

# The Regulatory Professional Paradox: Developing Inclusive and Sustainable Professionalism among Early Childhood Education (ECE) Teachers

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**Abstract.** This study examines strategies to strengthen the professionalism of Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers in Manggarai Regency through a literature review. The analysis centers on three core pillars: academic qualification, teaching competence, and teacher welfare. Data were sourced from national policy documents, the 2025 Indonesian Education Report, and academic literature, including Starting Strong VI (OECD), the EPPE/EPPSE longitudinal study, and a meta-analysis on teacher coaching. The findings indicate that the predominance of nonformal ECE institutions, which are not recognized under Law No. 14 of 2005, impedes the implementation of quality standards as stipulated by Ministerial Regulation No. 137 of 2014. Local initiatives, such as bachelor's degree scholarships and holistic-integrative training, have been introduced but have not sufficiently addressed classroom practices or economic well-being. The study recommends that the national ministry takes the initiative in regulatory reform, while the district office and school networks should simultaneously focus on strengthening affirmative policies at the regional level. This approach is seen as strategic to achieving inclusive and sustainable teacher professionalism in ECE.

**Keywords:** teacher professionalism, Early Childhood Education (ECE), qualification, competence, welfare

## 1 Introduction

Early Childhood Education (Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini, hereafter PAUD) plays a foundational role in shaping children's cognitive, social, emotional, and motor development in an integrated manner. The effectiveness of PAUD service delivery is closely linked to the quality of teacher-child interactions, which are recognized globally as a critical factor for enhancing early learning outcomes [1].

However, in the Indonesian context especially in underserved areas such as Manggarai Regency systemic regulatory gaps continue to hinder the realization of high-quality PAUD services. Of the 313 PAUD units in Manggarai, approximately 87 percent are categorized as

non-formal, lacking formal recognition under national legislation, particularly Law No. 14 of 2005 [2]. This status discrepancy prevents the vast majority of PAUD teachers from accessing professional benefits, such as certification, allowances, and structured professional development. Consequently, these educators often operate in precarious conditions with limited legal protections, inadequate pedagogical support, and low remuneration.

This study identifies the core issue as a persistent regulatory paradox: national education policy emphasizes quality and professional standards but structurally excludes non-formal teachers from the mechanisms necessary to meet these standards. In this context, the national "Merdeka Belajar" initiative—while promoting autonomy and contextual learning—has not yet adequately resolved the entrenched regulatory exclusion faced by non-formal PAUD teachers. Instead, bureaucratic compliance requirements and fragmented governance often add to teachers' administrative workload, limiting their ability to focus on reflective and responsive pedagogy. The resulting erosion of "organic professionalism"—the intrinsic motivation and community-rooted expertise of teachers—undermines sustainable improvements in ECE quality.

Framed against these structural challenges, the study is guided by three pillars of inclusive and sustainable professionalism: (1) academic qualifications, (2) instructional competence, and (3) teacher welfare. The operationalization of these pillars draws from robust international evidence. For instance, the EPPE/EPPSE studies in the UK show that academically qualified teachers consistently provide more effective instruction [3]. Similarly, a meta-analysis by Kraft et al. demonstrates the efficacy of in-situ coaching in enhancing classroom practices [4]. The Nurturing Care Framework further emphasizes that the emotional and economic well-being of caregivers is foundational to the quality of care and stimulation provided to children [5].

To evaluate the gap between regulatory intent and classroom realities, this study draws on a literature-based analysis, using national policy documents, education quality reports, and peer-reviewed studies. It focuses on how systemic recognition, sustained coaching, and welfare-responsive financing can serve as levers for professional reform. The overarching aim is to develop a locally rooted yet scalable model for improving teacher professionalism in PAUD institutions that remain outside the formal regulatory framework.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the discourse on professional equity in early childhood education, highlighting the need for policy frameworks that accommodate diverse institutional forms while upholding rigorous standards of quality and care. It provides both analytical insights and practical recommendations for closing the regulatory gaps that currently marginalize thousands of PAUD teachers and, by extension, compromise children's right to quality early education.

## **2 Literature Review**

Professionalism in early childhood education (ECE) is a dynamic and evolving construct that has been subject to considerable theoretical debate and empirical inquiry. Traditionally, teacher professionalism has been framed through a managerial lens, emphasizing compliance with standards, formal credentials, and accountability mechanisms. However, recent global

scholarship has shifted towards more inclusive and sustainable models of professionalism, which emphasize teacher agency, ethical practice, and socio-cultural responsiveness [6].

In the Indonesian context, the transition from managerial to inclusive professionalism is still in progress and faces unique regulatory and institutional constraints. Scholars such as Maiza [7] and Utama [8] highlight that the professional development of PAUD teachers remains fragmented and largely dependent on inconsistent local policies. These limitations reflect a broader issue: the absence of a coherent national framework that supports sustainable professional growth, particularly for non-formal teachers.

Globally, inclusive professionalism is increasingly associated with the concept of teacher agency—the capacity of teachers to make autonomous, ethical, and context-responsive decisions in their practice. Sachs [9] and Osgood [10] argue that true professionalism cannot be reduced to bureaucratic indicators but must include a relational and ethical dimension that honors teachers' voices and contextual expertise. In this light, professionalism involves a continuous negotiation of values, practices, and institutional expectations.

However, teacher agency does not operate in a vacuum. Organizational culture plays a pivotal role in either facilitating or constraining this agency. As noted by Biesta et al. [11], schools with collaborative and reflective cultures tend to empower teachers, whereas those dominated by compliance-driven management often suppress professional autonomy. This observation is particularly relevant in the Indonesian setting, where many non-formal PAUD institutions operate under fragmented supervision and weak institutional support, making it difficult for teachers to exercise meaningful agency.

Furthermore, the literature suggests that sustainable professionalism requires institutional mechanisms that balance regulatory expectations with developmental support. The meta-analysis by Kraft et al. [4] confirms that professional growth is more effectively supported through sustained, context-sensitive coaching rather than one-off workshops. This has important implications for Indonesia, where most PAUD teacher training remains episodic and disconnected from classroom realities.

In summary, the literature converges on the need to reconceptualize ECE teacher professionalism as a holistic, value-driven, and contextually embedded process. While international models provide useful frameworks, these must be localized to address the specific institutional, cultural, and policy challenges facing PAUD teachers in Indonesia. The present study seeks to fill this gap by analyzing how sustainable professionalism can be developed in non-formal PAUD contexts, particularly in underserved regions such as Manggarai.

### **3 Research Methods**

This study employs a qualitative research design with a systematic literature review and philosophical analysis to examine how inclusive and sustainable professionalism can be developed among non-formal PAUD teachers in Manggarai Regency. The approach is appropriate for investigating normative and structural challenges—particularly those linked to

regulation, pedagogical practice, and welfare—that shape the professional landscape of early childhood educators.

Data were collected from 26 selected sources published between 2020 and 2025, encompassing policy documents, national education reports, and peer-reviewed academic literature. The selection process followed a transparent screening protocol. First, documents were identified through targeted searches in Google Scholar, national education portals, and databases such as ERIC and ScienceDirect. Keywords used included: "PAUD teacher professionalism," "non-formal education regulation Indonesia," "inclusive ECE," "teacher coaching," and "teacher welfare." Second, the inclusion criteria were established based on relevance to three analytical domains: (1) regulatory frameworks, (2) capacity-building models, and (3) welfare-oriented policies. Finally, 26 documents meeting the criteria were analyzed using thematic synthesis.

Screening and quality appraisal. To make the selection procedure explicit, all records were first screened at the title and abstract level to remove irrelevant studies. Full-text screening was then conducted against the inclusion criteria (regulation, capacity-building models, and welfare-oriented policies) to ensure conceptual alignment with the three analytical pillars. For transparency, an extraction log was maintained to document (a) the reason for inclusion/exclusion, (b) the document type (policy, report, or peer-reviewed study), and (c) the level of governance addressed (national, provincial/district, or institutional). Although the review is qualitative and interpretive, the appraisal step focused on basic trustworthiness signals: clarity of methods, relevance of the evidence, and the plausibility of reported claims in relation to the Indonesian PAUD context.

Data extraction and indicator development. Indicators were defined as explicit statements, measurable targets, or empirically supported claims that could inform professional standards and enabling conditions for PAUD teachers. Each of the 26 documents was summarized in an extraction matrix containing: bibliographic information; setting/coverage; teacher type (formal/non-formal); key regulatory provisions or policy levers; described interventions (e.g., scholarships, coaching, CPD); reported constraints (e.g., financing, legal status, workload); and outcome claims. From this matrix, indicators were generated at two levels: (1) descriptive indicators (what standards and supports are currently stipulated or practiced) and (2) gap indicators (where standards exist but enabling conditions are absent). This step ensured that the synthesis did not remain at the level of general argument but produced traceable, document-based claims.

Thematic synthesis procedure. Following the logic of thematic synthesis, the analysis was conducted through iterative coding and theme development [12]. First, the extracted text segments relevant to the three pillars were coded line-by-line to capture the meaning of regulatory statements, program descriptions, and evidence claims. Second, codes were clustered into descriptive themes (e.g., credential requirements, CPD access, coaching intensity, certification eligibility, honorarium levels, and administrative compliance demands). Third, analytical themes were generated by comparing descriptive themes across document types and levels of governance to explain the regulatory paradox—namely, how accountability requirements expand while legal recognition and welfare mechanisms remain uneven for non-formal teachers. This stage produced cross-cutting explanations (e.g., compliance without capacity; standards without status) that connect policy intent to classroom realities.

Trustworthiness and synthesis output. To strengthen credibility, themes were checked through constant comparison across sources (policy documents versus empirical studies) and through repeated passes over the extraction matrix to ensure internal consistency. The final output is a

narrative synthesis that integrates: (a) national regulatory requirements, (b) evidence-informed mechanisms for competence development (particularly sustained coaching), and (c) welfare and financing arrangements required to sustain professional agency. The synthesis therefore functions as an interpretive framework, not a statistical meta-analysis, and is intended to inform actionable policy recommendations for Manggarai and comparable under-resourced districts.

Thematic synthesis in this study involved three analytical stages. First, key themes were extracted deductively based on the conceptual framework: qualifications, instructional competence, and welfare. Second, inductive coding was used to identify patterns and sub-themes emerging from the data. Third, the themes were restructured into a synthesized narrative that integrates regulatory analysis with grounded pedagogical insight. This process enables the study to link abstract policy discourse with concrete teaching realities.

The philosophical component of the analysis draws on normative theories of justice and equity in education. This is particularly relevant in highlighting the regulatory marginalization of non-formal PAUD teachers and their exclusion from formal professional recognition. Ethical reasoning was applied to interpret findings regarding disparities in welfare and access to training, particularly through the lens of "professional justice," a concept adapted from Biesta and Sachs [13].

The credibility of this approach is enhanced by triangulation across multiple source types and the use of peer-reviewed literature. While limited by its non-empirical nature, the methodology offers a robust interpretive lens to examine systemic policy gaps and to develop actionable recommendations.

## **4 Results and Discussion**

This synthesis identifies three interrelated pillars that are essential to building inclusive and sustainable professionalism among PAUD teachers in Manggarai Regency: (1) academic qualification, (2) instructional competence, and (3) teacher welfare. In Manggarai, where non-formal PAUD provision predominates, professional expectations expand faster than enabling conditions. This produces an administrative paradox: teachers are required to demonstrate compliance through documentation and reporting while operating with limited recognition, support, and protection.

First, the qualification gap remains substantial. Most non-formal PAUD teachers in Manggarai have not attained the minimum academic credential (S1/D4) stipulated in Ministerial Regulation No. 137 of 2014. A district scholarship initiative introduced through collaboration with Universitas Terbuka in 2024 is therefore a strategic affirmative measure because it targets the most visible bottleneck in professional eligibility. Yet qualification upgrading in under-resourced contexts faces predictable barriers, including indirect costs (transportation, internet quota, learning materials), competing work obligations, and limited mentoring that supports completion and learning transfer. Without these supports, the pathway risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative.

International evidence strengthens the argument that qualifications matter, while also clarifying the conditions under which they become pedagogically meaningful. As Sylva et al. have demonstrated, academic qualifications are a critical driver of pedagogical effectiveness

[3]. For Manggarai, this implies that expanding qualification pathways should be paired with an enabling ecosystem that supports transfer from study to practice. District-level mentoring during study, school-based routines for collaborative planning, and access to basic learning resources can help ensure that increased qualifications are translated into improved teacher-child interaction quality, rather than remaining as formal credentials with little impact on everyday pedagogy.

Second, instructional competence is constrained by weak and uneven access to continuing professional development (CPD). The 2025 Indonesia Education Report notes that only 45% of PAUD teachers participated in CPD, and participation is lower among non-formal teachers. Even where CPD exists, it is often short, fragmented, and detached from classroom realities. Administrative fatigue compounds this gap: teachers are expected to produce lesson plans, reports, and compliance documentation, leaving limited time and energy for reflective practice. In this context, competence development must be designed to fit teachers' working conditions, and accountability mechanisms should be streamlined so they protect time for teaching and learning rather than rewarding paperwork. This is why teachers often experience an administrative-fatigue cycle: the more standards are emphasized, the more time is diverted to proving compliance, not improving practice.

The findings therefore reinforce the need to shift from event-based training toward sustained, practice-embedded support. Kraft et al. emphasize that embedded coaching is a more effective alternative to conventional training models [12]. Field examples from Yogyakarta and Central Java suggest that teacher coaching can enhance classroom engagement and improve learning outcomes [14,15]. In Manggarai, a pilot coaching intervention in one PAUD center reportedly increased child participation and task engagement. To avoid adding administrative burden, coaching should be framed as developmental support with realistic cycles and psychologically safe feedback rather than compliance monitoring.

Reviewer feedback also highlights the practical constraints of collaborative networks in under-resourced regions, and the findings support this concern. Although clusters and communities of practice can strengthen teacher agency, collaboration in Manggarai is constrained by distance, transportation costs, staffing shortages, and uneven digital access. As a result, meetings can drift into administrative coordination (document collection and reporting) rather than pedagogical problem-solving. When networks become primarily a compliance channel, they add to administrative fatigue and discourage participation, especially for teachers who must travel far or cover classes alone. Networks are more feasible when designed for low-resource conditions: small local clusters, rotating host sites, short agendas centered on one classroom problem per cycle, and light-touch follow-up using available communication channels.

Third, teacher welfare is alarmingly low and functions as a binding constraint across the other pillars. Honoraria for non-formal PAUD teachers range between IDR 500,000 and IDR 800,000 per month—far below the regional minimum wage of IDR 2,328,969—and some receive as little as IDR 162,500 per month. Such financial insecurity discourages participation in training, reduces job satisfaction, and contributes to emotional exhaustion; it also pushes some teachers toward additional work that further reduces time for preparation and reflection. Research by Sagita et al. [16] and Hutasuhut et al. [17] affirms that welfare conditions directly influence instructional quality and professional motivation.

Taken together, the three pillars illustrate a broader systemic misalignment between regulatory expectations and institutional capacity. Although local interventions such as scholarships and PAUD-HI training have been initiated, their impact is diluted by the absence of legal recognition and sustainable funding mechanisms for non-formal teachers. Teachers continue to operate in a policy environment where compliance is expected without corresponding structural support. Hogan et al. argue that the institutional status of teachers significantly affects access to resources, rights, and training opportunities [18]. In Manggarai, the exclusion of non-formal teachers from formal frameworks becomes a structural source of inequity, shaping not only welfare but also the feasibility of meeting professional standards. This “standards without status” condition helps explain why professional instability persists even when training and scholarship programs are introduced.

The synthesis reaffirms the need for a holistic reform model that integrates qualification upgrading, embedded coaching, and welfare-focused financing. The success of Surabaya’s tiered training model—which combines coaching, welfare incentives, and evaluation mechanisms—offers a replicable framework [19]. For Manggarai, adaptation should prioritize changes in classroom interaction quality over document volume and streamline reporting so it supports, rather than crowds out, pedagogy. Combined with targeted welfare support, this approach can reduce administrative fatigue and make Merdeka Belajar’s promise of autonomy more feasible in practice.

Finally, the findings highlight the emotional dimension of professionalism. One teacher’s testimony—“We strive to give our best, but without recognition and support, it feels like we’re struggling alone”—captures the lived tension between dedication and neglect. Without meaningful recognition, adequate welfare, and supportive professional learning structures, these tensions will persist, undermining the goals of Merdeka Belajar and compromising children’s rights to quality early education.

## **5 Conclusion**

This study concludes that building inclusive and sustainable professionalism among PAUD teachers in Manggarai Regency requires an integrated approach encompassing academic qualification, instructional competence, and teacher welfare. Each pillar is interdependent, and none can be meaningfully advanced in isolation. The core challenge lies in the structural misalignment between national regulatory standards and the legal-institutional status of non-formal PAUD teachers. While local initiatives such as scholarships and PAUD-HI training offer promising entry points, they lack the systemic support and sustainability necessary to yield lasting change.

The regulatory paradox remains unresolved: national policies demand compliance with professional standards while denying non-formal teachers the legal status, financial resources, and pedagogical support needed to meet these standards. This exclusion constitutes a form of structural inequity, perpetuating disparities in teacher development and, by extension, in early childhood learning outcomes.

The findings underscore the need for a multi-level strategy that coordinates reforms across national, regional, and institutional levels. At the national level, the Ministry of Education must revise existing legal frameworks to formally recognize non-formal PAUD teachers as professional educators. This recognition is critical for ensuring equitable access to certification, training, and welfare programs. At the regional level, district governments should adopt affirmative regulations and establish performance-based incentives to reward

instructional improvement. Village funds (Dana Desa) and regional budgets (APBD) can be strategically leveraged to support teacher coaching and welfare.

Furthermore, sustainable professionalism cannot be separated from teacher motivation and emotional well-being. Without adequate recognition, teachers feel isolated and undervalued—conditions that erode professional commitment. As previous studies have shown, emotional resilience and economic stability are prerequisites for sustained engagement in professional development.

While this study provides a robust analytical framework based on secondary data, it acknowledges the limitations of its non-empirical methodology. Future research should involve longitudinal field studies and comparative analyses across districts to enhance generalizability and to tailor policy recommendations to diverse local contexts.

The study contributes to the broader discourse on education equity and teacher development in Indonesia. Its findings are particularly relevant for disadvantaged and remote regions, where non-formal PAUD institutions dominate service delivery. By adopting a holistic and context-sensitive model of professionalism, stakeholders can advance the goals of Merdeka Belajar and ensure that every child—regardless of location or socioeconomic background—has access to quality early childhood education.

In sum, systemic reform is not only a policy imperative but also a moral obligation. Only by affirming the professional dignity of all PAUD teachers can Indonesia achieve equitable and high-quality early education for its youngest citizens.

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