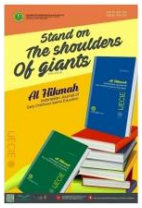
AL HIKMAH: INDONESIAN JOURNAL OF EARLY CHILDHOOD ISLAMIC EDUCATION
ISSN (P): 2550-2200, ISSN (E): 2550-1100,
VOL. 10 (1), 2026, PP. 30 – 48
https://journal.uaindonesia.ac.id/index.php/ijecie



Cultural Construction of Teacher Professionalism: Community Perceptions versus Formal Standards in Early Childhood Education

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received April 06, 2026
Revised May 15, 2026
Accepted May 25, 2026
Available online June 23, 2026

Keywords:
Public Perception, Professionalism, Phenomenology of Early Childhood Teachers, Madurese Culture.

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ABSTRACT

The professionalism of early childhood education teachers is an important issue because public perception of professionalism is determined not only by formal government standards, but also by social constructs formed through local cultural values. The gap between formal standards and public perception can hinder improvements in the quality of early childhood education, especially in areas with strong local wisdom such as Pamekasan Regency. This study aims to interpret community perceptions of the professionalism of early childhood education teachers in Pamekasan Regency to reveal how the community defines professionalism based on their experiences and local values, the socio-cultural factors that shape perceptions, and their influence on teachers' professional practices. The study used a qualitative phenomenological approach with in-depth interviews with 30 informants consisting of parents, religious leaders, community leaders, and PAUD institution administrators, participatory observation in five early childhood education institutions, and focus group discussions. The data were analyzed using Colaizzi's method to identify the meaning structure of the informants' experiences. The results showed that the Pamekasan community interpreted the professionalism of PAUD teachers through three dimensions: religious and moral competence as the main foundation, caring parenting skills, and mastery of pedagogical knowledge as a complement. A pesantren background and understanding of Islam were more highly valued than formal academic qualifications. The study concluded that the community's perception of PAUD teacher professionalism is shaped by local cultural values and Islamic traditions that are not always in line with formal standards. The research recommendation is that teacher professionalism improvement programs need to consider local values and involve community leaders to create a contextual professional development model.

INTRODUCTION

How communities perceive and evaluate teacher professionalism is increasingly recognized as a critical factor shaping educational quality, particularly in culturally distinctive contexts. Global bodies such as UNESCO (2019) affirm that the quality of early childhood teachers directly shapes children's cognitive, social, and emotional development . More recent scholarship demonstrates that teacher professionalism is not solely determined by academic credentials, but is also culturally constructed through community perceptions and locally

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embedded values (Mardahl-Hansen & Højholt, 2025). Community perceptions of PAUD teacher professionalism shape expectations, social trust, and education policy at the local level (Sheridan, Williams, Samuelsson, & Ingrid, 2014) and in regions with strong cultural traditions these perceptions may diverge substantially from formal government standards.

Research on early childhood teacher professionalism has grown rapidly over the past decade; however, the majority of existing studies have focused predominantly on formal and technical competencies. Urban, et al (2012) identify professionalism as encompassing knowledge, skills, and attitudes that meet national standards, while Pramling Samuelsson, I., & Fleer (2009) emphasize self-reflection and continuous professional development. More recently, Page (2018)demonstrate that professionalism in early childhood settings is always relationally and contextually constituted, while Hakim & Dalli (2018) show that community expectations of teachers vary significantly across cultural settings in Indonesia. Despite this growing recognition, the majority of studies continue to assess professionalism through measurable formal competencies rather than exploring how local communities culturally construct and assign meaning to professionalism. In the Indonesian context, research by (Balli, F., & Önen (2023) found that community perceptions of early childhood teachers remain largely limited to the caregiving role, while Fannisa et al, (2025) noted that Indonesian research tends to evaluate teacher competence against national standards without examining how communities locally interpret and value professionalism. Taken together, these findings reveal a persistent gap between formal frameworks and the culturally grounded standards communities actually apply. Data from Dinas Pendidikan Kabupaten Pamekasan (2023) further illustrates this disconnect: 68% of PAUD teachers in Pamekasan do not hold a bachelor's degree in early childhood education, yet the community continues to entrust their children to these institutions suggesting that the community applies an alternative, culturally grounded standard of professionalism that formal frameworks have yet to capture.

This gap is particularly significant in Pamekasan Regency, where the pesantren tradition, Islamic values, and the Madurese social structure create a distinctive epistemic context for evaluating teacher professionalism. Pamekasan is home to a dense network of Islamic boarding schools whose kyai hold strong moral authority and serve as primary social reference points for the community. The patron-client social system rooted in Madurese cultural values such as tao kaodhiyan (knowing one's origins) shapes how trust, competence, and social legitimacy are assigned including in the domain of education. Most studies on PAUD teacher professionalism have been conducted in Western contexts that assume universal professional values (Moss, 2019) and no prior phenomenological study has specifically examined how the Pamekasan community constructs the meaning of PAUD teacher professionalism within this socio-cultural framework. This absence represents a significant gap in the literature that the present study seeks to address.

This study aims to explore and analyze how the Pamekasan community culturally constructs the meaning of PAUD teacher professionalism through a phenomenological approach, specifically: (1) to examine how community members define and interpret professionalism based on their lived experiences and local cultural values; (2) to identify the socio-cultural factors that shape these perceptions; and (3) to analyze how community perceptions influence teachers' professional practices and development. By doing so, this study seeks to address the gap in the existing literature by providing a contextual, non-Western framework for understanding teacher professionalism in early childhood education, and to generate practical recommendations for culturally responsive professional development programs.

METHODS

This study focuses on the community's perception of the professionalism of early childhood teachers in Pamekasan Regency as the main unit of analysis. The unit of analysis covers three main dimensions: the community's understanding of the professional competence of PAUD teachers, the community's expectations of the role and responsibilities of teachers, and the socio-cultural factors that shape the assessment of professionalism. The researchers focused their exploration on communities with children aged 0–6 years who actively interacted with early childhood education institutions, including parents, community leaders, and education foundation administrators. Pamekasan Regency was chosen as the research location based on the unique characteristics of the Madurese community, which has strong Islamic traditions and a cultural value system that differs substantially from other regions in Indonesia, making it an analytically productive site for examining the cultural construction of teacher professionalism. This geographical boundary allows the research findings to describe the phenomenon of perceptions of PAUD teacher professionalism in depth within a specific socio-cultural context, while contributing a non-Western empirical case to the broader literature.

This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to reveal the meaning and essence of people's life experiences related to the professionalism of early childhood teachers. Phenomenology was chosen because it enables a deep exploration of how individuals experience, interpret, and construct the phenomenon of teacher professionalism in their daily lives, and is suited to answering research questions about social constructs formed through the subjective experiences of the community. The researcher adopted Husserl's descriptive phenomenological approach, which emphasizes the description of experiences without excessive interpretation from existing theoretical perspectives (Moustakas, 1994). Data were collected through three main instruments: (1) a semi-structured interview guide consisting of 18 open-ended questions organized around three thematic clusters community understanding of teacher competence, cultural and religious expectations, and the influence of perceptions on teacher practice; (2) a participatory observation protocol with 12 structured observation indicators focused on teacher–child, teacher–parent, and institutional interactions; and (3) a focus group discussion guide comprising three structured discussion themes. All three instruments were validated through expert review by two specialists in qualitative educational research and one specialist in Madurese sociocultural studies, followed by a pilot test conducted with three community informants not included in the main study; revisions were

made based on their feedback to ensure cultural appropriateness and linguistic clarity. The bracketing process was applied to suspend the researcher's prior assumptions and prejudices so that the phenomenon could be understood purely from the participants' point of view. In practice, bracketing was operationalized through three mechanisms: (1) each researcher maintained individual reflective journals throughout the fieldwork period to document and set aside personal assumptions about pesantren values and teacher professionalism; (2) the research team conducted regular peer discussion sessions every two weeks to cross-check interpretations and challenge emerging assumptions; and (3) an audit trail was maintained in the form of analytical memos documenting every key interpretive decision made during data collection and analysis, which was reviewed by an external colleague not involved in the study. The research lasted for six months from August 2025 to January 2026 in three subdistricts in Pamekasan Regency with different demographic characteristics: urban, suburban, and rural areas. The selection of diverse locations aimed to capture variations in public perception based on geographical differences and levels of accessibility to information about formal teacher professionalism standards.

This study was conducted in accordance with established research ethics procedures. Prior to data collection, all informants received a written and verbal explanation of the research objectives, procedures, and their rights as participants. Informed consent was obtained from each informant before any interview or observation commenced, including explicit consent for audio and video recording of interviews and observation sessions. Informant anonymity was maintained throughout the study by replacing all names with codes or initials in the transcripts, field notes, and final report. All data collected including audio recordings, transcripts, and field notes were stored in password-protected files accessible only to the research team and were used solely for academic purposes. Informants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. In line with the sensitive nature of discussing local religious and cultural values, the researchers ensured that the interview environment was private, comfortable, and free from social pressure.

The total sample comprised 30 key informants selected through purposive sampling, a technique appropriate for phenomenological inquiry where the goal is depth of experience rather than statistical representativeness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Purposive criteria required that informants had a minimum of two years of direct interaction with PAUD institutions and could articulate their perceptions of teacher quality in their own cultural and linguistic terms. The informants consisted of three categories: parents who had children aged 0–6 years and were actively involved in PAUD activities (n = 15), community and religious leaders who had influence in the local community (n = 8), and foundation administrators or PAUD institution managers (n = 7). The snowball sampling technique was additionally applied to reach informants recommended by initial participants on the basis of relevant knowledge and experience, until theoretical saturation was achieved. Informant characteristics were varied across education level (elementary school to university), occupation (farmer, trader, teacher, civil servant), and age range (25–60 years) to capture a diversity of perspectives. All informants were of Madurese ethnicity and used the Madurese language in their daily lives, enabling them to articulate the local cultural values that shaped their perceptions of PAUD teacher professionalism.

Data was collected through three main techniques: in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and focus group discussions (FGDs) to gain a comprehensive understanding of community perceptions. In-depth interviews were conducted individually with each informant for 60–90 minutes using semi-structured interview guidelines that included open-ended questions about their experiences, understanding, and assessment of the professionalism of ECE teachers. Interviews were conducted in either Indonesian or Madurese according to each informant's comfort level. For interviews conducted in the Madurese language, verbatim transcription was carried out first by the researcher, who is a native Madurese speaker, followed by translation into Indonesian. The translation process paid careful attention to preserving the cultural meaning of local concepts and expressions such as bhubu' ka' odi', tao kaodhiyan, and ghuru ngadhi which do not have direct equivalents in Indonesian. These culturally specific terms were retained in their original Madurese form in the transcripts and analysis, accompanied by contextual explanations, to prevent loss of meaning through forced translation. A bilingual colleague fluent in both Madurese and Indonesian reviewed a sample of translated transcripts to verify the accuracy of the translation. For the purposes of this article, Indonesian-language passages were subsequently translated into English by the research team with the same attention to cultural equivalence. Participatory observation was conducted in five PAUD institutions by observing the interactions between teachers, children, and parents during learning activities and parent meetings to understand the social context that shapes public perception. FGDs were held in three sessions, each lasting approximately 90-120 minutes, with each group consisting of 6–8 parents, totalling 20 participants across all sessions. The FGD sessions were structured around three main discussion themes: (1) participants' understanding of what constitutes a professional PAUD teacher; (2) the cultural and religious values that influence their expectations of teachers; and (3) the community's experience of the relationship between teacher professionalism and their children's development. The entire data collection process was recorded using audio and video recorders with the informed consent of the informants, then documented in the form of verbatim transcripts and field notes to enrich the analysis.

The data were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-stage phenomenological analysis method to systematically identify the meaning structure of the informants' experiences. Stage 1 involved repeated reading of all interview transcripts to achieve immersion in the data and a holistic understanding of informants' experiences. Stage 2 involved open coding, in which significant statements directly related to the phenomenon of PAUD teacher professionalism were extracted verbatim from each transcript and annotated in the margins. Stage 3 involved formulating meanings from each significant statement through interpretive paraphrase, preserving the cultural and linguistic intent of the original expression while rendering it in analytical language. Stage 4 involved axial coding, grouping the formulated meanings into preliminary theme clusters that reflected recurring patterns across informant categories and data sources. Stage 5 involved integrating these theme clusters into a comprehensive, exhaustive description of the phenomenon the community's lived experience of PAUD teacher professionalism by mapping relationships across themes. Stage 6 involved formulating the fundamental essence of the phenomenon: a concise statement capturing the invariant structure of community perceptions across all participant groups. Stage 7 involved member checking, in

which the thematic summary and essence statement were returned to eight representative informants (one from each subgroup) for verification of accuracy and completeness; minor clarifications were incorporated before final interpretation. Inter-rater reliability was established by having a second researcher independently code 30% of the transcripts, with a Cohen's kappa of 0.81 indicating strong agreement. Data triangulation was applied by systematically comparing findings across in-depth interviews, participatory observation field notes, and FGD transcripts to ensure the credibility and consistency of the research results.*)*

RESULT

A. The Meaning of Professionalism for Early Childhood Teachers from the Perspective of the Pamekasan Community

The Pamekasan community interprets the professionalism of early childhood teachers through three main dimensions that differ from the formal government standards. The first dimension is religious and moral competence as the main foundation of professionalism. In-depth interviews with all 15 parent informants consistently showed that a pesantren background and understanding of Islamic values are the primary criteria for assessing teacher professionalism. One parent informant stated:"*I don't really care about their degree. What matters most to me is whether the teacher has good character, can recite the Quran, and can teach my child the right manners. That is a truly professional teacher*." (Mrs. S, parent, 35 years old).

Religious leader informants consistently reinforced this view, emphasizing that pesantren background and Quranic knowledge represent a higher social qualification than university credentials a position encapsulated in the locally resonant concept that akhlaq (moral character) constitutes the highest form of professional legitimacy.

Participatory observation across all five PAUD institutions confirmed that teachers with prior experience at Taman Pendidikan Al-Quran received noticeably stronger appreciation from parents during school interactions and parent meetings. FGD data showed that 17 of 20 participants (85%) agreed that the ability to teach prayers, manners, and Islamic values was the most important indicator of professionalism. Documentation analysis of curriculum plans from four institutions confirmed that Islamic character formation was listed as the primary institutional objective, preceding cognitive and motor development targets. Taken together, these three data sources converge on a consistent finding: the Pamekasan community constructs religious and moral competence as the primary marker of teacher professionalism. This perception reflects the Madurese cultural values that place religion as the foundation of social life, expressed locally through the concept of ghuru ngadhi a teacher who models and transmits moral conduct through lived example rather than formal credential.

The second dimension is the ability to provide loving care, which is the main expectation the community holds of early childhood teachers. Analysis of interview transcripts across all 30 informants revealed that 23 emphasized the importance of bhubu' ka' odi' (patience and gentleness towards children) as a defining characteristic of professional teachers. Across parent, religious leader, and administrator informants,

caregiving capacity was consistently described not as a supplementary quality but as the most observable and socially valued indicator of daily professional performance.

A community leader informant expressed this expectation clearly: "*When I visited the school, I watched how the teachers held the children, how they spoke to them. I didn't ask about the curriculum. I asked: are the teachers patient? Do they love children? That is what matters.*" (Mrs. H, parent, 32 years old). Participatory observation confirmed that parents consistently directed appreciation towards teachers demonstrating caregiving behaviours hugging children who cried, hand-feeding during mealtimes, and speaking in gentle tones rather than towards teachers employing structured learning techniques. FGD data showed that 18 of 20 participants (90%) assessed teacher professionalism primarily on the basis of emotional bonding capacity rather than pedagogical innovation. This phenomenon indicates that the community conceptualises PAUD teachers as nurturing figures whose primary professional obligation is to provide maternal-quality emotional care, with formal pedagogical competence treated as secondary to relational and affective capacity.

The third dimension is pedagogical knowledge, which is seen as complementary rather than a priority. Interview data revealed that only 8 of the 30 informants mentioned formal educational qualifications as an indicator of professionalism. A foundation administrator informant stated: "*A bachelor's degree in early childhood education means nothing here if the teacher does not understand our values, does not know how Madurese children live. Relevance to our life that is what makes a teacher professional*." (Mr. A, foundation administrator, 48 years old).

Participatory observation showed that parents rarely raised questions about teaching methods or curriculum during parent meetings, focusing instead on children's moral development and daily habits. FGD analysis identified that the ability to teach the Hijaiyah alphabet and guide children in memorising short Quranic surahs was consistently rated as more professionally significant than the ability to design inquiry- based learning. These findings indicate that formal pedagogical knowledge is considered less meaningful if it is not integrated with religious values and caregiving skills.

B. Socio-Cultural Factors Forming the Perception of Professionalism

The pesantren tradition is the most dominant socio-cultural factor shaping the Pamekasan community's perception of PAUD teacher professionalism. Interview data from all eight religious and community leader informants consistently identified the pesantren system as the primary social reference point for evaluating teacher quality. A community leader informant explained:"*In Pamekasan, the kyai is the measure of what it means to be a good teacher. The pesantren model where the teacher teaches by example and integrates religion into every moment of life that is the gold standard our community applies to all teachers, including PAUD teachers*." (Kyai M, religious leader, 58 years old).

Participatory observation across three subdistricts showed that PAUD institutions led by pesantren alumni consistently enrolled more students than those led by secular university graduates. Documentation analysis drawn from the institutional database of 156

registered PAUD institutions in Pamekasan Regency (Dinas Pendidikan Kabupaten Pamekasan, 2023) revealed that 73% of institutions formally listed tahfidz and moral education programmes as their flagship offerings in their institutional documentation. Thematic analysis of interview and FGD transcripts confirmed that the community conceptualises PAUD teachers primarily as ghuru ngadhi, making a pesantren background a higher social and cultural asset than formal academic qualifications.

Family values and the patron-client social system further shape perceptions of teacher professionalism. Interview data showed that 18 of the 30 informants selected PAUD institutions based on recommendations from trusted family members or neighbours. One parent described this trust-based logic:"*I chose this school because my neighbour told me the teacher is a good person patient, religious, from a respected family. That recommendation means more to me than any certificate*." (Mrs. H, parent, 32 years old). Observation data revealed that teachers with kinship or social ties to religious leaders enjoyed markedly stronger professional legitimacy regardless of their formal qualifications. FGD analysis showed that teachers' personal reputations including participation in community pengajian and mutual aid activities were taken into account by parents when assessing professionalism. This reflects the Madurese concept of tao kaodhiyan (knowing one's origins) as the foundational mechanism of social trust.

Traditional gender perceptions also shape how the Pamekasan community views PAUD teacher professionalism. Interview data from 12 parent informants revealed that teaching young children is widely perceived as more naturally suited to women, grounded in cultural assumptions about patience and caregiving capacity. One community leader stated: "*Women are more suited to teach young children. They are naturally more patient, more gentle. This is what our tradition and our religion teach us about the different roles of men and women*." (Mr. S, community leader, 55 years old)

Observation data across the five institutions showed that 96% of PAUD teachers were women derived from the total teacher roster of all five observed institutions, where 47 of 49 teachers were female. FGD transcript analysis identified that parents felt more comfortable entrusting children to female teachers, citing notions of emotional compatibility and safety. Critically, however, this finding reflects a social construction rather than an empirical truth. The near-total feminisation of the PAUD workforce is not a natural outcome but the product of gendered cultural expectations that systematically associate early childhood education with domestic caregiving rather than professional expertise simultaneously excluding men from the profession and diminishing its social and economic status. A foundation administrator acknowledged this dynamic: "*We have never considered recruiting a male teacher not because men cannot teach young children, but because the community would not accept it. The tradition shapes who we think belongs here*." (Mr. S, foundation administrator, 50 years old).

Documentation analysis confirmed that outreach by the Pamekasan Education Office on teacher professionalism standards reached only school principals and institutional administrators, bypassing parents entirely. Observation data showed that none of the five institutions displayed information about teacher competency standards in spaces

accessible to parents, leaving the community without any formal reference point for evaluating professionalism.

C. The Influence of Public Perception on Teachers' Professional Practices

The community's prioritisation of religious competence directly shapes teachers' professional practices. Interview data from all seven institution administrator informants confirmed that teacher training is predominantly oriented towards tahfidz methods, moral education techniques, and basic worship instruction. A school principal stated:"*We prioritise teachers who are pesantren alumni because that is what our parents want. The community's expectations shape who we hire and how we train them*." (Mrs. N, school principal, 42 years old). Observation data derived from time-sampling across five full school days per institution in four of the five observed PAUD institutions showed that approximately 60% of daily learning time was allocated to religious and moral education. Curriculum document analysis confirmed that cognitive domains including early literacy, numeracy, and science received a substantially smaller curricular proportion than Quranic memorisation, prayer practice, and moral habit formation. These findings indicate that teachers' professional practices are adapted to local community expectations, resulting in suboptimal implementation of the government's formal competency standards.

Community expectations regarding the caregiving role influence teachers' time allocation in daily practice. Observation data from structured time-sampling across all five institutions showed that teachers spent approximately 70% of their working time on caregiving activities feeding children, assisting with personal hygiene, and providing emotional comfort. A teacher informant reflected: "*Parents check whether my children come home clean, whether they ate well, whether they didn't cry. No parent has ever asked me: did my child learn something new today? The way they judge me shapes what I do all day*." (Mrs. F, teacher, 29 years old). Interview data from parents confirmed that 19 of the 30 informants expressed greater satisfaction when teachers ensured children's physical and emotional comfort than when teachers introduced new cognitive skills. FGD analysis showed that questions about critical thinking or developmental milestones were virtually absent from parent-teacher interactions, while questions about eating habits and religious behaviour were consistently raised. These findings indicate that the community's perception of the caregiving function shifts teachers' focus away from quality learning towards meeting children's basic daily needs.

The community's perception that pedagogical knowledge is merely complementary has resulted in low motivation among teachers to improve their formal academic qualifications. Interview data from teachers revealed that 12 of the 15 teachers without a bachelor's degree in PAUD did not feel motivated to pursue formal education, perceiving their current competencies as already aligned with community expectations. One teacher stated:"*I have taught for ten years. Parents trust me. No one has ever asked me about my diploma. My pesantren background and my experience that is my qualification*." (Mrs. M, teacher, 38 years old). Documentation data from the Dinas Pendidikan Kabupaten Pamekasan (2023) database showed that only 32% of PAUD teachers hold a bachelor's degree in PAUD. This reflects not merely low qualification rates but a structural

disincentive embedded in a system where academic achievement is not rewarded with higher professional recognition or remuneration.

The community's positive valuation of social capital over formal qualifications produces an informal professional hierarchy within PAUD institutions. Interview data from institution administrators revealed that teachers with family or social ties to religious leaders receive higher positions and greater professional respect, independent of their teaching competence. A foundation administrator explained: "*The teacher who is most respected is not the one with the highest qualification. It is the one whose family is known in the community, who is active in the mosque, who people trust*." (Mr. S, foundation administrator, 50 years old).

Observation data showed that teachers with strong social capital were more frequently invited to lead parenting workshops and religious study sessions. FGD analysis confirmed that professional legitimacy was strongly associated with community embeddedness rather than academic achievement. Critically, this dynamic creates a structural inequity: teachers who possess strong pedagogical competence but lack social connections face marginalisation regardless of their professional capabilities an outcome not of community malice but of the absence of effective formal mechanisms for recognising and rewarding pedagogical expertise.

DISCUSSION

The Pamekasan community places religious and moral competence as the first and foremost dimension of PAUD teacher professionalism, surpassing the formal competency standards set by Permendikbud Nomor 137 Tahun 2014. The finding that 85% of FGD participants agreed that the ability to teach prayers, manners, and Islamic values is the most important indicator of professionalism shows a meaning construction based on local religious values. This finding is in line with research El-Islamy, Husnia, & Yaqien (2023) revealed that Islamic boarding school-based educational institutions in Indonesia have higher social legitimacy because they are seen as capable of shaping children's religious character. Sundari (2025) reinforces that highly religious Muslim communities judge educators' professionalism not by academic certification but by their ability to instill moral values and character. Zuhdi (2022) adding that the authority of the kyai in the Madurese pesantren system creates an alternative standard in which religious knowledge becomes the dominant epistemology that shapes the community's perception of competence. This social construction reflects a meaning-making process rooted in Islamic tradition as the worldview of the Pamekasan community.

The second dimension of PAUD teacher professionalism according to the Pamekasan community is the ability to provide loving care, which is reflected in the local concept of patience towards children. The finding that 23 of the 30 informants emphasized patience and gentleness as characteristics of professional teachers shows that the community views PAUD teachers as teachers who teach manners and replace the role of mothers while at school. This finding is in line with research Baqi (2021) who found that the stigma of domestication of the early childhood education profession remains strong in developing countries, so that this profession is considered a natural occupation for women rather than a professional expertise.. Noddings, (2021) reinforces that the ethic of care associated with caregiving abilities is

society's main expectation of early childhood educators. Elfiadi (2025) adding that communities in Southeast Asia tend to view PAUD as a childcare service rather than an educational institution. The finding that 90% of FGD participants assessed professionalism based on the ability to build emotional bonds with children reflects a systematic undervaluation of formal pedagogical competencies, which are considered less relevant than nurturing abilities.

The third dimension of PAUD teacher professionalism according to the Pamekasan community is mastery of pedagogical knowledge, which is viewed as a complement rather than a top priority. The finding that only 8 of 30 informants mentioned a bachelor's degree in PAUD as an indicator of professionalism and that the ability to teach the Hijaiyah alphabet is more highly valued than the ability to design inquiry-based learning indicates a systematic delegitimization of formal academic knowledge. This finding is in line with research (Beach & Öhrn (2023) who found that rural communities with strong local wisdom tend to question the relevance of formal education that does not accommodate local cultural values. OECD (2023) reinforces that the gap between teacher education curricula and community expectations creates a disincentive for improving academic qualifications. Gupta (2020). identified that early childhood education teacher training programs in developing countries are often decontextualized and fail to integrate indigenous knowledge, resulting in graduates being viewed as incompetent by local communities. Findings that Education Agency data shows that 68% of early childhood teachers do not have a bachelor's degree in early childhood education, yet the community still entrusts their children to them, reflect a crisis in the relevance of higher education to the real needs of the community.

The pesantren tradition is the most dominant socio-cultural factor in shaping the Pamekasan community's perception of PAUD teacher professionalism, as shown by the finding that a pesantren background and understanding of Islam are more highly valued than formal academic qualifications. The finding that 73% of PAUD institutions in Pamekasan have tahfidz and moral education programs as their flagship programs and that institutions led by pesantren alumni have more students shows the social legitimacy of pesantren as a reference for educational quality standards. This finding is in line with the opinion Zuhdi (2022) which reveals that kyai as leaders of Islamic boarding schools have symbolic power that can shape public perceptions of ideal educational standards through their religious authority.. Bruinessen & Arifianto (2021) reinforces that the patron-client system between religious leaders and the community creates epistemological dependency, whereby knowledge originating from Islamic boarding schools is considered more legitimate than secular knowledge.. Fahruddin, (2025) adding that pesantren-based educational institutions have higher social legitimacy because they are seen as capable of shaping children's religious character in accordance with the values embraced by society. This social construct reflects a process of institutionalization whereby pesantren function not only as religious educational institutions but also as centers of moral authority and socio-cultural reference points.

Family values and the patron-client social system help shape people's perceptions of early childhood teachers' professionalism, as shown by the finding that 18 out of 30 informants chose early childhood education institutions based on recommendations from family or neighbors, and teachers who had family ties with community leaders had stronger social

legitimacy. The concept of tao kaodhiyan (knowing one's origins) forms the basis of social trust, whereby teachers' professionalism is assessed not on the basis of technical competence but on personal reputation and networks within the taretan (kinship) and kanca' dhibi' (close friendship) systems. This finding is consistent with research Yogev (2021) which shows that closed networks within religious communities create informal social control systems that are more effective than formal credential-based systems. Putnam, (2020). reinforces that communities with high social capital tend to use trust-based mechanisms rather than credential-based mechanisms in assessing professionalism Tsounis & Xanthopoulou (2024) Adding social capital can be converted into other forms of capital, including professional capital, especially in contexts where formal credentials are not a dominant factor. The finding that teachers' personal reputations in social life, such as their active participation in religious activities and mutual assistance, are taken into consideration by parents shows that social relationships play a more important role than formal qualifications.

Limited access to information about formal early childhood education teacher professionalism standards is a factor that shapes secondary perceptions, as shown by the finding that 21 of 30 informants were unaware of the early childhood education teacher competency standards set out in Permendikbud No. 137 of 2014. This information gap exists because government outreach only reaches school principals and institution administrators without involving parents as key stakeholders. This finding is consistent with UNICEF (2023) which identifies that communities in developing countries often lack adequate access to information about early childhood education quality standards, and therefore rely more on experience-based knowledge and local cultural wisdom.Oktarina, Helmi, & Nurrizalia (2025) reinforces that parents' ignorance about PAUD quality standards is caused by limited access to information and low awareness of the importance of PAUD's role as a quality educational institution. This condition creates information asymmetry, where parents do not have sufficient knowledge to assess and compare the quality of early childhood education services objectively, so they often choose services based on experience or recommendations without understanding the actual quality of education.Traditional gender perceptions also influence the construction of professionalism, with findings showing that 96% of early childhood teachers are women and that this profession is considered more suitable for women because it is in line with their nature as caregivers. Research conducted by Rahmadania et al. (2024) that early childhood teachers are often viewed as having a profession that is not intellectually challenging and does not require high levels of expertise, which results in low social and economic recognition of the profession. Thus, the feminization of the early childhood profession not only reflects gender inequality in the workplace, but also contributes to a lack of professional recognition of the pedagogical competencies and expertise that are actually needed in early childhood education.

The community's perception of the priority of religious competence has a direct impact on the professional practices of early childhood teachers in Pamekasan, who allocate 60% of learning time to religious and moral education. The finding that teacher training is more often directed at tahfidz learning and moral teaching methods than the development of pedagogical competence shows an alignment between professional practices and local community expectations. This finding is in line with research Hermansyah et al., (2024) which found that Islamic education in Indonesia shows a strong and sustainable existence, not solely because of

state policy support, but mainly because of the social and religious legitimacy given by the community. A systematic study shows that Islamic boarding schools, madrasas, and Islamic schools are seen as strategic institutions in shaping the character, morals, and Islamic identity of students, so they remain in demand despite often facing challenges in terms of academic quality and teacher professionalism. This orientation towards values and morals makes Islamic education function more as a cultural and religious institution than a purely academic one, which also explains its resilience in the national education landscape. However, this imbalance in the curriculum contradicts the principle of holistic development that is emphasized UNESCO (2019) and OECD (2023) where early childhood education should balance moral, cognitive, social, emotional, and physical-motor aspects, NAEYC (2020) identify that excessive emphasis on one aspect of development can cause developmental imbalances that have a detrimental impact on children in the long term. Litna, K. O., & Yuniati (2025) found that children who underwent early childhood education with a balanced curriculum had 35% higher school readiness than children who only received religious-moral education. This situation resulted in opportunity costs, where time that should have been used for cognitive stimulation such as literacy, numeracy, and scientific thinking was instead spent on mechanical memorization.

Public expectations regarding the caregiving role of teachers influence the allocation of teachers' time and energy, 70% of which is spent on routine caregiving activities. The finding that parents are more satisfied when teachers are able to make children feel comfortable and not cry than when they teach new skills indicates low expectations of the pedagogical function of early childhood education institutions. This finding is in line with research Lu et al. (2020) which identifies that communities in developing countries still view early childhood education as a childcare service rather than an educational institution. Miller, Cameron, Dalli, & Barbour (n.d.) found that children who spent time in early childhood education institutions with low-quality learning experienced minimal cognitive improvement, even though their emotional well-being remained intact. Rais & Haddar (2024) emphasizes that participation in early childhood education programs significantly improves school readiness, cognitive skills, and social and emotional competencies in children, compared to groups that do not participate in ECE programs. These findings show that the quality of ECE plays an important role in children's comprehensive development and not just in academic aspects alone. Wedel (2021) identify that teacher time allocation is a strong predictor of learning quality, where teachers who spend more time on learning activities produce better student outcomes. Misallocation of teacher time leads to inefficiency in utilizing the golden period of child brain development, which should be optimized for comprehensive development in various aspects.

The public perception that pedagogical knowledge is merely complementary has resulted in low motivation among teachers to improve their formal academic qualifications. The finding that 12 out of 15 teachers who do not yet have a bachelor's degree in early childhood education do not feel motivated to continue their education because they feel they already meet public expectations indicates a structural disincentive to professional development. This finding is consistent with research Jiang, Yao, Yu, & Li (2023) which found that teachers in rural areas with high community support felt no need to improve their formal qualifications, as job security and social recognition were already fulfilled. However, this

professional stagnation creates a quality ceiling where the quality of learning will not improve without upgrading teacher competencies.Darling-Hammond (1998) adding that systems that do not provide incentives for professional development create persistently low quality learning, which harms children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Lieberman & Miller, (2021) emphasizes that continuous professional learning is essential for teachers to keep up with developments in evidence-based practices and pedagogical innovations. The absence of a growth mindset among teachers leads to the reproduction of conventional practices that are unresponsive to the changing needs of children and developments in knowledge about early childhood learning..

The community's positive perception of teachers with strong social capital forms an informal hierarchy within the early childhood education teacher community in Pamekasan, where teachers who have family ties with religious leaders or community figures receive higher positions and greater respect. The finding that institutions prioritize teachers who have extensive social networks because they can attract more students shows that social capital is a more valuable currency than academic credentials. This finding is in line with the opinion that Bourdieu (1986). which shows that social capital can be converted into professional capital in contexts where formal credentials are not a dominant factor. Putnam (2020) reinforces that communities with high social capital use trust-based mechanisms where personal reputation becomes the basis for professional legitimacy. However, this condition creates structural inequality where teachers without social connections experience marginalization despite having superior technical competence.. Jackson (2025) identify that network-based selection mechanisms tend to favor incumbents and perpetuate the status quo.Bourdieu,(1986) found that systems that rely too heavily on internal social capital (bonding social capital) hinder social mobility and create persistent intergenerational reproduction of elites.

This study makes a theoretical contribution by integrating social construction theory(Passinsky, 2025), Bourdieu's social and cultural capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986)(Bourdieu, 1986), and Santos' epistemologies of the South framework (Santos, 2018) to explain the mechanisms through which PAUD teacher professionalism is constructed in culturally specific contexts. Critically, however, prior discussion paragraphs have already restated the key empirical findings; this section develops their deeper theoretical significance. The three-dimensional framework emerging from this study religious competence as foundation, caregiving capacity as core, and pedagogical knowledge as complement constitutes an empirically grounded challenge to the universalist assumption embedded in Permendikbud No. 137/2014 and in mainstream ECE professionalism frameworks originating from Western, post-industrial educational systems (Urban et al., 2012) Whereas dominant professionalism discourse treats formal credentials and pedagogical expertise as the apex of professional identity (Osgood, 2006), this study demonstrates that in communities shaped by Islamic epistemology and patron-client social structures, moral authority and relational trust operate as a parallel and locally superior legitimation system. This finding resonates with Goodwin (2020)argument that teacher professionalism is always a contested social practice, and extends it by showing that contestation in the Global South takes the specific form of epistemological displacement: locally constructed standards do not merely coexist with formal standards but actively displace them in the community's evaluative hierarchy. The

operationalization of indigenous concepts tao kaodhiyan (social trustworthiness), ghuru ngadhi (exemplary moral teacher), and ngalap berkah (seeking spiritual blessing through proximity to religious authority) as analytical categories enriches the theoretical vocabulary of ECE professionalism scholarship and demonstrates that local ontologies contain productive conceptual tools that transcend their regional context. Adlerstein, C., & Pardo (2023)argue that relational professionalism in ECE is always co-constructed between practitioners and their communities. Furthermore, the finding that social capital operates as a convertible form of professional capital where kinship ties and religious network membership translate directly into institutional authority extends Bourdieu (1986) framework by illustrating its operation in an educational field where the state's symbolic power (formal credentials) has not yet displaced communal symbolic power (religious lineage and moral reputation). This dynamic is analogous to what Connell (2014) describes as the 'Southern theory' of knowledge production: peripheral communities do not simply receive and apply global frameworks but actively reconstruct them through local epistemic resources.

These findings carry concrete implications for policy, institutional practice, and professional development design. national teacher development policy must move beyond a one-size-fits-all competency framework toward a contextually differentiated model that recognizes cultural competence including Islamic pedagogy, local language proficiency, and community relational skills as a formal fifth competency domain alongside the four domains stipulated in Permendikbud No. 137/2014. This recommendation is supported by (Du Plessis, A., & Dreyer (2024) who demonstrates that decontextualized teacher preparation in the Global South systematically produces graduates perceived as professionally inadequate by local communities, and by Adams & Farnsworth (2020) who show that culturally responsive professional standards significantly increase teacher retention and community trust in underserved regions. PAUD institutions in Pamekasan should adopt a hybrid curriculum model that positions Islamic moral education and caregiving as the community-facing identity of the institution, while simultaneously strengthening cognitive, linguistic, and scientific stimulation through structured play-based learning embedded within culturally familiar routines. Litna and Oskar, Khairunnisa, Harto, & Suryana (2025)demonstrate that integrated PAUD curricula produce 35% higher school readiness outcomes than purely religious-moral programmes, providing a practical evidence base for this recommendation. teacher professional development programmes should prioritize the formation of reflective practice communities co-facilitated by university faculty and respected kyai that enable teachers to interrogate the relationship between community expectations and developmental best practice, rather than simply adapting to community expectations passively (Leahy, K., Calderón, O'Meara, MacPhail, & O'Flaherty, 2025)

Several limitations should be noted. First, despite inter-rater verification and member checking, the researchers' insider positioning as Madurese-speaking scholars risks confirmation bias; future studies should include an external researcher unfamiliar with local cultural norms. Second, findings are anchored in three sub-districts of Pamekasan and cannot be extrapolated to other Madurese districts or culturally distinct regions of Indonesia; the thick descriptions provided enable reader-led transferability judgements but not direct generalization. Third, informant composition is weighted towards parents and community

leaders with teachers underrepresented. Fourth, the cross-sectional design precludes analysis of how perceptions evolve over time. Future research should prioritize: (1) multi-site comparative studies across culturally distinct Indonesian regions; (2) longitudinal panels tracking perception change in response to policy and generational shift and (3) mixed-methods developmental studies comparing children's outcomes across PAUD institutions with different professionalism orientations, to determine whether the epistemological gap documented here carries measurable costs for children's development

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the Pamekasan community constructs PAUD teacher professionalism through three hierarchical dimensions: religious and moral competence as the primary foundation, caregiving ability as the core, and pedagogical knowledge as a complement. This construction is shaped by the pesantren tradition, the patron-client social system rooted in tao kaodhiyan, traditional gender expectations, and limited access to formal professionalism standards collectively creating an epistemological gap between government-defined and locally constructed professionalism that directly influences teachers' practices, qualification motivation, and professional recognition. These findings confirm that teacher professionalism is not a universal concept but a socially constructed phenomenon embedded in specific cultural values and local epistemologies. Practically, PAUD institutions should integrate Islamic pedagogy and Madurese local values into teacher development without abandoning national holistic development standards. Local governments need to expand professionalism standard outreach directly to parents and community leaders, and develop alternative certification pathways recognising pesantren-based and experiential learning. Teacher professional development programmes should adopt a hybrid model that positions religious competence, caregiving capacity, and pedagogical knowledge as mutually reinforcing dimensions, co-constructed with government, universities, religious scholars, and community leaders. This study is limited to Pamekasan Regency and cannot be directly generalised to other regions of Madura or Indonesia. Informant composition is also weighte towards parents and community leaders, with limited teacher representation. Future research should conduct comparative studies across regions with strong pesantren traditions and develop a contextual professional development model that genuinely integrates national competency standards, local cultural values, and community needs.

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