrate environmental education into their teaching practices. One of the most significant barriers is the difficulty in engaging young learners with environmental themes. Many preschoolers tend to prefer unstructured play and can exhibit limited interest in guided activities that involve abstract environmental concepts. This often makes it challenging for teachers to maintain their attention and enthusiasm for lessons related to sustainability, requiring the use of highly creative and interactive methods.

Another common issue is the limited availability of resources. Teachers frequently report a lack of access to relevant and up-to-date teaching materials, such as visual aids, interactive tools, or digital content, which can make it difficult to effectively deliver environmental education. As a result, educators often have to rely on their own creativity to develop materials, which can be both time-consuming and exhausting. Compounding this issue is the absence of a standardized environmental curriculum, leading to inconsistencies in how environmental education is approached and implemented across different schools and regions.

Behavioral challenges among children also present a significant hurdle. For example, teachers have noted that young learners may struggle to connect with abstract concepts, such as climate change or conservation, particularly when presented through stories or analogies. Instead, children often respond better to concrete examples and hands-on experiences, which require additional preparation and resources from teachers. The lack of specialized training and professional development opportunities further exacerbates these issues. Many teachers feel unequipped to introduce complex environmental topics in an age-appropriate manner due to insufficient training or access to best practices. This gap in knowledge and skills can impact the quality of environmental education provided to young children. Additionally, preschool teachers often face challenges in addressing diverse student needs, particularly when teaching children with special needs. Ensuring inclusivity while achieving comparable developmental progress for all children requires tailored approaches and additional support, which may not always be available. Institutional and administrative barriers also play a role. Limited support from school leadership or a lack of funding for environmental programs can leave teachers feeling isolated in their efforts to implement sustainable education. Differences in perspectives among educators, administrators, and parents further complicates the process, making it difficult to build a cohesive and well-supported environmental education program.

Lastly, broader environmental and societal issues can impact teaching efforts. For example, teachers in regions prone to natural disasters, such as flooding, often find these events disrupting school activities, while also underscoring the urgency and relevance of environmental education. Yet, without adequate resources or guidelines, connecting these real-world issues to learning objectives remains a challenge. Despite these obstacles, many preschool teachers display remarkable resilience, creativity, and dedication to fostering environmental awareness in their students. Addressing these challenges through systemic support—such as expanded training, improved access to resources, and clearer curriculum guidelines—would greatly enhance the effectiveness of environmental education in early childhood settings

Factors Influencing Effectiveness

The effectiveness of environmental education in preschool settings is shaped by a variety of interconnected factors. Teacher motivation plays a pivotal role, as educators who are passionate and informed about environmental issues tend to exhibit higher levels of engagement and creativity in their teaching methods. Their enthusiasm directly influences children's interest and understanding, creating a dynamic and interactive learning environment.

Institutional support is another critical factor. Schools with supportive leadership that prioritize environmental education by providing adequate resources, training opportunities, and encouragement enable teachers to integrate environmental themes more effectively into their curriculum. Access to appropriate teaching materials and administrative backing significantly reduces barriers to implementation.

Parental involvement further amplifies the effectiveness of environmental education. When parents actively participate by reinforcing environmental concepts at home—through practices like waste segregation, energy conservation, or gardening—children develop a stronger understanding and are more likely to adopt eco-friendly habits. Additionally, community engagement can greatly enhance educational efforts. Partnerships with local organizations, environmental groups, or community leaders provide access to additional resources, real-world experiences, and collaborative opportunities that enrich the learning process. For example, community-driven programs such as tree-planting events or clean-up drives can serve as practical learning extensions for children.

Lastly, policy and societal awareness also influence success. Educational policies that emphasize environmental sustainability and societal attitudes towards eco-conscious practices can create a more cohesive framework for both schools and families to promote environmental education. When schools operate in communities with higher levels of environmental awareness, they often receive greater support and collaboration in implementing sustainable programs. These factors underline the importance of a holistic approach, requiring collaboration among teachers, schools, families, and communities to establish a cohesive and supportive framework for environmental education. By addressing these elements collectively, preschool programs can more effectively nurture the next generation of environmentally conscious individuals.

Insights from Document Analysis

A review of school documents reveals a mixed and varied approach to environmental education across different preschool settings. While certain schools have made an effort to include environmental topics in their curricula, there is a significant lack of standardized guidelines for teaching these subjects. This inconsistency in approach results in uneven outcomes, as teachers are left to interpret and implement environmental education based on available resources. Unfortunately, in many cases, the materials provided are either outdated or overly simplistic, which limits their capacity to address the more complex and pressing issues of environmental sustainability. Teachers have voiced a clear need for updated, engaging, and comprehensive teaching materials that are tailored to the developmental needs of preschool children.

Despite these challenges, research highlights the critical benefits of Early Childhood Environmental Education (ECEE). Programs focusing on environmental education at an early age not only enhance children's cognitive skills, such as science literacy and problem-solving abilities, but also contribute to their social and emotional development. For instance, children exposed to environmental concepts often exhibit improved language acquisition, better environmental cognition, and the adoption of pro-environmental attitudes. These educational experiences lay a strong foundation for lifelong learning and sustainable practices, preparing young learners to become environmentally conscious citizens. Furthermore, ECEE has shown potential in nurturing empathy and collaboration among children, as they engage in activities like group recycling efforts or caring for plants. These interactions promote teamwork and foster a sense of responsibility for their surroundings, which can extend beyond the classroom into their daily lives.

Conclusion

This study identifies the significant challenges faced by preschool teachers in Indonesia when integrating environmental education, including a lack of training and resources. Despite these obstacles, many teachers show remarkable creativity, using innovative strategies to engage children in eco-friendly activities, supported by their motivation and community involvement. The findings emphasize the crucial role of teachers in fostering environmental awareness from an early age and the importance of systemic support to enhance their teaching impact.

In conclusion, building eco-awareness in preschool children through intentional and well-planned teaching approaches is vital to creating a generation that values and actively contributes to environmental sustainability. By applying effective teaching strategies and strengthening collaboration between teachers, parents, and communities, young learners can develop a strong foundation of environmental awareness.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Enhance Teacher Training Programs

Develop and implement professional development initiatives tailored to equip teachers with the necessary knowledge, skills, and confidence to effectively deliver environmental education. Such programs should include practical workshops, ongoing support, and access to best practices for teaching sustainability concepts to young learners.

2. Develop Resource-Supported Curricula

Design and provide comprehensive, age-appropriate curriculum materials and teaching frameworks that seamlessly integrate environmental topics into preschool activities. These resources should be adaptable and accessible, enabling teachers to overcome potential barriers such as resource scarcity or lack of institutional support.

3. Strengthen Collaborative Efforts

Encourage and facilitate partnerships between educational institutions, local communities, and environmental organizations. Collaborative initiatives can provide additional resources, share expertise, and create opportunities for experiential learning, such as community clean-ups or nature-based activities.

4. Expand Research Scope

Conduct further studies involving larger and more diverse participant groups, both within and beyond Indonesia, to gain broader insights into effective environmental education practices. Comparative analyses across different cultural and educational contexts can offer valuable perspectives for globally informed strategies.

5. Explore Parental Involvement

Examine the role of parents in reinforcing environmental education outside the classroom. Identifying effective methods for parental engagement, such as home-based activities or workshops, can amplify the overall impact of these educational efforts on children.

6. Evaluate Program Impacts

Systematically assess the long-term effects of environmental education initiatives on children's attitudes, behaviors, and understanding of sustainability. Measuring these outcomes can help refine educational strategies and ensure their effectiveness in cultivating environmentally conscious individuals.

Scientific Ethics Declaration

* The authors declare that the scientific ethical and legal responsibility of this article published in EPHELS Journal belongs to the authors.

Conflict of Interest

* The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest

Funding

* This research was financially supported by Indonesia Endowment Fund for Education (LPDP Indonesia), which provided substantial resources to ensure the completion of this study.

Acknowledgements or Notes

- * This article was presented as an oral presentation at the International Conference on General Health Sciences (www.icgehes.net) held in Trabzon/Türkiye on May 01-04, 2025.
- *We extend our deepest gratitude to the Department of Geography Education at Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia for their invaluable guidance and support throughout the course of this research.

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To cite this article:

Maruddani, R.F., Maruddani, R.T.J., & Ruhimat, M. (2025). Building eco-awareness in preschool children. *The Eurasia Proceedings of Health, Environment and Life Sciences (EPHELS)*, 17, 65-72.