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Culturally Responsive Professionalism in Early Childhood Education: Advancing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Through Educator Development and Inclusive Practice

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ABSTRACT

This study explores culturally responsive professionalism as a framework for enhancing the quality and inclusiveness of early childhood education, aligning with Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality education. Using a qualitative descriptive design, interviews were conducted with 36 educators and trainers from multicultural early education settings. Findings reveal that professional competence extends beyond pedagogical skills to include empathy, ethical reflection, and sensitivity to cultural and religious values. Participants emphasized that integrating Islamic virtues such as ihsan (excellence), amanah (trust), and rahmah (compassion) promotes fairness and inclusivity in professional behavior. Because professional development often neglects moral awareness, embedding reflective ethics into teacher training strengthens social cohesion and equitable learning. The study concludes that culturally responsive professionalism can guide early childhood educators toward transformative, faith-informed, and socially responsible practice consistent with SDG 4's mission to ensure inclusive and quality education for all.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Professionalism in early childhood education (ECE) represents more than technical competence; it embodies ethical responsibility, cultural responsiveness, and the nurturing of young learners' moral and intellectual growth. Many reports regarding ECE have been well-documented (Salman & Yahaya, 2025; Wijaya & Nandiyanto, 2022; Obafemi et al., 2023; Aguh & Olutola, 2023; Wahyuni et al., 2021; Agarry, 2022). The global pursuit of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) calls for inclusive and equitable quality education, yet teacher development programs often prioritize instructional skills over moral and cultural understanding. This neglect limits teachers' ability to respond to diverse children's experiences and values, especially in contexts where religion and culture shape educational expectations. Previous research emphasizes that quality education depends not only on effective pedagogy but also on educators' capacity to engage with families, communities, and local traditions (Blewitt et al., 2020; McWayne et al., 2022). Therefore, culturally responsive professionalism has emerged as an essential dimension of quality, linking teachers' reflective practice to social justice, empathy, and global citizenship.

Developing culturally responsive professionalism requires integrating ethical and cultural literacy into professional training. Such professionalism recognizes that every learning environment reflects social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions that must be respected to achieve genuine inclusion. Teachers who understand cultural and religious values are better prepared to adapt instruction, communicate respectfully, and support children's holistic development. The concept aligns with Islamic educational philosophy, which frames teaching as a moral trust (amanah) and a pursuit of excellence (ihsan). In this view, the educator functions as a moral guide (murabbi), shaping not only children's cognition but also their character. Embedding these values into professional development ensures that teachers' decisions and classroom behaviors are guided by compassion (rahmah), fairness (adl), and reflective self-awareness (muhasabah).

Despite the importance of culturally grounded ethics, many professional development frameworks remain secular and standardized, overlooking the spiritual foundations of teaching in Muslim-majority societies. As a result, teachers often struggle to balance global professional standards with local cultural and moral expectations. To address this gap, the present study investigates how culturally responsive professionalism, informed by Islamic ethical principles, can enhance inclusivity and quality in early childhood education. The novelty of this study lies in presenting a faith-integrated model of professional development that aligns personal virtue with global educational reform. Through this model, SDG 4 is approached not merely as a policy objective but as a moral endeavor (preparing educators who teach with empathy, cultural intelligence, and spiritual integrity).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Professionalism in ECE extends beyond formal qualifications and technical proficiency; it encompasses ethical conduct, reflection, and commitment to the holistic well-being of children. Literature defines professionalism as continuous reflection and growth grounded in moral responsibility. In ECE, this involves developing sensitivity toward children's emotional, social, and spiritual needs. Professional quality in early education must include collaboration, empathy, and inclusive values to achieve developmental equity (Blewitt *et al.*, 2020). When teachers perceive their work as a moral vocation rather than a bureaucratic function, professionalism becomes transformative. Professionalism thus integrates three dimensions

(knowledge, ethics, and empathy), which together sustain meaningful learning environments aligned with SDG 4's emphasis on inclusive and equitable quality education.

Cultural responsiveness refers to educators' ability to recognize and integrate learners' cultural backgrounds into teaching practices. Culturally responsive educators foster mutual respect and affirm students' identities, creating a sense of belonging and inclusion. In early education, responsiveness requires teachers to view cultural and linguistic diversity as assets rather than obstacles. Teachers who understand local traditions and family norms can design more effective communication and instruction (Lin *et al.*, 2021). Such responsiveness supports SDG 4.7, which promotes education that respects cultural diversity and human values. It also aligns with the principle of adl (justice) in Islamic ethics, which requires fairness through contextual understanding. Hence, professionalism rooted in cultural sensitivity helps educators navigate diversity while upholding equity and moral responsibility.

In Islamic philosophy, education is both a moral and spiritual process aimed at nurturing insan kamil (a complete and balanced human being). and Al-Ghazali's pedagogical writings emphasize that teachers act as moral guides (murabbi), entrusted with shaping learners' intellect (aql) and character (akhlaq) (Hashim, 2018). The Qur'anic principles of amanah (trust), ihsan (excellence), and rahmah (compassion) provide ethical anchors for professional behavior. These values align naturally with the reflective and inclusive dimensions of professionalism, emphasizing integrity, sincerity (ikhlas), and justice (adl). Integrating such values into teacher education ensures that professionalism becomes value-driven rather than rule-based. In contexts where religion influences social norms, this framework offers a moral foundation that strengthens both personal virtue and collective educational responsibility, bridging global standards of SDG 4 with Islamic ethical traditions.

Despite growing recognition of cultural and ethical diversity in education, few studies examine how professional development can harmonize global frameworks like SDG 4 with local religious and cultural ethics. Most existing literature isolates professional training from spirituality, focusing on competency frameworks rather than moral identity (Kassem *et al.*, 2020). As a result, educators often experience tension between institutional expectations and personal belief systems. Furthermore, cross-cultural approaches to professionalism remain underexplored in early education contexts, where teachers frequently encounter moral dilemmas related to equity and inclusion. This study addresses these gaps by proposing a model of culturally responsive professionalism grounded in Islamic values, linking reflective practice, teacher identity, and inclusive education. It contributes a faith-informed framework that unites ethical development with the global mission of SDG 4 to achieve quality education through cultural and moral coherence.

3. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore how educators understand and apply culturally responsive professionalism within ECE. The design was chosen to capture participants' experiences and reflections in their natural settings, allowing moral, cultural, and pedagogical dimensions to emerge holistically. The framework was guided by SDG 4's focus on inclusive and equitable quality education, interpreted through Islamic ethical principles emphasizing amanah (trust), ihsan (excellence), and adl (justice). The purpose of this approach was not only to describe existing practices but also to uncover the moral reasoning and reflective awareness that shape teachers' professionalism in multicultural environments.

Thirty-six educators participated in the study, including preschool teachers, teacher trainers, and administrators from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. Participants had between three and twenty years of experience and represented both public and private institutions. Purposive sampling was used to ensure representation from various regions and teaching contexts. All participants provided informed consent and agreed to contribute their insights anonymously.

Many participants described their work as a balance between institutional standards and personal faith commitments. One teacher stated, "Professionalism means not only following the curriculum but also showing mercy and fairness to every child."

Such reflections highlight the internalization of rahmah (compassion) as an ethical dimension of professionalism.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations conducted over ten weeks. Interview questions explored teachers' understanding of professionalism, their experiences with cultural diversity, and the influence of religious or moral values on their teaching. Focus group discussions encouraged participants to reflect collaboratively on ethical challenges, such as discipline, inclusion, and parental engagement.

Observations were conducted in twelve classrooms to examine how professional values were expressed in practice. For example, teachers were observed adapting classroom routines to respect cultural norms, such as using local languages during circle time or incorporating short reflective pauses to teach patience and empathy. These practices illustrated that professionalism is lived through everyday actions grounded in respect and moral awareness.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following a six-phase framework. Transcripts were read repeatedly to identify patterns related to professionalism, cultural responsiveness, and ethical decision-making. Initial codes were organized into categories reflecting the integration of faith-based and cultural principles within professional behavior. Three core themes emerged: (i) professionalism as moral accountability, (ii) teaching as cultural empathy, and (iii) reflection as a process of spiritual growth.

Throughout the analysis, the researchers applied an interpretive lens informed by Islamic moral philosophy and the SDG 4 framework. This ensured that data interpretation respected both universal educational values and faith-specific ethical contexts. Reflexive journaling was employed to reduce researcher bias and maintain alignment with participants' lived experiences. Triangulation of interviews, observations, and focus groups enhanced credibility, while peer debriefing validated the consistency of the thematic structure.

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board of both collaborating universities. Participants' confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained, and all data were used solely for academic purposes. Beyond procedural ethics, the research adhered to Islamic ethical principles: amanah (trustworthiness) in handling participants' narratives, ikhlas (sincerity) in interpretation, and adl (justice) in representing diverse perspectives fairly. These principles strengthened both the moral and methodological integrity of the study, ensuring that research ethics reflected not only global standards but also spiritual accountability.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Overview of Findings

Analysis of interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations revealed that culturally responsive professionalism in ECE operates at the intersection of moral accountability, cultural empathy, and reflective practice. Participants consistently viewed professionalism not merely as adherence to institutional rules, but as a moral obligation rooted in their faith and social responsibility. Three major themes emerged: (i) professionalism as moral accountability, (ii) teaching as cultural empathy, and (iii) reflection as spiritual growth. Together, these themes illustrate that professional conduct in ECE is shaped by both universal ethical principles and contextual moral values (particularly those derived from Islam).

Participants repeatedly referred to education as an amanah (trust) from God and society. They perceived their role as caretakers of children's holistic development (physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual). One teacher summarized, "Teaching is not just a job; it is a trust. I must care for the child's mind and soul with fairness and sincerity."

This sentiment reflects the integration of Islamic ethics with professional identity and aligns with SDG 4's vision of quality education founded on equity, inclusion, and lifelong learning.

4.2. Theme 1: Professionalism as Moral Accountability

The first theme highlights how teachers conceptualized professionalism as a form of moral accountability rather than institutional compliance. Many participants expressed that their sense of professionalism stemmed from an internalized moral compass influenced by their faith. They interpreted professional integrity as answering both to institutional standards and divine accountability.

For instance, an educator with ten years of experience noted, "When I prepare lessons, I remember that I will be asked by parents, by the school, but also by Allah. That makes me careful with every word I say to children."

This awareness of accountability to God transformed professionalism from a procedural duty into an ethical vocation. It mirrors previous reports (Hashim, 2018) that Islamic education unites spiritual consciousness and moral action. Teachers who internalized this worldview demonstrated consistent sincerity (ikhlas) and responsibility (amanah), performing their roles with a balance of competence and compassion.

Observation data supported this interpretation. Teachers who articulated moral accountability also exhibited consistent ethical behaviors—avoiding favoritism, maintaining respectful communication, and managing conflicts fairly. For example, one teacher gently mediated a disagreement among children by asking them to "reflect on how kindness feels." Such acts demonstrate how professional ethics become embodied in classroom interactions.

These findings align with the notion of reflective professionalism, where critical self-awareness drives ethical growth. In the Islamic context, this reflection becomes muhasabah (a form of moral self-evaluation grounded in faith). By linking daily practice with spiritual awareness, educators cultivate a professionalism that unites technical skill, moral integrity, and compassion (rahmah).

This moral interpretation of professionalism supports SDG 4's holistic approach to educational quality. SDG 4.7 calls for education that promotes sustainable values, peace, and moral awareness. The present study illustrates how these goals can be achieved through ethical teaching that integrates local faith-based principles with global humanistic aims.

4.3. Theme 2: Teaching as Cultural Empathy

The second theme underscores the role of cultural empathy as a central dimension of professionalism. Participants viewed respect for cultural diversity as essential to teaching fairly and inclusively. They emphasized that professionalism involves understanding students' cultural contexts and building trusting relationships with families. One teacher explained, "When I learn about a child's culture, I understand their behavior better and can teach with more patience."

Teachers described adapting classroom strategies to accommodate students from diverse linguistic, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. Examples included using bilingual storytelling, incorporating traditional songs, and recognizing local celebrations as opportunities for moral education. Such culturally responsive approaches reflect previous studies (Lin *et al.*, 2021) that teacher sensitivity to local contexts improves communication and inclusivity.

Observation notes confirmed that culturally responsive teachers established more collaborative environments. Children appeared more engaged when lessons integrated familiar cultural symbols or values. For example, during one observed literacy activity, a teacher used folktales emphasizing honesty and cooperation, then asked children how the story reflected fairness (adl). This approach encouraged moral reasoning alongside language development, illustrating how cultural narratives can serve as vehicles for ethical education.

Participants also highlighted empathy as a bridge between professionalism and cultural awareness. Empathy allowed teachers to interpret behaviors not as misbehavior but as communication shaped by family norms. A teacher working in a multiethnic classroom stated, "I used to think some children were stubborn, but now I see they are just expressing themselves differently. Understanding their culture helps me respond with compassion."

This capacity for cultural empathy is deeply rooted in Islamic pedagogy, which emphasizes rahmah (mercy) and adl (justice) as foundations for human relationships. Teachers who practiced empathy demonstrated patience and humility, qualities aligned with both prophetic ethics and the inclusive ideals of SDG 4. Their behavior illustrated the Qur'anic principle that diversity is a sign of divine wisdom ("We made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another," Qur'an 49:13).

Cultural empathy also redefined power relations in classrooms. Teachers acknowledged that professionalism required humility, to learn from families and communities rather than impose standardized norms. This recognition transformed teaching into a reciprocal relationship grounded in mutual respect. As one participant said, "I am not just teaching children; I am learning from their families how to be a better teacher."

Through such interactions, professionalism became a process of continuous cultural learning. Teachers reported that this openness reduced tensions with parents and increased community trust. In turn, children benefited from consistent moral messages between home and school, strengthening the moral ecology of early education.

These outcomes resonate with the inclusive and participatory vision of SDG 4.2, which emphasizes early childhood development within culturally appropriate and community-based frameworks. When cultural empathy becomes embedded in professional conduct, education advances equity not only in access but also in emotional and moral experience.

4.4. Theme 3: Reflection as Spiritual Growth

The third theme reveals that professional reflection, when guided by faith and cultural awareness, evolves into spiritual growth. Participants described reflection as more than an analytical review of teaching methods; it was a process of self-evaluation that connected professional performance to moral and spiritual accountability. Many teachers referred to reflection as muhasabah, an act of introspection intended to purify intention (niyyah) and sustain sincerity (ikhlas) in teaching.

One educator explained, "When I reflect after class, I ask not only what went right or wrong, but whether I was fair, patient, and kind. That is how I measure my professionalism."

This demonstrates how reflective practice bridges cognitive and ethical domains. Rather than separating professional growth from spirituality, teachers integrated both, aligning their pedagogical decisions with divine accountability and human empathy.

Reflection sessions during focus groups encouraged participants to share experiences of moral struggle and emotional fatigue. Many admitted that professional burnout was reduced when reflection included prayer, gratitude, and remembrance (dhikr). A teacher shared, "When I start reflection with gratitude, I see my work differently. It reminds me that patience with children is part of worship."

Such reflections show how spiritual awareness reorients professional motivation from external rewards toward inner fulfillment. This aligns with notion of reflective authenticity, where professional growth involves coherence between personal values and social action. In Islamic pedagogy, reflection is not only intellectual but transformative—it cultivates humility, empathy, and perseverance.

Field observations revealed that teachers who practiced regular reflection displayed calmer classroom management and greater emotional resilience. They modeled ethical consistency and fairness, reinforcing moral learning for children. For example, one teacher addressed a conflict by calmly asking students to "reflect on how the Prophet treated others with patience." This approach integrated moral storytelling into behavior management, demonstrating how spiritual reflection shaped daily teaching ethics.

Thus, reflection as spiritual growth strengthens professionalism by merging self-improvement with character formation (tazkiyah al-nafs). It supports SDG 4.7's call for education promoting sustainable values, peace, and human dignity. By nurturing inner awareness, teachers sustain ethical integrity in their practice and contribute to the moral culture of educational institutions.

4.5. Integrated Discussion: Professional Ethics, Cultural Responsiveness, and SDG 4

Across all themes, the study demonstrates that culturally responsive professionalism in ECE is an integrated moral system where faith, ethics, and pedagogy coexist. Teachers' professional behavior was shaped by three interrelated processes: moral accountability (amanah), cultural empathy (rahmah), and reflective spirituality (muhasabah). Together, these processes produce an educational environment where children experience learning as both intellectually enriching and morally nurturing.

The study's findings extend existing theories of professionalism by illustrating that ethical teaching cannot be separated from cultural and spiritual identity. Whereas traditional models of professional development emphasize standardized competencies, the participants in this study framed professionalism as a dynamic moral journey. Their reflections revealed that professionalism flourishes when teachers are encouraged to align their actions with both divine and communal values.

This integration resonates with the maqasid al-shari'ah (the higher objectives of Islamic law), which emphasize the preservation of intellect, dignity, and social harmony. Teachers who operate within these ethical boundaries contribute not only to academic success but also to social justice and peace. In this way, culturally responsive professionalism becomes a vehicle for advancing SDG 4's vision of equitable and quality education for all.

Moreover, the research underscores that cultural empathy is not an optional addition to professionalism but its ethical foundation. Recognizing cultural and linguistic diversity as divine wisdom fosters mutual respect among educators, parents, and children. Teachers who embody rahmah treat diversity as a source of learning rather than division. This moral orientation mirrors the inclusive spirit of SDG 4.5, which seeks to eliminate disparities in education and ensure full participation of marginalized groups.

The integration of Islamic values also addresses a gap in conventional teacher training. By situating professionalism within faith-based ethics, teachers acquire a framework for ethical reasoning that transcends procedural compliance. Their moral decisions become informed by both universal values (fairness, empathy, accountability) and religious principles (adl, amanah, ihsan, and ikhlas). As one administrator expressed, "When teachers act with sincerity, their work naturally fulfills both school goals and God's will."

This alignment between professional ethics and spiritual intention provides emotional stability and moral direction, especially in multicultural or resource-limited environments. Teachers who reflect on their faith reported greater motivation, resilience, and emotional regulation. Their professionalism thus becomes an expression of service (khidmah) to humanity, echoing the prophetic model of teaching as guidance and compassion.

Another significant insight is that culturally responsive professionalism enhances community trust and collaboration. Parents viewed teachers who respected cultural traditions and communicated with humility as more credible and caring. This mutual trust facilitated better coordination between home and school, reinforcing the community-based approach emphasized in SDG 4.2 for early childhood care and education. Consequently, culturally responsive professionalism becomes a catalyst for holistic educational reform, where families, educators, and policymakers work together to uphold shared ethical goals.

At a policy level, the study suggests that professional development programs should embed reflection on moral and cultural identity as part of teacher education. Workshops on empathy, ethical decision-making, and intercultural communication can be strengthened through modules on faith-based ethics and reflective spirituality. These reforms would produce educators who not only teach effectively but also embody moral coherence and global citizenship.

In sum, the results affirm that professionalism in early childhood education should be understood as moral stewardship (a continuous process of ethical growth that unites cultural awareness, reflective practice, and spiritual purpose). Through this synthesis, educators become agents of peace and social transformation. They enact SDG 4 not through policy rhetoric but through daily acts of justice, compassion, and integrity that shape the moral fabric of learning communities.

4.6. Summary

Culturally responsive professionalism bridges the moral, cultural, and global dimensions of education. Teachers in this study demonstrated that faith-informed ethics (grounded in amanah, rahmah, and adl) nurture professionalism that is emotionally intelligent, culturally inclusive, and spiritually balanced. Reflection served as both method and outcome: a pathway to self-awareness and a marker of professional maturity. By aligning professional conduct

with Islamic moral values and SDG 4 objectives, educators cultivated classrooms where equity, empathy, and excellence coexist. Ultimately, this model redefines quality education as not only what children learn, but also how teachers live and reflect their values in practice.

5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that culturally responsive professionalism strengthens both the moral and pedagogical dimensions of early childhood education. By integrating Islamic values (amanah (trust), adl (justice), and rahmah (compassion)) with reflective practice, educators cultivate empathy, ethical awareness, and intercultural understanding. Professional reflection becomes an act of spiritual growth that enhances inclusivity and integrity in teaching. The findings demonstrate that aligning professional ethics with cultural and faith-based values advances the vision of SDG 4, creating education systems that are not only effective but also humane, equitable, and morally coherent.

6. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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