



Scenario-Based Reflection for Integrated Early Childhood Education: A Qualitative Approach to Achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the use of scenario-based reflection as a qualitative approach to strengthening coordination in early childhood education and achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on quality education. Through semi-structured interviews and reflective scenarios involving 48 participants (educators, caregivers, and policymakers), the research explored ethical reasoning and collaborative problem-solving within service integration. Findings reveal that participants gained deeper awareness of moral responsibility and professional accountability when confronted with realistic dilemmas, such as unequal resource allocation or family-school conflicts. One educator noted, "Reflecting on justice made me rethink fairness in daily teaching decisions." Because reflection stimulates empathy and shared ethical understanding, scenario-based learning fosters stronger intersectoral trust and responsive decision-making. The study concludes that integrating faith-informed reflection, guided by Islamic principles of amanah (trust) and adl (justice), enhances both coordination and moral integrity in early education systems aligned with SDG 4.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (ECE) systems play a vital role in building the moral, cognitive, and emotional foundation of every learner. Many reports regarding ECE have been well-documented (Salman & Yahaya, 2025; Wijaya & Nandiyanto, 2022; Obafemi *et al.*, 2023). Global frameworks such as Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) emphasize inclusive and equitable quality education for all, beginning in the early years. However, many ECE systems remain fragmented, characterized by poor interagency coordination, inconsistent standards, and inadequate professional reflection among educators. These gaps often result in uneven access and limited quality, undermining children's right to holistic development (Anders *et al.*, 2023; Blewitt *et al.*, 2020). The challenge is not merely technical but ethical: how to cultivate a system that integrates professional competence, social accountability, and moral consciousness. Addressing this requires innovative reflective approaches that unite educators, policymakers, and families in shared moral dialogue.

Scenario-based reflection offers a promising method for transforming educational coordination into a reflective and ethical process. Through the simulation of realistic dilemmas, educators and policymakers can examine their values, biases, and decision-making processes (Führer *et al.*, 2025). This approach allows participants to explore moral complexity in a safe, dialogic environment, fostering empathy and shared understanding. In the context of early childhood education, scenario-based reflection encourages stakeholders to consider justice (adl), trust (amanah), and compassion (rahmah) as guiding principles in addressing coordination challenges. These values align with Islamic educational philosophy, which views education as a process of nurturing both intellect ('aql) and character (akhlaq). Embedding such reflective ethics into professional practice supports SDG 4.7, which calls for education promoting peace, cultural appreciation, and moral development.

Despite growing interest in reflective practice, little research has applied scenario-based methods to explore ethical reasoning and coordination in early education. Existing studies tend to focus on technical policy reforms, neglecting the spiritual and moral dimensions of educational systems (Kassem *et al.*, 2020; McWayne *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, this study aims to investigate how scenario-based reflection can enhance ethical awareness, professional coordination, and moral accountability among early childhood stakeholders. The novelty of this research lies in its integration of Islamic ethical values with reflective methodology, producing a faith-informed framework for achieving SDG 4 through education that is both collaborative and morally coherent.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Reflective practice is widely recognized as a vital component of teacher professionalism and educational improvement. It involves critical examination of one's actions and decisions to enhance learning and ethical understanding. Literature of reflection as "active, persistent, and careful consideration" underpins its role in fostering deeper pedagogical awareness. In ECE, reflection allows teachers to adapt practices to meet children's developmental and socio-emotional needs (Blewitt *et al.*, 2020). It bridges theory and practice by transforming routine actions into intentional and value-driven decisions. However, reflection is most effective when grounded in moral frameworks that guide educators in ethical dilemmas, especially in culturally and religiously diverse environments.

Scenario-based learning (SBL) enhances reflection by presenting realistic, complex situations that demand ethical and collaborative problem-solving. Through hypothetical cases, educators can explore possible consequences of their actions and test moral reasoning

before real-life implementation (Führer *et al.*, 2025). Studies show that SBL supports empathy, communication, and decision-making in educational contexts (Lin *et al.*, 2021). For ECE professionals, scenario reflection enables analysis of issues such as equity in resource allocation, inclusion of diverse learners, and family engagement. By simulating these dilemmas, educators strengthen their professional judgment while developing shared ethical understanding across sectors. Moreover, scenario-based reflection aligns with constructivist theory, positioning teachers as active learners who construct meaning through interaction and reflection. This approach supports the transformative aims of SDG 4, which promotes lifelong learning and professional growth.

Islamic educational philosophy situates reflection (tafakkur) at the heart of learning and moral development. The Qur'an repeatedly encourages believers to reflect upon their actions and the world around them, associating reflection with wisdom (hikmah) and righteousness (taqwa). In pedagogy, reflection guided by faith transforms teaching into an act of worship (ibadah), linking professional duty with spiritual accountability (Hashim, 2018). Educators are regarded as murabbi (nurturers of intellect and character), responsible for balancing cognitive development with moral guidance. Principles such as amanah (trust), adl (justice), and rahmah (compassion) provide a moral compass for decision-making. When applied to scenario-based reflection, these values foster ethical awareness and empathy, ensuring that coordination in early education remains humane, equitable, and spiritually meaningful. Integrating faith-based reflection into professional development reinforces both the intellectual and spiritual dimensions of SDG 4, ensuring quality education rooted in moral coherence.

Although reflective practice and scenario-based learning are well-documented in teacher education, few studies integrate religious or ethical frameworks, particularly within Islamic contexts. Existing literature often isolates professional reflection from spirituality, treating it as a technical rather than moral process (Kassem *et al.*, 2020; Al Rahahleh *et al.*, 2023). There is limited exploration of how faith-informed reflection can enhance intersectoral coordination among educators, caregivers, and policymakers. Moreover, while SDG 4 emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education, its moral dimensions remain underdeveloped in empirical research. This gap underscores the need for approaches that combine reflective methodology with ethical and cultural foundations. The present study contributes to this discourse by proposing a model of scenario-based reflection grounded in Islamic ethics—bridging professional competence, moral reasoning, and systemic coordination in early childhood education.

3. METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretive design to explore how scenario-based reflection supports ethical awareness and professional coordination among ECE stakeholders. The design was grounded in the belief that moral understanding emerges through reflective dialogue and shared reasoning. Scenario-based reflection was used to simulate real-world dilemmas, encouraging participants to evaluate professional decisions through both cognitive and moral lenses. The Islamic ethical principles of amanah (trust), adl (justice), and rahmah (compassion) were embedded into the scenarios to ensure cultural and spiritual relevance. This design aligns with SDG 4 by focusing on educators' professional development and moral responsibility in promoting quality and inclusive education.

Forty-eight participants were selected through purposive sampling to represent a cross-section of the ECE ecosystem: 25 teachers, 12 caregivers, and 11 policymakers. Participants

varied in experience (ranging from 2 to 20 years) and were engaged in both public and private educational settings. Their diverse backgrounds provided multiple perspectives on coordination, ethics, and cultural responsiveness in early childhood systems. Participation was voluntary, and all individuals provided informed consent before data collection.

During preliminary interviews, teachers described their daily moral and practical challenges in coordinating with parents and administrators. One participant reflected, "Sometimes, when policies are unclear, I act based on conscience and fairness, not just rules."

This illustrates how ethical reflection already underlies professional judgment but often remains implicit and unstructured. The scenario-based approach aimed to make these moral processes explicit and collaborative.

Data were collected in three stages over eight weeks.

- (i) Pre-Reflection Interviews: explored participants' understanding of coordination and professional ethics.
- (ii) Scenario Workshops: participants engaged in four thought-experimental scenarios addressing dilemmas such as unequal funding, parental conflict, crisis response, and inclusion of children with disabilities.
- (iii) Post-Reflection Focus Groups: facilitated open discussions on personal insights, ethical reasoning, and behavioral change after the workshops.

Each session was recorded, transcribed, and coded. Participants frequently connected their reflections to Islamic moral principles. For instance, one policymaker noted,

"Justice means not giving everyone the same, but giving each what they need most; this is how we serve children fairly."

Such statements reveal how religious ethics informed participants' views of professional responsibility and systemic fairness.

Thematic analysis followed a six-step framework: familiarization, coding, theme generation, review, definition, and synthesis. Data were organized into themes that captured participants' evolving moral reasoning and perceptions of coordination. Two coders independently analyzed transcripts, and inter-coder reliability was ensured through consensus discussion.

Themes were interpreted through an Islamic ethical lens, identifying intersections between faith-based values and professional conduct. Reflexive journaling by researchers minimized bias and documented analytical decisions. The analysis focused on how reflection reshaped participants' understanding of trust, justice, and compassion as operational principles in educational coordination.

To enhance credibility, member checking was conducted, and participants reviewed thematic summaries and confirmed accuracy. Triangulation was achieved through multiple data sources (interviews, group reflections, and workshop notes). Findings were contextualized within SDG 4's framework, emphasizing the moral foundation of inclusive, equitable, and quality education.

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review boards of both participating universities. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout data collection. Islamic ethical principles (such as *amanah* (confidentiality) and *ikhlas* (sincerity)) guided the research conduct, ensuring respect, transparency, and mutual trust between researchers and participants.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Overview of Results

Analysis of the data revealed that scenario-based reflection significantly deepened participants' ethical awareness, enhanced collaborative understanding, and strengthened their sense of professional accountability in coordinating ECE services. Three overarching themes emerged from the analysis: (i) awareness and ethical growth, (ii) trust and justice as coordinating values, and (iii) collaborative reflection for systemic change. Each theme illustrates how faith-informed reflective practices not only improved professional coordination but also contributed to moral coherence within educational systems aligned with SDG 4.

Participants consistently expressed that engaging with realistic moral dilemmas allowed them to re-examine their roles and assumptions. During the workshops, many educators admitted that they rarely paused to reflect on ethical implications in their daily work. One teacher stated, "We are often focused on completing tasks, but this process reminded me that every action toward a child must reflect fairness and mercy."

This reflective realization captures the transformative potential of scenario-based methods: they transform ethical reflection from abstract ideals into lived professional awareness.

4.2. Theme 1: Awareness and Ethical Growth

Scenario-based reflection sessions revealed a notable increase in participants' moral and professional self-awareness. Before the exercises, educators and policymakers tended to view coordination primarily as a bureaucratic process involving scheduling, communication, and compliance. After reflection, many began to interpret coordination as an ethical relationship, a collective effort grounded in moral accountability. One participant described this shift vividly: "At first, I thought coordination was just about systems and documents. Now I see it's about hearts and intentions."

This transformation highlights the link between reflective practice and ethical consciousness. The act of revisiting one's reasoning, emotions, and decisions creates a feedback loop between experience and moral insight. For example, when participants were asked to resolve a dilemma involving unequal resource distribution between urban and rural centers, they initially focused on procedural fairness. However, through group dialogue, they began to explore deeper moral questions, how compassion (*rahmah*) and trust (*amanah*) could guide equitable decision-making.

These findings resonate with the Islamic pedagogical concept of *tarbiyah*, which emphasizes self-improvement through continuous reflection and moral refinement. Reflection, in this sense, becomes both a pedagogical and spiritual act. As one policymaker noted, "When I reflect on my work through faith, I remember that my duty is not only to follow policy but to protect the dignity of every child."

Participants described the process as both "awakening" and "humbling." Many realized that ethical growth required confronting contradictions between their professional obligations and moral convictions. Several caregivers mentioned that reflection helped them "balance discipline with empathy," demonstrating a move from reactive decision-making to conscious ethical practice.

Moreover, scenario-based reflection fostered what participants called shared moral vision, a sense that ethical responsibility is distributed across roles. Teachers began to see their moral actions as interconnected with those of administrators and policymakers. This aligns with

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which positions child development within interconnected layers of influence (Merçon-Vargas *et al.*, 2020). When reflection occurs collaboratively, it strengthens these interconnections, ensuring that moral awareness informs every level of educational coordination.

Faith-informed reflection also encouraged participants to articulate the values underlying their professional behavior. While most participants identified justice and fairness as central principles, they interpreted these through Islamic ethical lenses. Justice was viewed not merely as equality but as equity, responding proportionally to each child's needs. This interpretation mirrors both Islamic jurisprudence and the SDG 4 principle of inclusive quality education. Reflection thus served as a bridge between global developmental goals and culturally grounded moral reasoning.

The process of reflection also enhanced educators' sense of *ikhlas* (sincerity) in service. They began to associate their professional tasks (lesson planning, parent communication, policy compliance) with spiritual accountability. One teacher explained, "When I teach with intention and compassion, it becomes worship, not just work."

This connection between moral consciousness and spiritual motivation transformed professional development into a process of self-purification (*tazkiyah al-nafs*). Through repeated reflection, participants learned to identify internal biases and emotional reactions, replacing them with deliberate, value-based decisions. The study thus demonstrates that scenario-based reflection can foster ethical growth that is simultaneously professional, emotional, and spiritual, a holistic learning outcome envisioned by both Islamic pedagogy and SDG 4.7, which promotes education for peace and sustainable development.

4.3. Theme 2: Trust and Justice as Coordinating Values

The second theme emphasizes how trust (*amanah*) and justice (*adl*) emerged as central moral foundations for coordination across educational sectors. During scenario-based workshops, participants faced dilemmas that required balancing efficiency with fairness, such as allocating limited teaching staff across centers or addressing complaints about bias in student assessments. In resolving these cases, participants repeatedly invoked trust and justice as the two "pillars" of ethical coordination.

Trust was viewed as both interpersonal and institutional. Teachers associated *amanah* with reliability and transparency in daily interactions, keeping promises, respecting confidentiality, and honoring responsibilities toward children and colleagues. Policymakers extended the concept to institutional accountability, emphasizing that *amanah* required transparency in budgeting and policy implementation. One administrator stated, "If we are trusted with children's future, we must also be transparent in how we use resources."

This ethical framing aligns with governance principles under SDG 4, which emphasize accountability and integrity in educational leadership. However, participants' understanding extended beyond compliance; they viewed trust as a moral covenant, rooted in divine accountability. As another policymaker explained, "*Amanah* is not just between people, it is between us and God. We will be asked how we handled what was entrusted to us."

This spiritual framing of professional responsibility demonstrates how religious ethics can reinforce systemic accountability. It transforms coordination into a moral commitment rather than a technical obligation. When participants applied this principle to their collaborative work, they reported higher levels of respect, empathy, and transparency. Teachers began sharing materials and strategies more willingly, interpreting cooperation as part of their *amanah* to serve the community.

Similarly, justice (adl) was redefined through moral reflection. Initially, participants equated fairness with uniform treatment, providing the same resources and attention to all schools or children. After reflective dialogue, however, they realized that justice requires differentiated action based on need and context. A teacher from a low-income area remarked, "Fairness is not giving the same to everyone but giving each child what helps them thrive."

This nuanced understanding of justice integrates both global and Islamic moral reasoning. SDG 4.5 calls for the elimination of educational disparities, while Islamic ethics teaches that justice is achieved when equity and compassion coexist. By connecting these frameworks, participants began to view resource allocation, teacher deployment, and parent engagement as moral decisions guided by adl and rahmah.

The emphasis on justice also improved cross-sector collaboration. Policymakers admitted that decision-making often favored urban centers due to administrative convenience. After the reflection sessions, several expressed a willingness to "revisit policy distribution with moral balance." This indicates a shift from administrative pragmatism to ethical governance, demonstrating how reflection can transform structural processes by embedding moral reasoning into coordination systems.

As reflection deepened, participants began translating the principles of trust (amanah) and justice (adl) into practical coordination strategies. Teachers formed informal peer-support groups to share reflective journals and discuss ethical dilemmas arising in classrooms. This collaborative trust-building strengthened transparency between educators and administrators. A participant explained, "Now we are not afraid to admit our mistakes, because reflection reminds us that accountability is part of trust."

This openness demonstrates the shift from defensive to developmental professionalism. The acknowledgment of imperfection became an opportunity for ethical growth rather than punishment. Policymakers also reported a new sense of responsibility toward community engagement, recognizing that justice in early education extends beyond classrooms to include families and neighborhoods. In post-reflection interviews, one policymaker summarized, "Justice in education is not a policy statement; it is a living value seen in how we treat the smallest child."

Such insights indicate how reflection transformed abstract values into concrete guiding norms. The process exemplified muhasabah (an Islamic tradition of self-evaluation), repurposed here for collective professional learning. It confirmed that sustainable coordination arises not merely from regulations but from morally grounded relationships that maintain transparency, fairness, and compassion.

4.4. Theme 3: Collaborative Reflection and Systemic Change

The third theme highlights how scenario-based reflection stimulated systemic thinking and collaboration across professional boundaries. Participants consistently mentioned that engaging in moral scenarios encouraged them to see coordination not as isolated administrative functions but as an interdependent ecosystem requiring empathy, communication, and shared values.

During workshops, mixed groups of teachers, caregivers, and policymakers jointly analyzed scenarios depicting conflicts (such as inequitable resource allocation or miscommunication between educators and parents). The dialogue revealed differing interpretations of responsibility and fairness, but through guided reflection, participants gradually converged on shared moral principles. A caregiver remarked, "When we discussed the scenario about

inclusion, I realized policymakers face pressure we never considered. Reflection made me more patient and understanding.”

This empathic shift marked a significant outcome: reflective dialogue reduced hierarchical barriers and cultivated mutual respect. Trust and justice, previously seen as individual virtues, evolved into collective ethics (standards shaping institutional culture).

Additionally, reflection enhanced decision-making transparency. Teachers began involving parents more actively in discussing curriculum and child progress, aligning with SDG 4.2’s emphasis on inclusive and participatory early education. Policymakers pledged to institutionalize reflection workshops as part of professional development programs, ensuring that coordination remains ethically responsive. This suggests that scenario-based reflection can function not only as a training tool but also as a governance model that reinforces accountability, empathy, and inclusivity.

An illustrative example came from one teacher who faced a scenario about handling a child’s behavioral issue linked to family conflict. Instead of attributing blame, the group applied reflective dialogue to design an integrated support plan involving both school counselors and parents. As the teacher recalled, “We stopped thinking in terms of ‘my job’ and ‘your job.’ We started asking, ‘What does the child need most?’”

This question became symbolic of the systemic transformation that reflection encouraged—a movement from bureaucratic role adherence toward collaborative child-centered ethics.

4.5. Integrated Discussion: SDG 4 and Islamic Moral Framework

The findings align strongly with the transformative aims of SDG 4 (Quality Education), particularly Target 4.7, which advocates for education fostering sustainable values, global citizenship, and cultural understanding. Scenario-based reflection, as implemented in this study, embodies these principles by merging cognitive skill-building with moral consciousness.

From an Islamic educational perspective, the integration of amanah, adl, and rahmah within reflection activities represents an authentic form of moral pedagogy. It mirrors the Qur’anic injunction to “enjoin justice and mercy” (Qur’an 16:90), connecting spiritual obligations with professional ethics. The resulting framework thus unites global educational reform with local religious wisdom, a synthesis rarely achieved in conventional policy discussions.

Participants’ reflections revealed that ethical coordination requires not only efficient systems but also spiritual depth. They began to perceive education as a moral ecosystem, where policy decisions, classroom practices, and family engagement must all be informed by shared values. This resonates with global literature on ethical leadership in education, which underscores that sustainable reform depends on value coherence rather than procedural compliance (Sultana, 2022).

Furthermore, the study illustrates that scenario-based reflection is both a process and an outcome. As a process, it cultivates dialogue, empathy, and accountability; as an outcome, it produces morally aware practitioners capable of transforming fragmented educational systems. This dual function directly supports SDG 4’s mission to promote lifelong learning and ethical development.

Islamic ethics enriched this process by providing participants with a stable moral vocabulary. Terms like amanah, adl, and rahmah offered familiar yet profound conceptual anchors, allowing participants to internalize global goals through culturally resonant meanings. Rather than viewing SDGs as external mandates, educators reinterpreted them as

moral imperatives consistent with their faith and professional duties. This alignment bridged the perceived gap between global development frameworks and local religious identities.

Another critical implication concerns leadership. Reflective practices inspired several participants (especially administrators) to rethink leadership as service (*khidmah*). They described leadership not as authority but as stewardship, accountable both to people and to God. This reconceptualization supports emerging research on ethical leadership in Muslim-majority contexts, which links servant leadership to higher institutional trust and improved organizational culture (Abdalla & Choudhury, 2022).

Finally, the discussion underscores the role of collective reflection in achieving systemic transformation. When trust and justice become shared institutional values rather than individual aspirations, coordination evolves from compliance to moral collaboration. The integration of Islamic ethics within reflective methodology ensures that such transformation is culturally sustainable and spiritually grounded.

4.6. Synthesis

The results of this study demonstrate that scenario-based reflection can be a transformative professional development approach when rooted in moral and spiritual frameworks. Participants not only developed ethical awareness but also enacted practical changes, improving transparency, equity, and empathy in coordination processes. Reflection acted as both a mirror and a catalyst, helping educators see the ethical dimensions of their work while inspiring collective reform.

These outcomes substantiate the argument that achieving SDG 4 requires a redefinition of “quality education” that extends beyond measurable outcomes to include ethical and spiritual integrity. Islamic educational philosophy provides the foundation for this redefinition, framing coordination as an act of worship and social responsibility. By merging reflective practice with moral purpose, education becomes a means of cultivating *insan kamil*, the complete human being who learns, reflects, and acts with compassion and justice.

5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that scenario-based reflection is an effective approach for cultivating ethical awareness, professional collaboration, and systemic integrity in early childhood education. By integrating Islamic principles of *amanah* (trust), *adl* (justice), and *rahmah* (compassion), reflection transformed coordination from a technical function into a moral process rooted in shared accountability. The findings demonstrate that reflective dialogue strengthens empathy and transparency across educational sectors. Aligned with SDG 4, this approach advances inclusive and value-driven quality education, fostering professionals who act with conscience, faith, and justice in shaping future generations.

6. AUTHORS' NOTE

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

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