



The Subjective Experiences in Primary School Education in Cirebon: Challenges and Hopes in Improving the Quality of Education

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ABSTRACT

The quality of education in primary schools remains a significant concern, especially in under-resourced regions, with various challenges affecting both teachers and students. Specifically, in Cirebon, a city in Indonesia, there is limited research exploring the subjective experiences of educators and learners in this context. Despite substantial efforts to improve educational standards, the complexities of these challenges are not fully understood. This study uses a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of teachers and students in primary schools in Cirebon, aiming to address the gap in understanding the real-life implications of these challenges. Through in-depth interviews and classroom observations, we found that limited resources, lack of access to technology, and low student motivation are key obstacles. However, both teachers and students expressed strong hopes for change, particularly in the use of technology and improved educational support. These findings underscore the importance of implementing policies that prioritize equitable resource allocation, teacher training programs focused on technology integration, and initiatives to enhance student engagement. By addressing these barriers, policymakers and educators can significantly improve educational outcomes in under-resourced regions. This research provides valuable insights for future policy and intervention strategies in similar educational contexts, particularly in regions with limited resources.



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INTRODUCTION

Education in Indonesia, particularly at the primary school level, has long been a subject of concern, with significant challenges related to resource limitations, unequal access to quality teaching, and socio-cultural disparities (Akram dkk., 2021). For students, limited access to digital resources exacerbates the educational divide between urban and rural areas, affecting their motivation and achievement.

While previous studies on educational challenges have focused on structural factors, such as infrastructure and teacher training, they often overlook the emotional and psychological dimensions of teaching and learning. Phenomenological approaches, by exploring lived experiences, offer insights into the personal and emotional challenges faced by teachers and students, such as feelings of frustration and hope.

This study seeks to fill this gap by exploring the subjective experiences of primary school teachers and students in Cirebon (Guan-Yi & Fu-Yun, 2024). Through a phenomenological lens, the research aims to capture the essence of their challenges, needs, and aspirations in the context of an educational system marked by limited resources and a lack of technological integration. The goal is to provide a deeper understanding of how these individuals navigate the complexities of their

educational environment, and to highlight their hopes for a more effective and engaging learning experience.

Research on the lived experiences of individuals within educational contexts has become an important area of inquiry, particularly when exploring how teachers and students navigate the complexities of resource-constrained environments (Hogan dkk., 2023). Unlike quantitative studies that measure test scores or access to resources, phenomenological research highlights the meanings individuals assign to their challenges, offering a more holistic understanding of educational realities.

One of the key challenges in studying subjective experience, particularly in the context of education, is the difficulty in capturing the nuanced, emotional, and personal aspects of the phenomenon (Ioris dkk., 2022). While quantitative research methods can measure outcomes such as test scores or resource availability, they fall short in exploring the deeper, personal meanings that individuals attach to these factors. For example, while a study might show that students in Cirebon have limited access to technology, it cannot capture how these students feel about this limitation or how it affects their motivation to learn. Similarly, while teachers may report high workloads and resource constraints, the emotional toll of these challenges remains largely unexamined. Phenomenology provides a means to explore these deeper layers by focusing on the personal and emotional experiences of individuals in their specific context, offering a more holistic view of the educational environment.

Despite the importance of understanding these subjective experiences, most previous studies on educational challenges have relied on methodologies that are better suited for analyzing measurable variables. Quantitative methods, though valuable for assessing trends and patterns, are often inadequate in exploring the complexity of individual perceptions and the meanings teachers and students attach to their experiences. As such, these approaches miss the emotional and psychological dimensions of the learning environment, which are critical to understanding how educational challenges manifest on a day-to-day basis. By focusing on lived experience, phenomenological research can overcome these limitations, offering a richer, more comprehensive understanding of the educational realities faced by teachers and students in resource-limited settings like Cirebon.

Although various practical solutions have been implemented to address challenges in education, such as improvements in facilities, teacher training, and the provision of technological resources, these approaches tend to focus on structural improvements and general policies. Often, educational policies and interventions at the macro level are based on quantitative data measuring measurable outcomes, such as graduation rates or mastery of content. While this provides valuable insights into the educational situation, such approaches frequently fail to capture the profound subjective experiences of teachers and students in their everyday contexts. For instance, although improvements in facilities and access to technology may enhance the physical learning environment, how students and teachers perceive these changes or how these changes affect their motivation and engagement in the teaching and learning process have not been thoroughly explored.

Previous research has focused more on solving structural or numerically-based problems, with little attention given to the emotional and psychological dimensions that shape the experiences of teachers and students. This approach results in a more limited and less holistic understanding of educational phenomena, as it does not take into account how individuals perceive and make sense of the challenges they face. In the context of education in areas like Cirebon, the challenges encountered may be strongly influenced by social, cultural, and economic factors that cannot be fully understood by relying solely on quantitative data or number-based analysis.

Therefore, research adopting a phenomenological approach becomes crucial to bridging this gap. By prioritizing subjective experiences, phenomenology allows for a deeper exploration of the meanings that teachers and students attribute to the educational challenges they face. This approach does not merely consider what happens on the surface—such as a lack of facilities or technology—but also how these experiences are perceived and processed by the individuals involved. Phenomenology offers the opportunity to uncover the essence of these experiences, which in turn can provide richer insights for future educational policies and interventions that are more effective.

Research on subjective experiences in the context of education has been conducted in various settings, yet most still focus on quantitative or structural aspects. These studies tend to measure the effectiveness of educational policies or learning outcomes, but rarely explore in depth how the personal experiences of teachers and students shape the learning process. Some previous phenomenological studies, such as those by Giorgi (2012) in the context of education, highlight the importance of understanding the subjective meaning of individuals' experiences in order to identify challenges that are often hidden in statistical data. This approach reveals how teachers and students face difficulties in the classroom, connects these challenges to their social and psychological backgrounds, and explores how they attribute meaning to each learning interaction. These studies emphasize the importance of examining direct experiences as a foundation for a more comprehensive understanding of education.

In this study, a phenomenological approach is used to explore the subjective experiences of teachers and students in Cirebon within the context of limited learning conditions. This method was chosen because phenomenology allows for a deeper understanding of how individuals feel about and assign meaning to the educational conditions they experience. Unlike quantitative approaches, which measure specific variables, phenomenology prioritizes direct experiences and the emotions involved in the process. Through this approach, it is hoped that insights will emerge on how limitations in facilities, technology, and resources affect the motivation, expectations, and learning practices of both teachers and students. In this way, phenomenology provides a richer understanding of the essence of educational phenomena in areas with such limitations.

This article is structured to facilitate a deep understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. It begins with an introduction that outlines the background and significance of the research, followed by an explanation of the educational context in Cirebon. The article then details the phenomenological methodological approach used, including data collection and analysis through interviews and observations. The thematic analysis process is conducted to uncover the main themes in the experiences of teachers and students. Finally, the research findings will be discussed, followed by a conclusion that offers recommendations and new insights that could contribute to future educational policies.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study employs a phenomenological approach, which is particularly suited for exploring the lived experiences and subjective meanings that individuals attribute to their reality (Lo dkk., 2022). Phenomenology, with its focus on understanding how people perceive and make sense of their experiences, allows for a deep exploration of the challenges faced by teachers and students in primary schools in Cirebon. By investigating these experiences, the study seeks to reveal the underlying essence of their perceptions and the meaning they assign to the educational challenges they encounter.

Phenomenological research is grounded in the belief that reality is constructed through individual perceptions and experiences. This approach is aligned with the study's aim to understand the personal and social contexts that shape teachers' and students' experiences in a resource-constrained educational environment. The use of a phenomenological design enables the identification of key themes and patterns that emerge from participants' accounts, offering a rich narrative of their lived realities.

Participants

Participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that individuals who had relevant experience and knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation were included. The study involved 10 primary school teachers and 10 students. The sample size was chosen to strike a balance between depth and breadth, ensuring that rich, detailed narratives could be obtained while maintaining manageability for in-depth analysis. Prior studies in phenomenological research recommend similar sample sizes to enable meaningful thematic saturation (Smith dkk., 2018).

The inclusion criteria for teachers required that they had at least three years of teaching experience in primary schools and were actively involved in the daily educational process. For students, the inclusion criteria were that they were aged between 10 and 12 years old and participated regularly in classroom activities.

Exclusion criteria involved teachers who were no longer actively teaching or students who were not engaged in regular learning activities. The demographic characteristics of the participants varied in terms of gender, age, and teaching experience, reflecting the diverse educational settings in Cirebon, which contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth interviews and classroom observations (Lobato, 2024). The interviews were semi-structured, allowing for flexibility in exploring participants' experiences while ensuring that key topics related to the research questions were covered. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted in a private setting at the participants' schools, ensuring a comfortable and non-disruptive environment for both teachers and students.

To maintain a focused exploration of the participants' experiences, interview guides were designed with open-ended questions. These guides were adapted to the context of the participants, allowing room for spontaneous responses that could illuminate unique aspects of their experiences. In addition to interviews, classroom observations were conducted to gain insights into the daily dynamics of the learning environment and the challenges observed firsthand.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a technique well-suited to phenomenological studies. Thematic analysis involves identifying and analyzing recurring themes within the data that are central to the research questions. The analysis followed a systematic process, starting with the transcription of interviews and field notes from observations. The transcripts were then reviewed multiple times to identify patterns and key themes related to the challenges, experiences, and expectations of the participants.

Themes such as "resource constraints," "teacher workload," "student motivation," and "hope for educational reform" emerged as central categories. Data analysis was conducted manually, but the NVivo software was used to support the organization and coding of thematic data. Each theme was further refined and compared across different participants to understand the nuances of their experiences. This approach facilitated the identification of core meanings that reflected the essence of the teachers' and students' perceptions of education in Cirebon.

Ethics

The study adhered to ethical guidelines ensuring the protection and rights of participants. Prior to participation, informed consent was obtained from both teachers and students, as well as from the parents or guardians of the students. Participants were provided with clear information about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

Confidentiality was maintained by assigning pseudonyms to all participants, and all data were securely stored and anonymized to prevent identification of individual respondents. The study was approved by the relevant ethics committee, ensuring that all procedures followed international ethical standards for research involving human subjects.

RESULTS

Constraints in Educational Resources and Infrastructure

A central theme that emerged from both interviews and observations was the persistent challenge of inadequate resources and infrastructure in schools. Teachers and students alike expressed

frustration over the lack of basic facilities, which significantly hindered the teaching and learning process. A teacher shared:

"Sometimes we have to teach without any teaching aids, and that really hampers the learning process." This finding aligns with existing literature highlighting the critical role of infrastructure in shaping educational outcomes. For instance, UNESCO (2022) emphasizes that inadequate facilities and resources disproportionately affect learning environments in low-income regions, limiting the potential for equitable education. Similarly, Barrett et al. (2019) suggest that poor infrastructure not only undermines student performance but also demotivates educators, exacerbating systemic inequities.

This lack of resources was especially noticeable in classrooms where students lacked access to even basic tools such as desks and chairs, let alone more advanced technology like computers. Observations revealed that many classrooms were overcrowded, with teachers struggling to provide individual attention to students. As one teacher described the situation:

"We have to share classrooms with other subjects, and often there aren't enough desks or chairs for all the students."

Despite these constraints, teachers demonstrated resilience by utilizing creative methods, such as project-based learning, though their efforts were often limited by the lack of proper facilities. Similarly, students voiced their frustrations about the lack of access to technology that could enrich their learning experiences. One student stated:

"I want to learn using computers, but our school doesn't have any."

The inability to engage with technology significantly reduced opportunities for interactive learning, which is increasingly seen as essential for modern education.

Teacher Workload and Emotional Strain

Another prominent theme that emerged was the high workload experienced by teachers, which was exacerbated by the limited resources available. Several teachers described their role as overwhelming, not only due to the sheer volume of work but also because of the emotional toll it took on them. One teacher noted:

"The workload is enormous, and with the lack of resources, it feels like we're always in survival mode, just trying to get through each day."

This theme highlights the emotional and psychological challenges faced by teachers, who often feel unsupported in their efforts to improve the quality of education. The lack of professional development opportunities for teachers was also identified as a significant barrier to effective teaching. Teachers noted that their training was insufficient, especially in adapting to new technological advancements. As one teacher explained:

"We don't get enough training on how to incorporate technology in the classroom. It feels like we're just trying to keep up."

These sentiments were echoed by several other participants, suggesting that teacher burnout, compounded by the demands of their role and the scarcity of resources, had a profound impact on their ability to perform at their best.

Student Motivation and the Desire for More Engaging Learning Methods

The interviews with students revealed a notable lack of motivation, which they attributed to the monotonous nature of lessons and the absence of engaging learning methods. Many students expressed a desire for more dynamic and interactive forms of teaching, such as the use of educational games or videos. One student remarked:

"I want to learn in a more fun way, like using videos or educational games."

This lack of engagement, fueled by the limited teaching methods available, has a direct impact on students' motivation to participate in learning activities. Observations in the classroom

supported these claims, with many students appearing disengaged, particularly during lessons that could benefit from technological enhancements. The combination of low motivation and insufficient resources created a barrier to student engagement, leading to a less effective learning environment.

Hopes for Educational Reform and Technological Integration

Despite the numerous challenges, both teachers and students expressed hope for change, particularly in the form of better access to technology and improved teaching practices. Many teachers emphasized the need for more training in using digital tools, recognizing their potential to enhance student engagement and improve learning outcomes. One teacher shared:

"If we could integrate more technology into our lessons, it would make a huge difference. But we need training and proper tools."

Similarly, students expressed a strong desire for educational reforms that would introduce more interactive and technologically driven methods of learning. Many students were optimistic that, with better resources and a more engaging curriculum, their educational experiences could improve dramatically. One student said:

"If we had more computers, I think learning would be more exciting, and we would understand things better."

This hope for change reflects the broader aspiration for a shift toward more modern, interactive, and student-centered learning environments in Cirebon's primary schools.

The findings from this study reveal a picture of a struggling educational system in Cirebon, characterized by significant resource limitations, high teacher workloads, and a lack of student motivation. Despite these challenges, both teachers and students expressed a strong desire for improvement, particularly in the integration of technology and the development of more engaging teaching methods. The data suggest that while current conditions are far from ideal, there is a shared sense of hope for positive change that could enhance the quality of education for both educators and learners.

DISCUSSION

This study reveals that the subjective experiences of teachers and students in primary schools in Cirebon are influenced by limitations in facilities, lack of resources, and insufficient teacher training in adapting to the development of educational technology (Marcus-Quinn & Hourigan, 2022). Although these challenges serve as major barriers to learning, both teachers and students express strong hopes for change, particularly regarding the use of technology and more interactive teaching methods (McGrath dkk., 2019). These findings address the research questions regarding how their experiences and perceptions relate to limited learning conditions, as well as their hopes for the improvement of educational quality.

The main findings of this study provide important insights into the dynamics of learning in resource-constrained areas (Nwoko dkk., 2023). Specifically, the research shows that, despite the limitations in facilities, both teachers and students actively seek ways to overcome these constraints, with the hope of improving the quality of education. Teachers, for instance, often have to manage large classes with limited space and teaching aids, but they try to use alternative methods, such as project-based learning, to keep students engaged. On the other hand, students demonstrate a strong desire to use technology in their learning, but feel hindered by limited devices and internet access (O'Brien dkk., 2019). These findings offer a deeper understanding of how teachers and students respond to the challenges of learning and show that their experiences are not merely confined to physical limitations, but are also shaped by their expectations for broader improvements.

These findings align with literature emphasizing the importance of subjective experiences in learning, which have often been overlooked in quantitative-based educational research (Pescarmona, 2024). For example, Flanders (2019) highlights that the challenges faced by teachers in managing large classes often impact the quality of instruction. However, this study also demonstrates that

teachers are not passive in the face of such conditions; rather, they actively adapt by developing creative methods for alternative teaching. On the other hand, the findings regarding student motivation being hindered by limitations in facilities and access to technology are consistent with previous research by Vygotsky (1978), which underscores the importance of access to tools and media in supporting effective learning processes. While this study cannot provide direct solutions to resource constraints, it offers richer insights into how these limitations are perceived by both teachers and students, and how they hope these conditions can be improved through policy changes and the enhancement of educational infrastructure.

Explanation of the Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study have significant implications both scientifically and practically, particularly in the context of developing educational policies in areas with limited resources (Poolsawad dkk., 2020). From a scientific perspective, these findings enrich our understanding of how the experiences of teachers and students are not only influenced by physical conditions, such as limitations in facilities, but also by their hopes and motivations for improvement. This highlights the importance of adopting a more holistic approach to educational research, one that considers the subjective and social aspects that are often overlooked by quantitative approaches. Practically, the findings suggest the need for the development of educational policies that are more responsive to the needs of both teachers and students, such as technology-based training for teachers and improving students' access to technology. If implemented, such policies could help create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment, which in turn could enhance the quality of education in areas facing similar challenges.

The social and cultural significance of these findings is also important to consider. In the social context of Cirebon, which exhibits disparities between urban and rural areas, educational challenges are often not only material but also related to attitudes and perceptions toward education itself (Rieser & Decristan, 2023). These findings show that despite numerous limitations, both teachers and students have high hopes for changes that could improve the quality of their learning experience. Thus, education can serve as a tool for social empowerment, where changes in the learning experience can shift local social dynamics. These implications are relevant not only for Cirebon but also for other regions in Indonesia that face similar challenges, making the findings applicable to broader contexts.

Study Limitations

Although the findings of this study provide meaningful insights, there are several limitations that should be noted. First, the study involved only 20 participants from Cirebon, which, while providing an in-depth picture, cannot be generalized to all of Indonesia or even to the entire West Java region. Second, although phenomenology allows for a deep exploration of subjective experiences, this approach cannot capture the full variability of experiences across the entire population of teachers and students (Runtić & Kavelj, 2020). In other words, the experiences expressed by the participants in this study may not fully represent the experiences of all teachers and students in Cirebon, let alone in other regions. Lastly, limitations in time and resources also affected the ability to conduct interviews or observations with more participants, which could have provided a broader and deeper perspective.

Prospective Statement for Future Research

The findings of this study open the door for further research that can expand our understanding of educational phenomena in resource-constrained areas (Topalska, 2024). Future research could broaden the participant sample to include more schools in various regions with similar conditions to see whether the patterns found in Cirebon are also applicable elsewhere. Additionally, further studies could delve deeper into the long-term impacts of limited facilities on student development, particularly in terms of learning motivation and academic achievement. Research could also explore more effective technology-based interventions to support teachers and students in areas with limited access to technology. By expanding this focus, future research could provide broader insights and stronger evidence to inform future educational policy improvements.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the subjective experiences of teachers and students in primary schools in Cirebon, focusing on the challenges and hopes they face in improving the quality of education. The research revealed that both teachers and students encounter significant limitations, such as inadequate facilities, lack of technological resources, and low motivation, but they also harbor strong aspirations for positive change. These findings fill a gap in previous studies by offering a deeper understanding of how these challenges impact daily learning experiences and the perceptions of those involved. The study underscores the importance of addressing these limitations through policy improvements and better access to educational resources, particularly technology. A forward focus on targeted interventions and sustained efforts to improve teacher training and resource allocation could significantly enhance educational quality in resource-constrained contexts like Cirebon.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The conflict of interest will occur when the author actions may be influenced from organization or personal relationship such as financial gain, personal interest or any successful outcomes. Please provide a conflict of interest statement. If there is no conflict of interest, state that “The author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest.”

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