



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 strengthening educator development and inclusive practice in early childhood education. Using a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations involving 36 educators, teacher trainers, and administrators from multicultural early education settings. Educator professionalism extends beyond pedagogical competence to include moral accountability, cultural empathy, reflective practice, and sensitivity to children's cultural and religious backgrounds. Islamic values such as amanah, ihsan, rahmah, adl, and muhasabah were found to support fairness, compassion, ethical awareness, and inclusive professional behavior. The study concludes that culturally responsive professionalism can help educators create humane, equitable, and culturally meaningful learning environments. This framework supports Sustainable Development Goal 4 by promoting inclusive and quality education for all young learners.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Professionalism in early childhood education is not limited to technical competence or classroom management. It also includes ethical responsibility, cultural sensitivity, reflective practice, and commitment to children's holistic development. Early childhood educators work with young learners at a formative stage of life, where emotional security, identity formation, moral development, and social belonging are deeply connected to learning. Therefore, educator professionalism must be understood as both pedagogical and moral practice. The importance of early childhood education has been widely discussed in previous studies. Research has examined early childhood educators' professional code of conduct, challenges in early childhood education, home-based childcare programs, virtual learning, digital-based learning, and educational outcomes of children with and without parental home instruction programs (Agarry, 2022; Aguh and Olutola, 2023; Wahyuni *et al.*, 2021; Salman and Yahaya, 2025; Wijaya and Nandiyanto, 2022; Obafemi *et al.*, 2023). These studies show that early childhood education requires attention not only to curriculum and instruction but also to educator competence, family involvement, child development, technology, and inclusive learning environments.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 4, emphasize inclusive and equitable quality education for all. In early childhood education, this goal requires educators who can respond to children's diverse cultural, linguistic, religious, emotional, and developmental needs. However, many professional development programs still prioritize instructional skills over moral awareness and cultural understanding. This can limit teachers' ability to communicate with families, respect local values, and create inclusive classrooms. Previous studies show that quality early childhood education depends on collaboration, empathy, health-education integration, family partnership, and culturally responsive practice (Blewitt *et al.*, 2020; McWayne *et al.*, 2022; Lin *et al.*, 2021).

Culturally responsive professionalism offers a useful framework for addressing this gap. It refers to educators' ability to combine professional competence with cultural awareness, ethical reflection, and respect for learners' identities. In multicultural and faith-based contexts, professionalism also includes sensitivity to religious values that shape family expectations and children's moral development. In Islamic educational philosophy, teaching is understood as a moral trust, or *amanah*, and a pursuit of excellence, or *ihsan*. Educators are expected to act with compassion, or *rahmah*, justice, or *adl*, and reflective self-awareness, or *muhasabah*. These values can strengthen professional behavior by linking teaching practice with moral responsibility.

Despite growing attention to inclusive education and professional development, limited research has examined how culturally responsive professionalism can connect SDG 4 with Islamic ethical values in early childhood education. Many teacher training models remain standardized and secular, while educators in Muslim-majority or culturally diverse contexts often need to balance global professional standards with local moral and religious expectations. This study addresses that gap by exploring how educators understand and apply culturally responsive professionalism in multicultural early education settings.

This study aims to examine culturally responsive professionalism as a framework for strengthening educator development and inclusive practice in early childhood education. By integrating Islamic values with reflective practice and SDG 4, the study contributes to a model of professionalism that is ethically grounded, culturally responsive, and socially responsible.

The study argues that quality education is not only achieved through effective teaching methods, but also through educators who practice empathy, fairness, compassion, and moral integrity in their daily interactions with children, families, and communities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Professionalism in Early Childhood Education

Professionalism in early childhood education includes more than formal qualifications and teaching skills. It also involves ethical conduct, reflective practice, empathy, collaboration with families, and commitment to children's holistic development. Early childhood educators are responsible not only for supporting cognitive growth but also for nurturing children's emotional, social, moral, and cultural development. Therefore, professionalism in early education should be understood as both pedagogical competence and moral responsibility.

Previous studies show that early childhood education quality depends on educator knowledge, professional conduct, learning resources, family support, and inclusive learning environments. Educators' understanding of professional codes of conduct helps guide ethical classroom behavior, while parental involvement and home-based support can strengthen children's social-emotional development (Agarry, 2022; Wahyuni *et al.*, 2021). Other studies have also highlighted challenges in early childhood education, including limited resources, access gaps, teacher readiness, and the need for stronger institutional support (Aguh and Olutola, 2023; Obafemi *et al.*, 2023). These findings indicate that professionalism should be connected to both classroom practice and broader systems of support.

In the context of SDG 4, professional educators are expected to promote inclusive and equitable quality education. This means that teachers must be prepared to respond to children's diverse needs, backgrounds, languages, values, and developmental conditions. Professional development should therefore include ethical reflection, inclusive pedagogy, and sensitivity to cultural and family contexts.

2.2. Cultural Responsiveness and Inclusive Practice

Cultural responsiveness refers to educators' ability to recognize, respect, and integrate learners' cultural backgrounds into teaching practice. In early childhood education, cultural responsiveness is especially important because young children form their identity, belonging, and social understanding through interaction with teachers, peers, and families. Teachers who understand children's cultural and family contexts can communicate more effectively, build trust, and create learning environments where children feel valued.

Culturally responsive professionalism supports inclusion because it treats diversity as a strength rather than a problem. It encourages educators to adapt classroom routines, stories, language use, examples, and family engagement strategies to reflect children's lived experiences. Previous research shows that collaborative early childhood systems and family-school partnerships can strengthen equitable educational coordination and inclusive learning support (Blewitt *et al.*, 2020; McWayne *et al.*, 2022). Teacher professional development that includes moral and digital education can also help educators respond more effectively to changing educational contexts and ethical challenges (Lin *et al.*, 2021).

Technology and virtual learning also affect early childhood education. Digital-based learning and virtual learning may support access and engagement, but they require educators

to remain sensitive to children's developmental stages, family resources, and cultural contexts (Wijaya and Nandiyanto, 2022; Salman and Yahaya, 2025). Thus, inclusive practice in early childhood education requires both pedagogical flexibility and cultural awareness.

2.3. Islamic Values, Reflective Ethics, and SDG 4

In Islamic educational philosophy, teaching is viewed as a moral and spiritual responsibility. The teacher is not only an instructor but also a moral guide who supports children's character, intellect, and social behavior. Islamic values such as *amanah* or trust, *ihsan* or excellence, *rahmah* or compassion, *adl* or justice, and *muhasabah* or self-reflection provide an ethical foundation for professional conduct in education.

These values are relevant to culturally responsive professionalism because they encourage teachers to act with fairness, empathy, sincerity, and accountability. *Amanah* reminds educators that teaching is a responsibility toward children, families, society, and God. *Ihsan* encourages excellence in both teaching quality and moral behavior. *Rahmah* supports compassionate interaction with young learners, while *adl* emphasizes fairness and respect for diverse children. *Muhasabah* encourages teachers to reflect on their actions and improve their professional practice.

Previous research on Islamic education and professional ethics emphasizes that teacher professionalism should include moral identity, reflective practice, and ethical responsibility (Hashim, 2018; Kassem et al., 2020). These principles align with SDG 4 because inclusive and quality education requires more than access to schooling. It also requires educators who can create humane, equitable, and culturally meaningful learning environments. Therefore, integrating Islamic values into professional development can support both local ethical traditions and global educational goals.

3. METHODS

This study used a qualitative descriptive design to explore how educators understand and apply culturally responsive professionalism in early childhood education. This approach was appropriate because the study aimed to capture educators' experiences, reflections, and ethical reasoning in multicultural early education settings. The participants consisted of 36 educators, including preschool teachers, teacher trainers, and administrators from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure variation in professional roles, teaching experience, institutional type, and cultural context. All participants provided informed consent and contributed their views anonymously. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations over ten weeks. Interviews explored participants' understanding of professionalism, cultural responsiveness, Islamic values, inclusive practice, and SDG 4. Focus group discussions allowed participants to reflect collectively on ethical challenges, family engagement, classroom diversity, and teacher development. Classroom observations were used to examine how culturally responsive professionalism appeared in daily teaching practice. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Interview and focus group transcripts were read repeatedly to identify patterns related to moral accountability, cultural empathy, reflective practice, and inclusive teaching. Initial codes were grouped into broader themes and interpreted through the lens of Islamic ethical principles and SDG 4. Triangulation of interviews, focus groups, and observations was used to strengthen credibility, while peer debriefing and reflexive journaling helped reduce researcher bias. Ethical procedures were followed throughout the study. Participants' identities were kept

confidential, and all data were used only for academic purposes. The research also followed Islamic ethical principles, including *amanah* in protecting participants' trust, *ikhlas* in interpreting data sincerely, and *adl* in representing participants' perspectives fairly.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings from interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations. The analysis identified three main themes: professionalism as moral accountability, teaching as cultural empathy, and reflection as spiritual growth. These themes show that culturally responsive professionalism in early childhood education is shaped by the interaction of ethical responsibility, cultural awareness, Islamic values, and inclusive practice.

4.1. Overview of Findings

The findings show that educators understood professionalism not only as compliance with institutional standards but also as a moral and cultural responsibility. Participants emphasized that early childhood educators should be patient, fair, compassionate, reflective, and responsive to the cultural backgrounds of children and families. This understanding is important because early childhood education is not only concerned with academic readiness but also with children's emotional, moral, social, and spiritual development.

Three major themes emerged from the data. First, professionalism was understood as *moral accountability*, especially through the values of *amanah* or trust and *ihsan* or excellence. Second, teaching was understood as *cultural empathy*, where educators adapted their communication, routines, stories, and classroom practices to respect children's cultural and family backgrounds. Third, reflection was understood as *spiritual growth*, where educators used self-evaluation or *muhasabah* to improve both teaching quality and moral conduct. These themes are summarized in **Table 1**. Culturally responsive professionalism connects professional competence with ethical and cultural awareness. The findings indicate that educators who understood teaching as a moral responsibility were more likely to emphasize fairness, compassion, and reflective improvement in their daily practice. This supports the view that professionalism in early childhood education should include moral identity and inclusive values, not only pedagogical skill.

Table 1. Main themes of culturally responsive professionalism in early childhood education.

THEME	MEANING IN EDUCATOR PRACTICE	RELATED ISLAMIC VALUE	LINK TO SDG 4
Professionalism as moral accountability	Teachers view their work as ethical responsibility, not only technical performance.	<i>Amanah, ihsan, ikhlas</i>	Supports quality teaching and ethical professional conduct.
Teaching as cultural empathy	Teachers respect children's family backgrounds, cultural values, and community traditions.	<i>Rahmah, adl</i>	Supports inclusive and equitable learning environments.
Reflection as spiritual growth	Teachers use self-reflection to improve fairness, patience, and sincerity in teaching.	<i>Muhasabah, ikhlas</i>	Supports continuous educator development and moral learning.
Inclusive professional practice	Teachers adapt instruction and interaction to diverse learners' needs and identities.	<i>Adl, rahmah</i>	Supports access, participation, and belonging for all children.

4.2. Professionalism as Moral Accountability

The first theme shows that educators viewed professionalism as moral accountability. Participants described teaching as an *amanah*, or trust, given by families, institutions, society, and God. This value shaped how educators understood their responsibilities toward young children. They believed that teaching required not only lesson preparation and classroom management but also sincerity, justice, patience, and care.

Many participants explained that early childhood educators influence children's character as well as their learning. Therefore, professional behavior should reflect *ihسان*, or excellence, in both instruction and moral conduct. Teachers who internalized this view tried to avoid favoritism, speak gently, respond fairly to children's mistakes, and create emotionally safe classrooms. This finding is consistent with Islamic educational thought, which views teachers as moral guides responsible for nurturing both intellect and character (Hashim, 2018).

Classroom observations supported the interview findings. Educators who described professionalism as moral accountability were observed using respectful language, mediating conflict calmly, and encouraging children to consider the feelings of others. These practices show that moral values were not only abstract beliefs but also practical guides for classroom interaction. In this sense, professionalism was enacted through daily ethical decisions.

This theme also aligns with SDG 4 because quality education requires safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environments. Early childhood educators who practice fairness and compassion can help children experience school as a place of trust and belonging. Professionalism as moral accountability, therefore, strengthens both educational quality and child well-being.

4.3. Teaching as Cultural Empathy

The second theme highlights cultural empathy as a central part of professionalism. Participants emphasized that teachers must understand children's cultural, linguistic, religious, and family backgrounds. They explained that children's behavior and communication styles are often shaped by home values and community norms. Therefore, culturally responsive educators should avoid judging children through a single standard and should instead learn from families and local contexts.

Teachers described several culturally responsive practices, including using local languages, choosing familiar stories, recognizing family traditions, and communicating respectfully with parents. These practices helped children feel recognized and valued in the classroom. Prior research also shows that culturally responsive teaching and family collaboration can support inclusion, belonging, and educational equity in early childhood settings (Blewitt *et al.*, 2020; McWayne *et al.*, 2022; Lin *et al.*, 2021).

Islamic values also shaped this theme. Participants connected cultural empathy with *rahmah*, or compassion, and *adl*, or justice. Compassion helped teachers respond patiently to children's needs, while justice required teachers to treat children fairly while recognizing their different backgrounds. In this way, equality did not mean treating every child in exactly the same way, but ensuring that every child received respectful and appropriate support.

Observation data showed that culturally responsive teachers created more inclusive classroom interactions. For example, teachers used stories about honesty, cooperation, and kindness to connect moral learning with children's cultural experiences. They also adjusted

classroom routines to respect children's religious and family practices. These findings suggest that cultural responsiveness can make early childhood education more meaningful and emotionally secure for young learners.

4.4. Reflection as Spiritual Growth

The third theme shows that educators understood reflection as a process of spiritual and professional growth. Participants described reflection not only as reviewing lesson success or classroom problems, but also as examining their intentions, patience, fairness, and sincerity. Many connected this practice with *muhasabah*, or self-evaluation, and *ikhlas*, or sincerity.

Reflective practice helped educators identify moments when they needed to improve their communication, emotional regulation, or treatment of children. Some participants explained that reflection allowed them to ask whether they had acted with fairness and compassion. This shows that professional development was experienced as both technical improvement and moral self-correction.

This finding supports previous research that professional ethics and reflective practice are important for teacher development (Kassem *et al.*, 2020). However, the present study extends this idea by showing how reflection can also be faith-informed. In this framework, educators do not reflect only to become more efficient teachers, but also to become more ethical, patient, and spiritually aware professionals.

Reflection as spiritual growth is also relevant to SDG 4 because inclusive and quality education depends on teachers who can continuously improve their practice. When reflection is linked to empathy and moral responsibility, teachers become more capable of responding to children's diverse needs. This strengthens the ethical foundation of professional development in early childhood education.

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

Across the three themes, the findings show that culturally responsive professionalism is an integrated framework that connects professional competence, Islamic ethics, inclusive practice, and SDG 4. Educators did not separate teaching skills from moral responsibility. Instead, they viewed professional practice as a combination of knowledge, empathy, cultural sensitivity, and ethical self-awareness.

This finding is important because many professional development programs focus mainly on curriculum delivery, classroom techniques, and assessment. While these skills are necessary, they are not sufficient for inclusive early childhood education. Teachers also need the ability to understand family values, respond to cultural diversity, reflect on moral decisions, and create learning environments where children feel safe and respected.

The study also shows that Islamic values can support the global goals of inclusive and equitable education. Values such as *amanah*, *ihsan*, *rahmah*, *adl*, and *muhasabah* provide a moral vocabulary for professional behavior. These values help educators connect faith, ethics, and teaching practice. Rather than conflicting with SDG 4, they can strengthen its implementation by grounding quality education in compassion, justice, and responsibility.

Table 2 presents an integrated framework showing how culturally responsive professionalism can support educator development and inclusive practice. Culturally responsive professionalism can be used as a professional development framework. It

encourages teacher education programs to include not only pedagogy and classroom management but also ethics, cultural understanding, family engagement, and reflective practice. This is important for multicultural early childhood settings, where teachers must balance global standards with local moral and cultural expectations.

Table 2. Integrated framework of culturally responsive professionalism for SDG 4.

PROFESSIONAL DIMENSION	PRACTICAL EXPRESSION	ETHICAL FOUNDATION	EXPECTED EDUCATIONAL OUTCOME
Ethical professionalism	Fairness, responsibility, sincerity, and respectful communication	<i>Amanah, ihsan, ikhlas</i>	Trustworthy and humane educator conduct
Cultural responsiveness	Recognition of children's language, family values, and community traditions	<i>Rahmah, adl</i>	Inclusive classrooms and stronger family-school relationships
Reflective practice	Self-evaluation of teaching decisions, emotions, and intentions	<i>Muhasabah, ikhlas</i>	Continuous professional and moral growth
Inclusive pedagogy	Adapted instruction, child-centered routines, and supportive interaction	<i>Adl, rahmah</i>	Greater participation, belonging, and child well-being
Professional development	Training in ethics, culture, family engagement, and reflective teaching	<i>Amanah, ihsan</i>	Educators prepared for SDG 4-oriented practice

The framework also has implications for policy and training. Teacher education programs should include modules on cultural responsiveness, inclusive communication, Islamic ethics, and reflective professionalism. Professional development workshops should help educators analyze classroom dilemmas, communicate with families, and respond to children's different needs with empathy and fairness. Such training can strengthen both educator competence and moral awareness.

4.6. Summary

The findings indicate that culturally responsive professionalism bridges the moral, cultural, and global dimensions of early childhood education. Educators in this study understood professionalism as a form of moral accountability, cultural empathy, and reflective spiritual growth. These dimensions support inclusive practice because they help teachers respond to children's diverse identities, values, and developmental needs.

By aligning Islamic values with SDG 4, culturally responsive professionalism provides a framework for early childhood education that is ethically grounded and socially inclusive. It redefines quality education as more than effective instruction. Quality education also includes compassion, fairness, belonging, reflective growth, and respect for children's cultural and moral worlds.

5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that culturally responsive professionalism strengthens the quality and inclusiveness of early childhood education. The findings show that educator professionalism is not only based on pedagogical competence, but also on moral accountability, cultural empathy, and reflective practice. Islamic values such as *amanah, ihsan, rahmah, adl, and muhasabah* can guide educators to act with trust, excellence, compassion, justice, and self-

awareness in their daily teaching. By integrating these values with SDG 4, early childhood educators can create learning environments that are more inclusive, humane, and culturally meaningful. Professional development programs should therefore include ethical reflection, cultural responsiveness, family engagement, and inclusive pedagogy. This approach can help educators support children's holistic development while advancing equitable and quality education for all.

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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