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The Dilemma Faced by Early Childhood Educators in Meeting Demands for Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Young Children at RA Al-Mukhlisin

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the demands for reading, writing, and arithmetic (calistung) faced by early childhood education teachers, examine their professional dilemmas, and identify the strategies used to address these demands at RA Al-Mukhlisin. This research employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive design. Data were collected through classroom observations, structured interviews with early childhood teachers, and documentation. The findings reveal that calistung demands primarily arise from parental expectations and differing perceptions of school learning targets. These demands create a professional dilemma for teachers who must balance academic expectations with children's developmental readiness, interests, and learning needs. Teachers address these challenges through play-based learning, songs, pictures, persuasive approaches, attention to children's readiness, collaboration with fellow teachers, and communication with parents. The study highlights the importance of cooperation between PAUD institutions, elementary schools, and parents to ensure a gradual and developmentally appropriate introduction to calistung without placing excessive academic pressure on young children.

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INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education plays a crucial role as the foundation for shaping children's character, moral values, social-emotional development, physical-motor skills, and cognitive abilities through a play-based learning approach. However, in practice, children's transition from Early Childhood Education to elementary school is often marked by various challenges and structural pressures. Most ECE institutions and parents still view reading, writing, and arithmetic skills as the primary indicators of academic success and an absolute prerequisite for admission to prestigious elementary schools. This phenomenon has shifted the focus of learning which should be enjoyable toward a rigid, rote memorization based academic

approach.

A number of previous studies have shown that the pressure to master reading, writing, and arithmetic at an early age is often inconsistent with children's cognitive development, which is still in the preoperational stage. Forcing academic material that is not appropriate for a child's developmental age has the potential to cause long-term negative effects, ranging from learning burnout and a loss of intrinsic motivation to academic stress in early childhood. On the other hand, early childhood educators or teachers often find themselves caught in a dilemma. Based on empirical studies conducted by Wulansuci (2021) and Hodeniah et al. (2026), teachers face a conflict between the pragmatic demands of parents and school administrators who want children to be proficient in reading, writing, and arithmetic and their professional ideals.

Although various studies have highlighted the negative impacts of academic pressure and the dynamics of the transition from early childhood education to elementary school, in-depth research that explores the nature of professional dilemmas and the adaptive strategies employed by frontline educators to bridge these demands still requires comprehensive development. Given this gap, this study is crucial to uncover the realities behind institutional pressures and social expectations that often disregard the essential rights of young children. Therefore, this study aims to explore the types of demands faced by teachers, analyze the professional dilemmas experienced in teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic, and describe the adaptive strategies teachers use to meet these demands without violating the principles of early childhood development.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive research design. This approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the dilemmas faced by early childhood education (ECE) teachers in meeting the demands for teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic (known as *calistung*) to young children. The informants for this study are ECE teachers who are directly involved in the instructional process. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, based on the relevance of their experience and their direct involvement with the research focus.

Data collection techniques included observation, structured interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted directly in the classroom to examine *calistung* activities, the teaching methods employed by the teachers, children's responses, and any challenges that arose during instruction. Interviews were conducted with ECE teachers to gather information regarding curriculum and school requirements, parental expectations, directives from school principals, the dilemmas encountered during teaching, and the strategies teachers use to address these demands. The data obtained were then analyzed through the processes of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The validity of the data was verified using methodological triangulation by comparing the findings from observations, interviews, and documentation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Forms of Calistung Demands Faced by Early Childhood Education (PAUD) Teachers

The interview results indicate that the calistung (reading, writing, and arithmetic) demands faced by teachers primarily stem from parental expectations and learning targets understood or implemented within the school environment. Both teachers stated that parents expect children to have reading, writing, and arithmetic skills before continuing their education to elementary school. These expectations often cause calistung skills to be viewed as one of the primary indicators of a child's readiness to enter the next educational level.

Nevertheless, there are differences in emphasis between the two informants regarding calistung targets at school. Teacher B2 explained that learning is directed more toward the gradual introduction of letters, numbers, and simple arithmetic operations, rather than demanding all children to achieve fluent reading and writing skills. Meanwhile, Teacher B3 expressed an expectation that children should master calistung by the time they graduate from kindergarten; at the very least, children are expected to be capable of basic arithmetic. Teacher B3 also linked this expectation to the concern that elementary school material can be quite challenging for children who lack foundational calistung skills.

These differing statements should be understood as variations in teachers' views and experiences, rather than as evidence that the school establishes a single, uniform formal policy. However, both interviews show that parental expectations and concerns regarding elementary school demands influence teachers' decisions in planning instruction.

Table 1. Forms of Calistung Demands Faced by Teachers

Source of Demand	Interview Findings	Implications for Learning
Parents	Parents expect children to possess reading, writing, and arithmetic skills before entering elementary school.	Teachers need to explain PAUD learning objectives and child development to parents.
School Targets/Expectations	Teacher B2 emphasizes the gradual introduction of calistung; Teacher B3 expresses the expectation that children acquire calistung skills upon kindergarten graduation.	Teachers face differing emphases when determining learning achievements.
Transition to Elementary School	Teacher B3 considers elementary school material to be quite challenging and hopes children are equipped with calistung foundations.	Concerns regarding elementary school readiness may encourage the strengthening of calistung activities in kindergarten.

Source: Interview and observation results, processed by the researcher (2026).

These findings align with Wulandari and Fachrani (2023), who explain that some parents view calistung skills as a measure of a PAUD institution's success as well as preparation for entering elementary school. Such perceptions can generate demands regarding children's learning outcomes. Wulansuci (2021) also found that parental expectations and pressures from subsequent educational levels are factors that drive calistung instruction to become more prominent in PAUD institutions. Consequently, the demands experienced by teachers at RA Al-Mukhlisin illustrate issues that have also been identified in previous studies.

2. Teachers' Professional Dilemmas in Calistung Instruction

Professional dilemmas arise when teachers strive to meet parental expectations and prepare children for elementary school, while simultaneously recognizing that PAUD instruction must take into account the readiness, interests, and developmental characteristics of each child. Teacher B2 stated that calistung achievements should not be the sole measure of a child's success in PAUD. According to Teacher B2, independence, responsibility, discipline, and mental readiness are also crucial aspects that need to be developed.

On the other hand, Teacher B3 revealed that a child's inability in calistung can make them feel as though they have not yet succeeded in teaching. This statement indicates that learning outcome demands are not only related to children's achievements but can also affect how teachers evaluate their professional success. Teachers are in a complex position: if they place too much emphasis on calistung, instruction risks neglecting children's play needs; conversely, if calistung is not sufficiently provided, teachers worry that children will experience difficulties when entering elementary school.

This dilemma is also reflected in teachers' efforts to cope with differences in children's abilities. Teacher B2 explained that children's achievements are not always uniform. For example, when numbers are introduced up to ten, a child who can only recognize numbers one through five is still appreciated according to their capability. This demonstrates teachers' awareness that children's learning processes take place gradually. However, observations during one learning session showed that the adaptation of calistung activities to individual children's abilities was not clearly visible during observation. Therefore, a discrepancy exists between the strategies described in the interviews and the practices observed in a single learning session. This discrepancy cannot be immediately concluded as a permanent pattern, but it serves as an important note for instructional evaluation.

Observations in Group B showed letter and number recognition activities during opening sessions, followed by writing letters or words in special books after theme-based activities. During reading and writing activities, several children appeared bored. Observation notes also indicated that children had difficulty maintaining focus. These findings illustrate that calistung activities need to be designed with consideration for children's responses, rather than merely focusing on the completion of material targets.

Table 2. Forms of Teachers' Professional Dilemmas

Aspect of Dilemma	Description of Findings	Significance for Teachers
Parental Expectations vs. Children's Needs	Parents expect children to master calistung, whereas teachers must pay attention to children's readiness and interests.	Teachers need to balance communication with parents and developmentally appropriate teaching principles.
Measures of Teaching Success	Teacher B3 feels that children's calistung skills are tied to the evaluation of their own teaching success.	Academic targets can impose professional pressure on teachers.
Differences in Children's Abilities	Teacher B2 notes that number recognition targets can be adapted to children's abilities; observations in one session did not clearly show this adaptation.	Lesson planning and execution must be continuously evaluated to remain responsive to children's abilities.

Readiness for Elementary School	Teachers worry that children will face elementary school materials considered quite challenging.	PAUD-elementaryschool continuity is needed so that the burden of preparation does not fall solely on PAUD.

Source: Interview and observation results, processed by the researcher (2026).

These findings align with Nasikhah, Sholihah, and Purnamasari (2025), which indicate a conflict between PAUD teachers' idealism to provide meaningful learning experiences through play and the academic demands of the environment. Wulansuci (2021) also elaborates that demands placed on teachers can influence the implementation of learning. In this study, teachers' dilemmas are manifested through differing orientations among informants, concerns regarding children's readiness for elementary school, and teachers' feelings when children's calistung achievements fall short of expectations.

3. Teachers' Adaptive Strategies in Facing Calistung Demands

Although facing calistung demands, both teachers demonstrate efforts to manage instruction so that it remains acceptable to children. The strategies mentioned include utilizing play activities, songs, pictures, physical games, persuasive approaches, adapting to children's moods, and communicating with parents. Teacher B2 explained that the introduction of letters and numbers is carried out gradually through engaging activities, such as playing and singing. Teachers also utilize pictures, physical games, and coding activities as variations.

Teacher B3 stated that when children are unwilling to participate in activities, teachers attempt to persuade them through songs or games. Teachers also wait until children's moods improve before starting activities. Furthermore, cooperation with assistant teachers is established to support instructional execution. These strategies show that teachers are not only focused on delivering material but also strive to build children's engagement in learning activities.

Another strategy is implemented through communication with parents. Teacher B2 stated that developmental evaluations conducted every three months and consultations provide opportunities to explain that PAUD success is not measured solely by calistung abilities. Teachers also provide suggestions for simple activities that can be performed at home according to the child's needs, such as squeezing materials to support fine motor readiness before writing activities. This communication is crucial so that stimulation at home and school can mutually support each other without imposing uniform targets on all children.

Table 3. Teachers' Strategies in Facing Calistung Demands

Strategy	Implementation Based on Interviews	Objective
Learning Through Play	Utilizing games, pictures, physical games, and coding activities.	Making the introduction of letter and number concepts more engaging for children.
Songs and Persuasive Approaches	Using songs to introduce letter sounds and persuading children to participate in activities.	Enhancing children's engagement without coercion.
Paying Attention to Children's Readiness	Teacher B2 accepts children's progress gradually; Teacher B3 waits for children's moods to improve before starting activities.	Providing space for differences in children's abilities and conditions.

Collaboration with Fellow Teachers	Teacher B3 collaborates with assistant teachers to handle children and carry out activities.	Supporting classroom management and instructional implementation.
Communication with Parents	Periodic evaluations, consultations, and suggestions for simple home stimulation activities.	Aligning understanding regarding PAUD objectives and building stimulation continuity.

Source: Interview and observation results, processed by the researcher (2026).

These strategies align with Nasikhah et al. (2025), who found that teachers endeavor to combine academic activities with play and adopt persuasive approaches toward parents. Another similarity is seen in the importance of learning that remains attentive to children's needs. In the context of RA Al-Mukhlisin, teacher strategies have not completely eliminated calistung demands, but serve as an adjustment so that the introduction of basic skills can take place in a more enjoyable and gradual manner.

4. The Need for Alignment in PAUD to Elementary School Learning Transitions

The interviews reveal that teachers' concerns regarding elementary school learning constitute one of the reasons for reinforcing calistung in kindergarten. Teacher B3 expressed the hope that learning demands in elementary school can be adjusted so that PAUD does not have to bear an excessive burden of academic preparation. This indicates that the calistung issue is not only related to classroom teaching practices but also concerns the continuity of learning between PAUD and elementary school.

Wulandari and Fachrani (2023) explain that the policy of a joyful PAUD-to-elementary school transition—which avoids making calistung tests an admission requirement for elementary school—is one of the efforts to rectify public misconceptions regarding PAUD objectives. The findings of this study reinforce the importance of communication among PAUD units, elementary schools, and parents. Children's readiness to enter elementary school must be understood more broadly, encompassing not only reading, writing, and arithmetic skills, but also independence, interaction skills, self-confidence, and readiness to adapt to a new learning environment.

Consequently, efforts to address calistung demands should not be placed solely on PAUD teachers. A shared understanding is required that the introduction of calistung at an early age must be conducted gradually while respecting children's readiness. Elementary schools also need to build transition processes that support the continuity of children's development, while parents need to obtain accurate information regarding PAUD learning achievements.

5. Synthesis of Research Findings

Based on the overall data, PAUD teachers' dilemmas in meeting calistung demands are shaped by the interplay between parental expectations, perceptions of school targets, and concerns regarding children's readiness to enter elementary school. This situation places teachers in a position to balance academic achievement demands with children's developmental needs. Teachers respond to this condition through play-based learning, persuasive approaches, attention to children's readiness, collaboration with peer teachers, and communication with parents.

Another important finding is the presence of differing views among teachers regarding calistung targets and discrepancies between interview descriptions and observations from a

single learning session. This indicates that instructional practices need to be continuously examined through teacher reflection and observation of children's responses. This research is not intended to conclude that all children experience academic pressure, but rather indicates signs of boredom and difficulty focusing during certain activities that warrant educators' attention.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research conducted at RA Al-Mukhlisin, it can be concluded that the demands for early childhood reading, writing, and arithmetic skills (calistung) create professional dilemmas for Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers. These dilemmas arise from parental expectations, differing perspectives on learning targets, and teachers' concerns regarding children's readiness to enter elementary school. This situation places teachers in a challenging position, as they must balance academic expectations with the principles of early childhood education, which prioritize children's needs, readiness, and developmental stages.

The findings indicate that teachers have different perspectives on the achievement of reading, writing, and arithmetic skills. Some teachers emphasize the gradual introduction of letters and numbers, while others expect children to have acquired basic literacy and numeracy skills before entering elementary school. To address these demands, teachers implement various learning strategies, including play-based activities, singing, the use of visual learning materials, persuasive approaches, and communication with parents. However, classroom observations revealed that some children still showed signs of boredom and difficulty maintaining their attention during reading and writing activities. These findings suggest that the implementation of early literacy and numeracy instruction requires continuous evaluation and adjustment based on each child's abilities and responses.

Therefore, this study emphasizes that introducing reading, writing, and arithmetic skills in early childhood education is appropriate as long as the learning process respects the principles of learning through play and does not impose the same achievement targets on every child. Furthermore, collaboration among teachers, parents, and elementary schools is essential to develop a shared understanding that children's readiness for further education is not determined solely by academic abilities, but also includes social-emotional development, independence, self-confidence, and emotional readiness. Thus, the success of early childhood education should be viewed as a holistic developmental process rather than merely the achievement of reading, writing, and arithmetic skills.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There are no conflicts of interest to report.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Salwa Agnian contributed to the conceptualization of the research and conducted the data collection in the field. Wardah Mujayanah was responsible for drafting the introduction. Sulis Tiawati developed the research findings into the discussion section. Rira Yuliani was responsible for drafting the conclusion and provided financial support for the writing and publication process. Meanwhile, Tepi Mulyaniapi supported the manuscript preparation process, providing guidance, mentorship, and motivation to the authors until the completion of the article.

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