



Reframing Kindergarten Teacher Professionalism in Nurturing Deep Learning Experiences during Early Primary Education

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the professionalism of kindergarten teachers in fostering deep learning experiences in early elementary school education. As the demands of developing high-level thinking skills and social-emotional competencies increase, early childhood teachers are required to carry out professional roles that are reflective, adaptive, and based on strong pedagogy. This research aims to reframe the professionalism of kindergarten teachers by examining the contribution of professional knowledge, pedagogical beliefs, and learning practices in supporting deep learning. The research uses a qualitative approach with multiple case study designs. Data was collected through classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and analysis of learning documents, then analyzed thematically. The results of the study show that teachers with high professional flexibility, curriculum adaptability, and child-oriented pedagogical competence are more effective in creating a learning environment that encourages deep learning. Teacher professionalism is not only determined by formal qualifications, but also by the ability to integrate understanding of child development, responsive learning strategies, and designing meaningful learning. This study emphasizes the importance of strengthening cross-cultural competencies and reflective pedagogy in teacher education and early childhood education policies.

INTRODUCTION

The quality of early education at the elementary school level is greatly influenced by the professionalism of kindergarten teachers who play a role as the main foundation in the formation of early childhood learning experiences. At this stage, the learning process is not only directed at achieving basic academic abilities such as literacy and numeracy, but also at developing high-level thinking skills, social-emotional competence, and long-term learning readiness (OECD, 2020; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Therefore, kindergarten teachers are required to have professionalism that is not only technical, but also reflective and contextual.

The development of global education discourse shows a paradigm shift from surface learning to deep learning. Deep learning emphasizes the active involvement of learners in the process of critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, and sustainable construction of meaning (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014; Hattie, 2017). In the context of early childhood education, deep learning is not interpreted as material complexity, but as a meaningful, exploratory, and appropriate learning experience for the child's developmental stage.

Although the concept of deep learning has been widely applied to primary and secondary education, studies on its implementation in the context of kindergarten and early primary education are still relatively limited. In fact, this period is a crucial phase in the formation of learning habits, curiosity, and a positive attitude towards learning. The limitations of this study show that there is a gap between the demands of meaningful learning and pedagogical practices that take place in kindergarten classrooms.

The professionalism of kindergarten teachers has often been understood normatively as the possession of academic qualifications, certifications, and adherence to the curriculum and learning standards (Urban et al., 2012; Sachs, 2016). This approach tends to position teachers as implementers of education policy, rather than as professional actors who have pedagogical autonomy and reflective capacity. As a result, learning practices are often routine and lack space for immersive learning experiences.

Contemporary perspectives view teacher professionalism as a dynamic construct that includes professional identity, reflexivity, pedagogical decision-making, and moral responsibility towards learners (Biesta, 2015; Day & Gu, 2018). Within this framework, kindergarten teachers are positioned as learning experience designers who are able to integrate a child's developmental understanding, socio-cultural context, and long-term learning goals. This reframing of professionalism is an important prerequisite for the realization of deep learning in early childhood education.

In the Indonesian context, education policies that emphasize student-centered learning and character development have increased expectations for the professional role of early childhood education teachers (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). Kindergarten teachers are expected to be able to design learning that is contextual, inquiryal, and responsive to the diversity of students. However, a number of studies show that learning practices are still dominated by teacher-

centered approaches and routine activities, so that the potential of deep learning has not been developed optimally (Mulyasa, 2020; Suyanto & Jihad, 2021).

Various studies confirm that professional reflexivity, curriculum adaptation, and child-oriented pedagogy are key factors in improving the quality of learning in early childhood education (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2008; Sheridan et al., 2019). However, research that specifically links the professionalism dimension of kindergarten teachers to the development of deep learning experiences is still very limited, especially in the context of early elementary education. This gap shows the need for more in-depth and contextual empirical studies.

Based on this exposure, this study aims to reframe the professionalism of kindergarten teachers by exploring how professional knowledge, pedagogical beliefs, and learning practices contribute to fostering deep learning experiences in early elementary school education. By using a qualitative approach through multiple case study designs, this research is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the study of teacher professionalism as well as practical implications for teacher education, sustainable professional development, and early childhood education policies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Professionalism of Early Childhood Education Teachers and Its Challenges

The professionalism of Early Childhood Education (PAUD) teachers is a fundamental factor in determining the quality of educational services during the early development period of children. Professional teachers have not only formal qualifications, but also pedagogic competence, mature personality character, and strong social abilities to support the holistic development of children (Sahadatunnisa et al., 2023). Literature studies show that the professional development of early childhood education teachers involves integrated pedagogic, personality, professional, and social domains, each of which contributes to creating a conducive and responsive learning environment to the child's developmental needs (Andriani et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, the practice of teacher professionalism in many PAUD units still faces a number of challenges, such as variations in academic qualifications, low pedagogical competence in learning design, and limited use of relevant learning media or technologies (Julia & Nurhafizah, 2024; Wulandari et al., 2022). This condition has an impact on the implementation of traditional and less innovative learning practices, which can ultimately limit teachers' ability to facilitate meaningful learning experiences for students.

Deep Learning Approach in Early Childhood Education

Deep learning in PAUD focuses on the active involvement of students through sensory stimulation, project-based activities, and holistic social interaction, so that it can meet various aspects of development such as cognitive, motor, social, emotional, and children's character simultaneously (Jayawardana, 2024). This approach encourages children to consciously relate knowledge to real

experiences, think reflectively, and build a deeper conceptual understanding than just memorization or simple routines.

In line with that, the application of deep learning is also related to the shift in the role of teachers from mere conveyors of information to facilitators who are able to design meaningful and contextual learning activities. For example, deep learning strategies include play-while learning activities, thematic projects, and teacher-guided social interactions to encourage children's exploration and active involvement in the learning process (Jayawardana, 2024; Munawar et al., 2025).

The Interaction between Teacher Professionalism and Deep Learning

Recent research shows that improving teachers' professional competence, especially in the ability to design meaningful and reflective learning experiences, contributes to the effectiveness of implementing deep learning approaches in early childhood education. This includes skills in preparing lesson plans that are appropriate to the child's developmental stages, choosing the right learning media, and managing classroom interactions effectively (Andriani et al., 2023; Nayra et al., 2024).

In addition, professional training programs based on real practices, such as action research training and continuous coaching, show an increase in teachers' ability to reflect on practice, evaluate learning strategies, and adapt plans that suit the individual needs of students (Hafidah et al., 2022). These findings reinforce the evidence that teacher professional development is an important prerequisite in supporting the effective and sustainable implementation of deep learning in the context of early childhood education.

Research Gaps and Contributions of This Study

Although a number of studies have explored aspects of the competence and professionalism of early childhood education teachers, there are still limitations in research that directly link teachers' professionalism to their ability to create meaningful deep learning experiences for students in early primary school education. Previous studies have tended to focus on the development of general competencies or separate learning strategies, without integrating the concept of professionalism with pedagogical designs that support deep learning systematically (Sahadatunnisa et al., 2023; Jayawardana, 2024).

For this reason, this study takes a position to fill this gap by thoroughly examining how the professionalism of kindergarten teachers—including professional knowledge, pedagogical beliefs, and reflective practices—plays a role in fostering deep learning experiences in elementary school early education. The findings of this study are expected to enrich theoretical and practical studies on the professionalism of educators and provide strategic recommendations for the development of early childhood education in the future.

METHODOLOGY

Research and Design

This study uses a qualitative approach with multiple case study designs to explore the professionalism of kindergarten teachers in fostering deep learning experiences in elementary school early education. The qualitative approach was

chosen because it was able to present an in-depth understanding of perspectives, professional practices, and learning dynamics in the early childhood education environment (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The multiple case study design facilitates cross-contextual comparisons of teachers with different professional characteristics, resulting in richer and more contextual understanding (Yin, 2018; Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Location and Research Participants

The research was carried out in several kindergarten schools in the region (e.g., province/city) which were selected by purposive sampling based on variations in school characteristics (public/private), teacher experience level, and diversity of students. The main participants of the study were kindergarten teachers (n = 12–15) who had at least two years of teaching experience and were willing to share experiences related to their professional practices in meaningful learning (deep learning). The criteria for selecting participants are also adjusted to the principles of representativeness and diversity of perspectives to understand the various practices of teacher professionalism holistically (Patton, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Instruments and Data Collection

The research data was collected through three main techniques, namely structured classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation analysis. Structured classroom observation was carried out to obtain empirical data on learning practices applied by teachers in the classroom, especially strategies used to encourage active student involvement, exploration, and reflection as the main elements of deep learning (Anggraini & Harnanto, 2023; Munawar et al., 2025). The focus of observation includes learning activities, interaction patterns between teachers and students, and teachers' responses to individual needs of children in the learning process.

In addition to observation, semi-structured interviews were used to delve deeply into teachers' professional views and experiences related to pedagogical beliefs, practical reflections, and strategies they applied in creating meaningful learning experiences. This interview approach allows for flexibility in exploring issues that arise during the data collection process, without neglecting the main question framework that has been compiled based on teacher professionalism indicators and deep learning principles developed in the literature review (Rowley, 2022; Guest et al., 2020).

The next data collection technique is documentation, which includes the analysis of the Learning Implementation Plan (RPP), teacher reflection journals, and learning portfolios. Document analysis was carried out to strengthen and verify the findings obtained from observations and interviews, as well as provide written evidence regarding the planning, implementation, and evaluation of learning carried out by teachers (Miles et al., 2019). The use of these various data sources allows triangulation, thereby increasing the credibility and validity of research results.

Research Procedure

This research was carried out through several systematic stages. The initial stage begins with the selection of locations and research participants using purposive sampling techniques to ensure the diversity of school contexts and professional characteristics of teachers. Furthermore, the researcher applied for a research permit to the school and obtained approval from the student's parents to ensure that the entire research process met the principles of research ethics.

The next stage is the collection of primary data through classroom observation and teacher interviews over a period of 8–12 weeks, allowing researchers to gain a deep and continuous understanding of the learning practices applied. In addition, the analysis of learning documents, such as lesson plans and teachers' reflection notes, is carried out as part of the data triangulation process. All data obtained are then analyzed in an integrated manner through source triangulation to increase the validity and credibility of the findings by combining observation, interviews, and documentation (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using a thematic analysis model that included stages: data preparation, code unit formation, identification of key themes, preparation of advanced themes, and thematic interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This approach allows researchers to find patterns of meaning in qualitative data that are relevant to teacher professionalism and deep learning implementation. The analysis process also involves triangulation between data sources and member checking to increase the credibility and reliability of the findings (Nowell et al., 2017).

Quality and Validity Criteria

To ensure the quality and validity of the research, several methodological strategies are applied systematically. Data triangulation was carried out by combining the results of classroom observations, teacher interviews, and learning documentation analysis to strengthen the consistency of findings (Denzin, 2017). In addition, member checking is carried out by involving participants in the process of verifying the results of data interpretation to ensure the accuracy of meaning. Researchers also compile trail audits that document the entire research process, including analytical decision-making, in an effort to improve the transparency and dependability of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). The researcher's reflexivity is maintained through continuous recording of reflections and field notes to minimize subjective bias in the process of data collection and analysis.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The results of the study show that the professionalism of kindergarten teachers in fostering deep learning experiences in early education is not solely reflected in the technical mastery of pedagogic competencies, but more broadly includes reflective skills, sensitivity to the context of children's development, and professional awareness in designing meaningful learning experiences. Thematic

analysis of classroom observation data, in-depth interviews, and learning documentation resulted in three main themes that are intertwined, namely: (1) shifting the role of teachers as facilitators of meaningful learning, (2) reflective and adaptive pedagogical practices, and (3) the creation of learning environments that support children's exploration and active engagement.

Shifting the Role of Teachers as Facilitators of Meaningful Learning

The first theme shows a significant shift in the way teachers interpret their professional roles. Teachers no longer position themselves as centers for knowledge delivery, but rather as facilitators who consciously design learning experiences based on exploration, dialogue, and meaningful play. Classroom observations show that teachers provide ample space for children to ask questions, express opinions, and build understanding through social interaction and hands-on experience. One of the teachers explained the role change as follows:

"I now observe more and provoke children to think. If I used to explain everything, now I ask back so that they can find the answer for themselves." (G1 interview, February 12, 2025)

A similar view was also expressed by another teacher who emphasized the importance of giving confidence in a child's thinking ability:

"Children are actually able to think deeper than we imagine. My job is not to give quick answers, but to accompany their process of understanding." (G3 interview, February 18, 2025)

This practice is evident in story-based learning activities and problem-solving games, where teachers encourage children to relate learning experiences to everyday life. This approach shows an orientation to deep conceptual learning, not just the mastery of basic mechanical skills, so that it is in line with the principles of deep learning in early childhood education.

Reflective and Adaptive Pedagogical Practices

The second theme reveals that teachers' professionalism is strongly reflected through reflective and adaptive practices in responding to children's learning needs. The results of the interviews showed that teachers actively reflected on the learning process, both individually and collectively, to evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies used. One teacher stated:

"Every time I finish teaching, I always take note of what is going well and what needs to be improved. From there I knew I had to change my approach at the next meeting." (G2 Interview, February 20, 2025)

This reflection is not only administrative, but also the basis for pedagogical decision-making. Another teacher added:

"Sometimes the plan in the lesson plan does not always match the child's condition that day. So I learned to be more flexible and keep up with their needs." (G5 interview, February 25, 2025)

Analysis of learning planning documents shows that the lesson plan is prepared openly and dynamically, with room to adjust activities based on children's interests, emotions, and responses in the classroom. This reinforces the finding that teacher professionalism is not static, but rather develops through continuous reflection and readiness to adapt to changing learning contexts.

Creating a Learning Environment That Supports Children's Exploration and Active Involvement

The third theme emphasizes the role of the learning environment as a key element in supporting deep learning. Teachers consciously create a classroom atmosphere that is emotionally safe, inclusive, and rich in stimulation, so that children feel comfortable to explore, express themselves, and take risks in learning. A teacher described the importance of a sense of security in a child's learning process:

"If children feel safe and are not afraid of making mistakes, they are more courageous to try and think. That's what I keep in class." (G4 Interview, March 1, 2025)

The learning environment is also intentionally arranged through thematic play angles, the use of manipulative media, and the integration of real experiences. Another teacher said:

"I arrange the class so that children can choose their own activities. From there I saw that they were more focused and engaged for longer." (G6 Interview, March 4, 2025)

Observations show that children's active engagement increases when they are given the opportunity to explore material independently or collaboratively. This supportive environment not only enriches the learning experience, but also reinforces a sense of autonomy and meaning in the child's learning process.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm that the professionalism of kindergarten teachers in the context of early education needs to be understood as a dynamic practice that integrates pedagogic competence, reflectivity, and orientation to meaningful learning. Professionalism is not only reflected in the technical ability of teaching, but also in the capacity of teachers to design relevant, contextual, and child-centered learning experiences. These results are in line with the view that deep learning in early childhood develops through intentional and reflective pedagogic interactions, rather than through one-way knowledge transmission (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; OECD, 2021).

The effectiveness of teachers in facilitating deep learning can be explained through pedagogic mechanisms that emphasize the connection between learning experiences and children's real world. By providing space for simple exploration, dialogue, and reflection, teachers help children build deeper conceptual understanding, rather than just memorizing information. This approach supports constructivist and socio-constructivist learning theories that assert that knowledge is built through the active involvement of children in authentic and meaningful learning experiences (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2020; Kumpulainen et al., 2022).

The reflective practices shown by teachers in this study also strengthen the understanding of professionalism as a continuous learning process. Teachers not only reflect on children's learning outcomes, but also critically evaluate the pedagogical strategies, approaches, and decisions they take. These findings are consistent with the literature that emphasizes that professional reflection is a key element in improving the quality of learning, particularly in early childhood education which relies heavily on teachers' sensitivity to children's developmental needs, interests, and social context (Schön, 2020; Loughran, 2021).

In addition, the creation of a safe, inclusive, and exploration-supportive learning environment is proving to be an important prerequisite for the emergence of deep learning. An environment that respects children's voices, encourages curiosity, and provides emotional support allows children to engage cognitively and affectively in learning. This confirms the findings of previous research that showed that the quality of teacher-child relationships and the emotional climate of the classroom have a significant influence on children's deep involvement and self-regulation in learning (Pianta et al., 2020; Siraj et al., 2022).

Overall, the results of this study broaden the understanding of the professionalism of kindergarten teachers by placing deep learning at the core of pedagogic practice. Teacher professionalism can no longer be narrowed down to adherence to administrative standards or the achievement of cognitive indicators alone, but must be understood as a reflective and adaptive capacity in designing meaningful and sustainable learning experiences. These findings have important implications for the development of education policies, teacher training programs, and learning practices in early childhood education, particularly in efforts to prepare the foundation of deep learning from the early stages of formal education (UNESCO, 2021; Fullan et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study concludes that the professionalism of kindergarten teachers in fostering deep learning experiences in early education is a pedagogic practice that is reflective, adaptive, and oriented towards the meaning of children's learning. Professionalism is not solely determined by mastery of technical competencies or adherence to curriculum standards, but by the teacher's ability to design contextual learning experiences, facilitate active exploration, and build pedagogic relationships that respect children's voices and experiences. Through the role of teachers as facilitators of meaningful learning, children are encouraged

to be cognitively, affectively, and socially involved in the learning process from the early stages.

The findings of this study confirm that deep learning in early childhood education grows through pedagogic mechanisms that integrate professional reflection, planning flexibility, and the creation of a safe and stimulating learning environment. Thus, efforts to improve the quality of early education need to be directed at strengthening the professionalism of teachers in a sustainable manner, both through reflective capacity development, deep learning-based pedagogical training, and education policies that support child-centered learning practices. This research makes a conceptual and practical contribution in reframing the professionalism of kindergarten teachers as an important foundation for deep and continuous learning in the early stages of formal education.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

Future research is encouraged to examine how kindergarten teacher professionalism in fostering deep learning can be strengthened through specific training models, mentoring systems, and institutional support. Further studies may also explore the long-term impact of deep learning-oriented pedagogical practices on children's cognitive, emotional, and social development. Expanding research across diverse educational contexts and using longitudinal designs would help strengthen the generalizability and practical application of these findings in early childhood education.

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