



Kindergarten Teachers' Lived Experiences in Classrooms with Limited Learning Media

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ABSTRACT

Learning media are essential for supporting meaningful learning experiences in early childhood education. However, many early childhood education settings continue to face persistent limitations in the availability of instructional resources, creating multifaceted challenges for teachers in facilitating learning. This study aimed to explore kindergarten teachers' lived experiences of teaching in classrooms with limited learning media. A qualitative approach using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed. The participants were four kindergarten teachers actively serving at RA Al Hidayah, Kedungkelor Village, Tegal Regency, Central Java, Indonesia, comprising the entire teaching staff of the school, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and analyzed using the six-stage IPA procedure proposed by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin. The findings revealed four interconnected themes that reflect a progressive journey from constraint to transformation: (1) encountering the realities of limited learning media, in which teachers experienced daily instructional challenges and a reduced sense of teaching effectiveness; (2) navigating emotional challenges through professional commitment, in which feelings of confusion, frustration, and self-doubt were continually negotiated through resilience and dedication; (3) transforming limitations into creativity and innovation, in which teachers actively developed alternative learning media and adapted pedagogical strategies; and (4) growing through adversity through professional learning and transformation, in which repeated engagement with resource constraints fostered agency, confidence, and professional growth. The study concludes that teaching in classrooms with limited learning media can be understood as a journey from constraint to transformation. While resource limitations present significant pedagogical and emotional challenges, they also serve as catalysts for resilience, creativity, and professional development among kindergarten teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (ECE) plays a crucial role in supporting children's holistic development during the formative years of life (Nongko et al., 2025; Nurhonen et al., 2026). High-quality early childhood learning environments contribute significantly to children's cognitive, social, emotional, language, and physical development. In achieving these developmental goals, teachers serve as key agents who design and facilitate meaningful learning experiences. One important element that supports effective teaching and learning in early childhood settings is the availability of appropriate learning media. Learning media help children understand concepts through concrete



experiences, stimulate curiosity, encourage active participation, and create engaging learning environments.

In early childhood classrooms, learning media function not only as instructional aids but also as tools that facilitate exploration, interaction, and knowledge construction. Young children tend to learn most effectively through direct experiences and hands-on activities. Therefore, the availability of learning materials, educational toys, visual aids, and other instructional resources is often considered an important component of classroom quality. Previous studies have shown that classroom resources contribute to children's engagement and support developmentally appropriate learning experiences (Godoy et al., 2025). Furthermore, meaningful learning can emerge when teachers successfully connect learning activities with children's interests and everyday experiences (Raven & Wenner, 2023).

Despite the recognized importance of learning media, many early childhood education settings continue to face challenges related to limited educational resources. Such limitations may include insufficient teaching materials, inadequate educational toys, lack of visual learning aids, or restricted access to instructional resources. These challenges are often more pronounced in schools operating with limited financial support or located in under-resourced communities. In many Indonesian kindergarten settings, schools often operate with minimal operational budgets, leaving classrooms largely devoid of standardized and commercially manufactured educational tools (Karina et al., 2022; Monica et al., 2025). Consequently, teachers are frequently required to adapt their instructional practices and develop alternative strategies to support children's learning (Casimiro et al., 2025).

The presence of limited learning media can influence teachers' classroom experiences in various ways. In addition to creating instructional challenges, resource limitations may affect teachers' confidence, emotional wellbeing, and perceptions of teaching effectiveness. Teachers may experience frustration when attempting to explain abstract concepts without adequate materials or when trying to maintain children's engagement during learning activities (Frearson & Duncan, 2024). Previous research has highlighted that teaching in early childhood settings often involves significant emotional labor as teachers balance professional responsibilities with children's learning needs and developmental differences (Dickerson et al., 2025; Mukhlis et al., 2025). Such experiences suggest that the impact of limited learning media extends beyond pedagogical concerns and may shape teachers' emotional and professional lives.

At the same time, research has shown that teachers are not merely passive recipients of contextual constraints. Many educators demonstrate creativity, resilience, and professional agency when responding to challenging teaching conditions. Teachers often create learning media from locally available materials, modify instructional approaches, and seek innovative ways to facilitate learning despite resource limitations (Kurniawati et al., 2024). Studies have emphasized the importance of teacher creativity and agency in shaping meaningful learning experiences within diverse educational contexts (Hu et al., 2024; Yildirim & Yilmaz, 2023). These findings suggest that resource limitations may simultaneously function as challenges and opportunities for professional growth.

Although previous studies have examined classroom quality, teacher creativity, resilience, emotional labor, and professional competence in early childhood education, limited attention has been given to how teachers personally experience and interpret the process of teaching in classrooms with limited learning media. Studies on early childhood learning media tend to focus on the development and effectiveness of instructional media (Novia et al., 2026; Tamiyati & Handayani, 2025; Wahyudi et al., 2026) or on issues related to resource availability and educational facilities (Joni et al., 2025; Nisa et al., 2025). As a result, there remains a limited understanding of how teachers make sense of their daily experiences, emotions, challenges, and adaptations while working in resource-constrained classroom environments. To date, no known study has applied Interpretative

Phenomenological Analysis to specifically capture how kindergarten teachers subjectively experience and make meaning of teaching under conditions of limited learning media within the Indonesian Raudhatul Athfal (RA) context. This study addresses that gap by offering an idiographic, first-person account of teachers' lived realities, an approach that moves beyond the predominantly quantitative or media-development focus of prior research in this area (Novia et al., 2026; Tamiyati & Handayani, 2025; Wahyudi et al., 2026), and thereby offers a novel empirical and methodological contribution to the early childhood education literature.

Understanding teachers' lived experiences is important because it provides deeper insight into the meanings teachers attach to their professional practices and the ways they respond to contextual challenges. From a phenomenological perspective, examining lived experience allows researchers to explore how individuals interpret and construct meaning from everyday situations (Skehill, 2022). Such an approach is particularly relevant for understanding the complex realities faced by early childhood educators who work under conditions of limited resources.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers teaching in classrooms with limited learning media. Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, the study seeks to understand how teachers perceive, experience, and respond to resource limitations in their daily professional practice. By focusing on teachers' subjective experiences, this study offers a novel phenomenological contribution that has not been previously documented in the Indonesian early childhood education literature, by illuminating the emotional, pedagogical, and professional dimensions of teaching in resource-constrained settings, and by tracing how these experiences evolve from constraint toward professional transformation.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore kindergarten teachers' lived experiences in classrooms with limited learning media. IPA was selected because it focuses on how individuals make sense of significant personal and professional experiences through detailed examination of their narratives (Smith et al., n.d.; Tuffour, 2017).

The study was conducted in June 2026 at RA Al Hidayah, Kedungkelor Village, Warureja District, Tegal Regency, Central Java, Indonesia. The site was selected purposively because preliminary observations indicated persistent limitations in instructional media, requiring teachers to frequently utilize self-developed and improvised learning materials.

Prior to data collection, the researcher maintained reflexive notes to document personal assumptions and enhance interpretative transparency throughout the study. Following phenomenological research procedures, the study involved participant selection, data collection, transcription, IPA analysis, trustworthiness verification, and reporting of findings (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The overall procedure is presented in Figure 1.

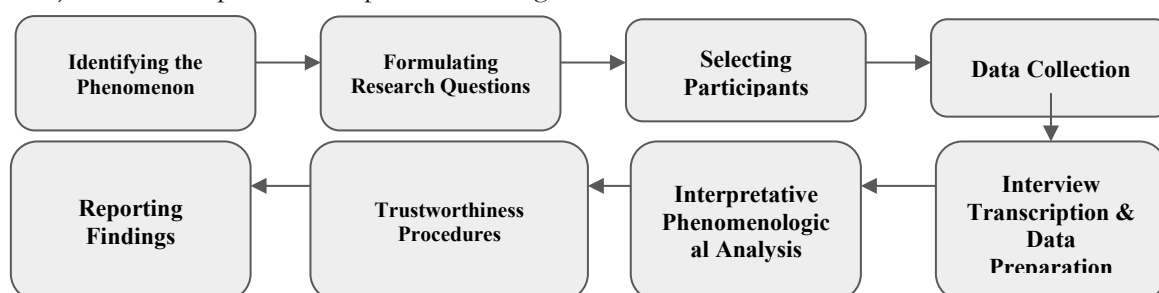


Figure 1. Research Procedure

Participants and Data Collection

Participants were selected using purposive sampling because phenomenological studies require information-rich individuals who have direct experience with the phenomenon being investigated and are capable of articulating their experiences in detail (Creswell & Poth, 2017). A sample of four participants is consistent with IPA's idiographic commitment, which prioritizes depth of analysis over breadth of representation, and falls within the recommended range of three to six participants for IPA studies (Smith et al., 2009). The participants consisted of all four actively serving kindergarten teachers at RA Al Hidayah, Kedungkelor Village, Warureja District, Tegal Regency, whose demographic profiles are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Demographic Profile of Participants*

Code	Gender	Age	Education	Teaching Experience	Position
P1	Female	36	S1 BK	9 years	Head Teacher
P2	Female	34	SMA	3 years	Class Teacher
P3	Female	28	S1	2 years	Class Teacher
P4	Female	24	S1 Teknologi Pangan	1 year	Class Teacher

The inclusion criteria for participant selection were as follows: (1) actively serving as a kindergarten teacher at RA Al Hidayah, (2) having a minimum of one year of teaching experience, and (3) having direct experience managing learning activities under conditions of limited instructional media. Willingness to participate voluntarily was established separately as an ethical safeguard and communicated through the informed consent process.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. Semi-structured interviewing is widely recommended in IPA studies because it allows participants to express their lived experiences in their own words while providing opportunities for the researcher to explore emerging meanings and interpretations (Smith et al., n.d.; Tuffour, 2017). The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions focusing on five thematic areas: (1) teachers' daily experiences when learning media was unavailable or insufficient, (2) challenges encountered during instructional activities, (3) adaptive strategies employed to overcome resource limitations, (4) available institutional support, and (5) personal reflections on teaching practices in such contexts. Table 2 presents sample questions from the interview protocol.

Table 2. *Sample Interview Questions by Thematic Area*

Theme	Sample Interview Questions
Daily Experience with Limited Media	Can you describe a typical day of teaching when the learning media you needed was unavailable or insufficient? How did it make you feel?
Challenges Encountered	What are the most significant difficulties you face when teaching with limited learning media? Can you give a specific example?
Adaptive Strategies	How do you adapt your instructional methods or materials when the resources you need are not available? Can you walk me through a situation where you had to improvise?
Institutional Support	What kind of support—if any—do you receive from your institution or colleagues in dealing with limited learning media? Do you feel that support is sufficient?
Personal Reflections	Looking back on your experiences, how do you think teaching with limited media has shaped you as a teacher? What would you want others to understand about this experience?

Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted face-to-face at RA Al Hidayah during June 2026. All interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to ensure participants could express their experiences naturally and without linguistic constraint. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity of

participants' accounts. Field notes were also maintained throughout the interview process to document contextual information, participant expressions, and non-verbal observations that could enrich data interpretation (Palacios & Simons, 2021).

In addition, brief classroom observations were conducted before and after interviews to provide contextual understanding of the availability and use of learning media within the school environment. These observations were not treated as primary data but served to support interpretation and contextualization of interview findings.

Data were analyzed using the six-stage IPA procedure proposed by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2022). Analysis began with repeated reading of interview transcripts, followed by initial noting and the development of emergent themes. Related themes within each transcript were then clustered into broader conceptual categories. The analytical process was repeated for each participant individually before conducting cross-case analysis to identify patterns of convergence and divergence across participants' experiences. Through this iterative process, superordinate themes and subordinate themes representing teachers' lived experiences were generated.

Throughout the analysis, the researcher maintained analytical memos and reflexive notes to support transparency and interpretative rigor (Smith et al., 2022; Tuffour, 2017).

Trustworthiness was established through the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was enhanced through member checking, whereby participants reviewed summaries of interview data and preliminary interpretations. Dependability was supported through an audit trail documenting all stages of data collection and analysis. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive journaling to monitor potential researcher bias. Transferability was addressed by providing detailed descriptions of the research setting, participants, and analytical procedures, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Results

The analysis of participants' narratives yielded four interconnected themes that together illuminate the complex reality of teaching in classrooms with limited learning media: (1) Encountering the Realities of Limited Learning Media, (2) Navigating Emotional Challenges Through Professional Commitment, (3) Transforming Limitations into Creativity and Innovation, and (4) Growing Through Adversity: Professional Learning and Transformation. Together, these four themes trace a recursive trajectory from constraint to transformation, reflecting the overlapping instructional, emotional, adaptive, and developmental dimensions of teachers' everyday professional lives.

Encountering the Realities of Limited Learning Media

The first theme captures teachers' daily encounters with the acute scarcity, lack of variety, and limited accessibility of instructional media in their classrooms. Across all participants, limited learning media was experienced not merely as an absence of physical tools, but as an immediate pedagogical barrier that hindered instructional delivery, weakened classroom engagement, and constrained the facilitation of concrete learning experiences.

Participants highlighted that teaching without adequate learning media often forced them to fall back on verbal instruction and repetitive lecturing, which frequently failed to capture the interest of young learners. P1 described this daily instructional constraint:

“The available learning media are still very limited. Sometimes I have to explain lessons only through verbal explanations because there are no supporting materials. Some children become less interested and find it difficult to understand the lesson.”

Similarly, P2 emphasized how resource scarcity required constant, ad-hoc instructional adjustments:

“There are times when the media needed for a lesson are not available. We have to adjust using whatever materials are available, but the learning process is not always as effective as we expect.”

Participants voiced strong concerns regarding the impact of these limitations on children's comprehension, particularly when teaching foundational or abstract concepts. The lack of manipulatives and interactive aids directly limited opportunities for hands-on exploration. P4 expressed her persistent apprehension regarding learning outcomes:

“Sometimes I feel that the learning process is not optimal because the media are limited. I worry that children do not fully understand the lesson when there are not enough materials to support learning.”

Navigating Emotional Challenges Through Professional Commitment

The second theme reflects the internal, affective dimensions experienced by the teachers. Participants frequently experienced confusion, anxiety, frustration, and self-doubt when classroom resources fell short of supporting their instructional intentions.

When confronted with sudden resource shortages, teachers initially experienced professional uncertainty regarding how to deliver lessons effectively. P1 articulated this internal tension:

“Sometimes I feel confused when the media needed for learning are unavailable. I have to think of other ways to explain the material, but I am not always sure whether the children fully understand.”

P2 shared a similar concern regarding instructional effectiveness and student attainment:

“There are moments when I feel worried because the available materials are very limited. I wonder whether the learning activities are interesting enough and whether the children can achieve the expected learning outcomes.”

Participants often internalized classroom difficulties—such as child disengagement or confusion—interpreting them as indicators of their own pedagogical shortcomings rather than purely institutional limitations. However, these negative emotions did not result in professional withdrawal or burnout. Instead, teachers consistently demonstrated emotional resilience, driven by a deep sense of moral and professional responsibility toward the children's growth and well-being. Children's enthusiasm, responsiveness, and developmental milestones served as vital counterweights that sustained their dedication.

Transforming Limitations into Creativity and Innovation

The third theme illustrates how participants actively adapted to material shortages by developing alternative learning media and modifying instructional methodologies. Rather than remaining passive in the face of constraints, teachers exercised professional agency through improvisation, low-cost media production, and pedagogical adaptation.

Teachers systematically utilized locally available, recycled, and natural materials—such as bottle caps, cardboard, pebbles, seeds, and popsicle sticks—to create functional instructional media. P4 explained her approach to material repurposing:

“I often use bottle caps, popsicle sticks, pebbles, and seeds. Bottle caps can be turned into flowers, while pebbles can be used for counting activities. After painting the pebbles in different colors, the children became much more interested in using them.”

P1 similarly shared how low-cost materials supported early literacy:

“I made alphabet media from bottle caps and paper. The children used them to recognize letters and arrange simple words.”

In addition to physical materials, teachers expanded their instructional repertoires through performance-based and interactive techniques, including expressive storytelling, role play, rhythmic singing, and classroom games. P3 explained:

“When media are unavailable, I make storytelling more interesting by using facial expressions, gestures, and voice intonation so that children can still understand the lesson.”

This creative process was supported by informal learning and professional collaboration. Teachers actively sought inspiration from digital platforms (e.g., YouTube and social media) and shared instructional ideas with colleagues. P3 noted:

“I often learn from social media, YouTube, and other teachers. Many ideas for creating learning media come from there.”

Growing Through Adversity: Professional Learning and Transformation

The final theme captures the long-term developmental trajectory of the teachers. Sustained engagement with resource constraints fostered a heightened sense of professional competence, self-efficacy, and a fundamental shift in pedagogical philosophy.

Participants reflected that overcoming continuous classroom hurdles enabled them to become more reflective, autonomous, and adaptive problem-solvers. P3 stated:

“I feel that I have learned many new things. Because of these limitations, I have become more creative and more capable of finding solutions when problems arise.”

P4 echoed this sentiment:

“The limitations have made me think more creatively. I have learned that meaningful learning can still happen even when we use simple materials.”

Crucially, participants experienced an epistemological and professional shift regarding the essence of high-quality early childhood education. Teachers moved away from equating educational quality strictly with expensive, commercially manufactured media toward prioritizing interactive, responsive, and child-centered pedagogy. P2 articulated this realization:

“I used to think that good teaching required complete learning media. Now I realize that what matters most is whether children are engaged, enjoy learning, and understand the lesson.”

P1 summarized this perspective:

“Professionalism is not determined by how many learning materials we have. It depends on how teachers use what is available to support children's learning.”

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that teachers' lived experiences of teaching with limited learning media unfold as a progressive movement from constraint to transformation, a pattern that can be meaningfully interpreted through existing theoretical frameworks and recent empirical literature.

The instructional and emotional difficulties captured in the first two themes align with the broader understanding that learning materials constitute a fundamental component of structural classroom quality (Godoy et al., 2025), and that teaching in early childhood settings inherently involves substantial emotional labor (Dickerson et al., 2025; Mukhlis et al., 2025). Participants' experiences of confusion, frustration, and self doubt when instructional resources were unavailable mirror Mukhlis' (2025) phenomenological account of Indonesian early childhood educators, who similarly regulate and manage emotional strain to sustain professional interactions. This suggests that

resource scarcity does not merely constrain pedagogy; it activates an emotional labor process in which teachers must continuously negotiate professional responsibility against material limitation.

The third and fourth themes, concerning creativity, innovation, and professional growth, are well explained by the concept of teacher agency. Hu et al. (2024) argue that teachers actively shape their professional practices through adaptation, initiative, and job crafting rather than passively responding to workplace conditions; the participants' repurposing of everyday materials and redesign of pedagogical strategies strongly exemplifies this agentic process. Their experiences also resonate with Raven and Wenner's (2023) finding that meaningful early learning depends less on the sophistication of instructional materials than on how teachers facilitate children's active engagement, a pattern clearly echoed in P2's realization that what matters most is whether children are engaged rather than resource completeness.

Participants' growing sense of confidence and professional identity further reflects resilience theory as applied to early childhood education. Yang et al. (2025) found that resilience enhances teachers' professional wellbeing through its association with self efficacy and pedagogical competence; similarly, Ciuciu (2023) contends that teacher agency sustains professional engagement and job satisfaction even in the absence of ideal working conditions. The present findings extend these arguments by showing that resilience and agency in this study were not abstract dispositions but were forged experientially, through repeated, situated encounters with material constraint, consistent with Palupi and Sugito's (2025) observation that professional competence among early childhood educators develops through adaptive, reflective engagement with contextual challenges rather than through formal training alone.

From an interpretative phenomenological standpoint, these findings collectively demonstrate that resource limitation functions not only as a pedagogical constraint but as an existential and professional turning point, one through which teachers reconstruct their understanding of what constitutes effective, meaningful teaching. This reframing, from a resource centered to a child and process centered conception of teaching quality, represents a shift in professional philosophy rather than a mere coping mechanism.

The academic contribution of this study lies in extending the application of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to an underexplored context, Indonesian Raudhatul Athfal settings, thereby offering an idiographic, first person account that complements the predominantly quantitative and media development oriented literature on early childhood learning resources (Novia et al., 2026; Tamiyati & Handayani, 2025; Wahyudi et al., 2026). By empirically linking teacher agency, emotional labor, and resilience within a single interpretative framework, this study contributes a more integrated theoretical understanding of how material constraint is transformed into professional growth in early childhood education.

CONCLUSION

Teaching in classrooms with limited learning media is, fundamentally, a lived journey from constraint to transformation: rather than being merely obstructed by material scarcity, kindergarten teachers actively reinterpret it into a catalyst for resilience, creativity, and professional growth. This affirms that meaningful early childhood education rests not solely on resource availability but equally on teachers' capacity to adapt, innovate, and remain committed to children's development. As the findings are drawn from four teachers within a single institutional setting, they are not intended for statistical generalization; future research should examine similar experiences across diverse institutional and geographical contexts, and consider complementary methods such as longitudinal or comparative designs to further illuminate how resource constraints shape early childhood teachers' professional lives over time.

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