



Teacher Professionalism in Primary Education: An Integrative Framework of Relational Practice, Professional Development, and Instructional Leadership

Ilmi Amalia Maghfiroh^{*1}, Nur Mahmudah²

^{1,2}STAI Al-Akbar Surabaya, Indonesia

*Correspondence Author: ilmiamalia345@gmail.com

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Abstract: *Teacher professionalism is increasingly recognized as a multidimensional construct that extends beyond pedagogical competence to encompass relational, moral, and contextual dimensions of teaching, particularly in primary education. This study examines how teacher professionalism is enacted through the interaction of relational-moral practices, continuous professional development, instructional leadership, parental engagement, and professional resilience under infrastructural constraints. Adopting a qualitative case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 informants (eleven classroom teachers and one school leader), complemented by observations and document analysis. The data were analyzed inductively using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that teacher professionalism is shaped by emotionally supportive and parental-like practices, sustained engagement in professional learning, collaborative and supportive instructional leadership, active teacher-parent communication, and adaptive responses to limited school infrastructure. These dimensions operate in an interconnected manner rather than as isolated professional attributes. This study contributes to the literature by proposing an integrative and context-sensitive conceptual framework that reconceptualizes teacher professionalism as a relationally grounded, morally informed, and institutionally embedded practice. The framework offers an analytical lens for future research and provides practical insights for strengthening teacher professionalism in primary education contexts characterized by strong community involvement and structural constraints.*

Keywords: *Teacher Professionalism; Relational Practice; Instructional Leadership; Professional Development; Professional Resilience; Primary Education*

Abstrak: *Profesionalisme guru semakin diakui sebagai konstruk multidimensional yang melampaui kompetensi pedagogis untuk mencakup dimensi relasional, moral, dan kontekstual dalam pengajaran, terutama di pendidikan dasar. Studi ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana profesionalisme guru diimplementasikan melalui interaksi antara praktik relasional-moral, pengembangan profesional berkelanjutan, kepemimpinan instruksional, keterlibatan orang tua, dan ketahanan profesional di bawah batasan infrastruktur. Mengadopsi desain studi kasus kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan 12 informan (sebelas guru kelas dan satu pemimpin sekolah), dilengkapi dengan observasi dan analisis*

dokumen. Data dianalisis secara induktif menggunakan analisis tematik. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa profesionalisme guru dibentuk oleh praktik yang mendukung secara emosional dan mirip orang tua, keterlibatan berkelanjutan dalam pembelajaran profesional, kepemimpinan instruksional yang kolaboratif dan mendukung, komunikasi aktif antara guru dan orang tua, serta respons adaptif terhadap infrastruktur sekolah yang terbatas. Dimensi-dimensi ini beroperasi secara saling terhubung rather than sebagai atribut profesional yang terisolasi. Studi ini berkontribusi pada literatur dengan mengusulkan kerangka konseptual yang integratif dan sensitif terhadap konteks, yang merekonseptualisasi profesionalisme guru sebagai praktik yang berakar pada relasional, didorong oleh moral, dan tertanam dalam institusi. Kerangka kerja ini menawarkan lensa analitis untuk penelitian masa depan dan memberikan wawasan praktis untuk memperkuat profesionalisme guru dalam konteks pendidikan dasar yang ditandai oleh keterlibatan komunitas yang kuat dan batasan struktural.

Kata Kunci: *Profesionalisme Guru; Praktik Relasional; Kepemimpinan Instruksional; Pengembangan Profesional; Ketahanan Profesional; Pendidikan Dasar*

Introduction

Teacher professionalism has become a central concern in contemporary educational discourse, particularly in primary education, where teachers play a decisive role in shaping students' academic, social, and moral development (Budiansyah et al., 2025; Huong et al., 2025). Globally, teacher professionalism has often been conceptualized in terms of pedagogical competence, instructional effectiveness, and formal qualifications (Fitriyah et al., 2025). While these dimensions remain important, an increasing body of literature suggests that such technical perspectives alone are insufficient to capture the complexity of teachers' work in real school contexts, especially in settings characterized by strong community involvement and structural constraints (Hallinger et al., 2025; Sholeh, 2021).

Recent studies emphasize that teacher professionalism is deeply intertwined with relational and emotional dimensions of teaching. Meta-analytic evidence demonstrates that teacher support is positively associated with multiple dimensions of student engagement, with emotional support emerging as one of the most consistent predictors of learning involvement (Vargas-Madriz et al., 2024). Empirical research further shows that teacher emotional support influences academic achievement through students' positive academic emotions, highlighting the psychological mechanisms linking relational practices and learning outcomes (Shen et al., 2024). These findings suggest that professionalism in primary education extends beyond instructional delivery to include teachers' capacity to create emotionally secure learning environments. However, relational practices are still frequently treated as implicit or supplementary aspects of professionalism rather than as its core components.

In parallel, continuous professional development (CPD) has been widely promoted as a key mechanism for enhancing teacher professionalism. Research indicates that effective professional development can foster reflective practice and instructional improvement when learning opportunities are sustained and contextually grounded (Cirocki et al., 2024; Cyprian et al., 2025; Sholeh, 2021). Nevertheless, CPD is often examined as an individual activity, with limited attention to the organizational and leadership conditions that enable professional learning to become embedded in everyday practice. This gap points to the need for a more integrative understanding of professionalism as a collective and institutionally supported process.

Another important strand of literature highlights the role of instructional leadership and parental engagement in shaping teacher professionalism and student learning. Meta-analytic studies show that instructional leadership is associated with teacher attitudes such as self-efficacy, commitment, and job satisfaction, which indirectly support instructional quality (Hallinger et al., 2025). Longitudinal evidence further indicates that the effects of instructional leadership on educational outcomes are mediated by teacher collaboration, underscoring the importance of collegial cultures in professional practice (Persson et al., 2025). At the same time, parental involvement has been consistently linked to positive academic outcomes, particularly when engagement is relational rather than merely procedural (Castro et al., 2015; Jaynes, 2024).

Despite these advances, discussions of teacher professionalism often overlook the role of structural and infrastructural constraints, especially in resource-limited educational contexts. Emerging research suggests that school infrastructure is not merely a background condition but can shape pedagogical practices and collaborative processes when aligned with instructional needs (Zivave et al., 2025). However, limited attention has been given to how teachers adapt professionally to infrastructural constraints and how such adaptive responses reflect professional resilience.

Against this backdrop, there remains a lack of integrative and context-sensitive studies that conceptualize teacher professionalism as a dynamic and multidimensional construct, particularly in primary and faith-based school contexts. Many existing models originate from Western educational systems and may not fully capture professionalism as enacted in schools where moral education, close teacher–student relationships, and strong parental involvement are integral to daily practice (Gholami, 2011; Gholami & Tirri, 2012).

To address these gaps, this study explores teacher professionalism in a primary Islamic school context through a qualitative case study approach. Specifically, it examines how professionalism is enacted through relational–moral practices, continuous professional development, instructional leadership, parental engagement, and professional resilience under infrastructural constraints. By synthesizing teachers’ lived experiences and institutional practices, the study proposes an integrative conceptual framework that captures the interaction of these dimensions.

This study contributes to the international literature in three ways. First, it foregrounds relational and moral practices as core dimensions of teacher professionalism rather than peripheral attributes. Second, it conceptualizes professionalism as a collectively constructed and institutionally embedded process, shaped by leadership, collaboration, and community engagement. Third, it offers a context-sensitive framework that extends existing models of teacher professionalism by incorporating professional resilience within structurally constrained primary education settings.

Method

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine how teacher professionalism is enacted within a primary education context. A qualitative approach was selected to capture in-depth accounts of professional practices as they unfold in everyday school settings, enabling professionalism to be understood as a socially constructed and contextually embedded phenomenon rather than a set of discrete technical competencies.

The study was conducted at MI Hasyim Asy'ari, a primary Islamic school characterized by strong parental involvement and institutional efforts to strengthen teacher professionalism. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, targeting individuals directly involved in instructional practice and school-level decision-making. In total, 12 informants participated in the study, comprising 11 classroom teachers and 1 school leader. This composition was designed to capture variation in professional roles while maintaining sufficient depth for qualitative analysis. Data collection was concluded when thematic saturation was reached, as indicated by the recurrence of patterns across participants' accounts.

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to articulate their experiences in their own words while enabling the researcher to probe key issues related to teacher-student interaction, continuous professional development, instructional leadership, collaboration, parental engagement, and infrastructural conditions. To enhance contextual depth and analytical robustness, interview data were complemented by informal observations and document analysis, including records of professional training, internal meeting notes, and institutional communications. The use of multiple data sources supported triangulation and strengthened the credibility of the findings.

Data analysis followed an inductive thematic analysis procedure. Interview transcripts and supporting documents were read repeatedly to achieve familiarization, after which meaningful units were coded and iteratively compared. Related codes were clustered into broader categories and refined into overarching themes that captured patterned meanings across the dataset. Throughout the analytical process, a clear boundary was maintained between empirical description and interpretative synthesis, ensuring analytical transparency and coherence between the Results and Discussion sections.

To ensure trustworthiness and rigor, multiple strategies were employed. Credibility was enhanced through data triangulation and prolonged engagement with the research context. Dependability was addressed by maintaining a systematic and well-documented analytical process, while confirmability was supported by grounding interpretations in verbatim interview excerpts and engaging in reflexive analysis to minimize researcher bias.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed. Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection, and all participants provided informed consent. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured through the use of pseudonyms, and participation was voluntary. All data were securely stored and used solely for research purposes.

Result and Discussion

1. Result

a. Teacher Professionalism as an Expanded and Value-Oriented Professional Role

Teacher professionalism at MI Hasyim Asy'ari is understood as an expanded role that integrates instructional responsibility with moral and religious commitment. Teachers consistently described their profession as inseparable from character education and religious guidance, positioning professionalism as both a pedagogical and ethical obligation.

"Teaching here is not only about explaining subject matter. We are also responsible for shaping students' character and religious behavior, which requires constant self-discipline as teachers." (Teacher 3)

Classroom observations confirmed that teachers frequently embedded moral messages and religious values into instructional explanations, classroom rules, and interactions with students. Institutional documents explicitly reinforced this expectation by defining teachers as moral exemplars, thereby formalizing value-based professionalism within the school structure.

This expanded role significantly shapes teachers' professional identity. Teachers perceive professionalism not merely as compliance with teaching standards, but as a lifelong moral responsibility. While this strengthens professional commitment, it also increases emotional and ethical demands, as teachers are expected to consistently model ideal behavior both inside and outside the classroom.

b. Pedagogical Competence as a Differentiating Dimension of Professionalism

Pedagogical competence emerged as a key differentiating factor among teachers. Although most teachers demonstrated adequate mastery of subject content and basic classroom management, notable differences were observed in lesson planning quality, instructional adaptability, and the use of student-centered learning strategies.

"We know the standards of good teaching, but implementing innovative methods regularly is difficult because many of us still rely on familiar, traditional approaches." (Teacher 7)

Teachers who had participated in professional development activities showed greater flexibility in adapting instructional strategies, whereas others tended to repeat routine teaching patterns. Observational data further indicated limited use of reflective teaching practices, such as post-lesson evaluation and instructional adjustment.

The findings suggest that access to professional learning opportunities is uneven among teachers, resulting in differing levels of pedagogical confidence and innovation. This variation highlights that professionalism is not solely determined by individual motivation, but also by access to learning resources that support continuous pedagogical growth.

c. Institutional Support and Structural Constraints Shaping Professional Practice

Institutional factors were found to play a decisive role in shaping teacher professionalism. Teachers consistently reported that administrative responsibilities significantly reduced time available for lesson preparation, reflection, and professional development.

"Administrative tasks consume much of our time, so improving teaching quality or developing learning materials often becomes secondary." (Teacher 1)

Observations supported this claim, revealing limited opportunities for collaborative planning and peer discussion among teachers. Document analysis further showed that administrative reporting requirements were extensive and recurring.

Although professional development activities were formally available, they were largely episodic and short-term. Teachers perceived these activities as insufficient for addressing long-term pedagogical challenges. Consequently, institutional support was viewed as normative rather than developmental, reinforcing compliance rather than sustained professional growth.

d. Professional Challenges in Balancing Expectations, Capacity, and Well-Being

A central challenge identified across data sources was the difficulty of balancing high institutional expectations with personal capacity. Teachers reported experiencing role overload due to the accumulation of instructional duties, administrative responsibilities, and moral expectations.

"The expectations are very high, but our capacity and time are limited. We try to meet all demands, but it can be physically and emotionally exhausting."
(Teacher 5)

This professional strain affected teachers' emotional well-being, although most continued to demonstrate strong commitment and resilience.

Despite these challenges, teachers actively negotiated their professionalism by prioritizing tasks, adapting expectations, and relying on peer support. This indicates that teacher professionalism in this context is not static, but continuously shaped by interactions between individual capacity, institutional demands, and contextual constraints.

2. Discussion

a. Teacher Professionalism as Relational and Moral Practice

The findings indicate that teachers' practice of accompanying students "as parents" represents a form of professionalism grounded in emotional support as a pedagogical resource. Meta-analytic evidence consistently shows that teacher support is positively associated with multiple dimensions of school engagement, with emotional support emerging as one of the most stable predictors of students' involvement in learning (Vargas-Madriz et al., 2024). This situates relational practices not as supplementary actions, but as a core dimension of instructional quality.

At the level of underlying mechanisms, emotional support is closely linked to students' positive academic emotions, which in turn mediate academic achievement. Empirical findings demonstrate that teacher emotional support contributes to learning outcomes through students' emotional regulation and affective engagement (Shen et al., 2024). Within this framework, the present study reinforces the argument that teacher professionalism encompasses the capacity to create psychologically safe and emotionally supportive learning environments that enable cognitive engagement.

Moreover, the emphasis on *akhlak* and character formation aligns with scholarship that conceptualizes teaching as a moral and ethical practice, where caring is embedded in pedagogical decision-making. Studies on caring teaching identify care as an inherent moral dimension of professional teaching practice (Gholami & Tirri, 2012), while caring pedagogy highlights the normative foundations guiding teachers' actions (Gholami, 2011). These perspectives provide a robust theoretical basis for interpreting the findings as evidence of professionalism enacted through relational-moral commitment.

2. Continuous Professional Development and the Construction of Reflective Practice

Teachers' participation in multi-level training activities can be interpreted as engagement in continuous professional development (CPD) that renews pedagogical competence and expands instructional repertoires. Empirical research

demonstrates that professional development programs can significantly enhance teachers' reflective practice and stimulate instructional improvement when learning is translated into classroom experimentation (Cirocki et al., 2024; Mubarok et al., 2023). This aligns with the present findings, where teachers report attempting to apply insights gained from training within their instructional contexts (Cyprian et al., 2025).

Importantly, CPD does not operate in isolation. The literature on school improvement emphasizes that professional learning is most effective when embedded within a supportive organizational climate. In the present study, leadership support and collegial deliberation create an ecosystem that enables reflective practice to become a routine professional habit, rather than a sporadic response to external training mandates.

Accordingly, CPD in this context should not be reduced to participation in training events. Instead, it represents a cyclical process of professional learning, applying, and adjusting that contributes to the sustained construction of professionalism. Linking CPD with instructional leadership further strengthens the argument that professionalism is shaped collectively through institutional arrangements rather than developed solely at the individual level.

3. Instructional Leadership, Collaboration, and Parental Engagement

Supportive leadership practices, including openness to teachers' ideas and the facilitation of deliberative meetings, reflect instructional leadership that nurtures a collaborative school culture. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that instructional leadership is associated with teachers' attitudes such as self-efficacy, commitment, and job satisfaction which indirectly influence instructional quality (Hallinger et al., 2025; Khofi & Sunoko, 2025). This provides a strong empirical foundation for interpreting leadership support in the present study as a catalyst for professional motivation and capacity building.

More specifically, longitudinal research suggests that the influence of principal instructional leadership on outcomes is mediated by teacher collaboration (Persson et al., 2025). This finding closely resonates with the role of *musyawarah* observed in this study, where collaborative problem-solving functions as a mechanism for professional learning and shared responsibility.

In parallel, active communication between teachers and parents can be situated within the literature on parental involvement. Meta-analytic findings confirm that parental involvement is positively associated with academic achievement (Castro et al., 2015), while more recent studies highlight the importance of relational dimensions of parental engagement for both academic and non-academic outcomes (Jeynes, 2024). These findings support the interpretation that teacher-parent communication in this study constitutes a strategic extension of professional practice rather than a purely administrative task.

4. Structural Constraints and Professional Resilience

The identified limitations in school infrastructure underscore that teacher professionalism operates within tangible structural constraints. International research emphasizes that school infrastructure is not merely a background condition but can act as a catalyst for pedagogical innovation and collaboration when aligned with instructional needs (Lamatenggo & Panigoro, 2017; Zivave et al., 2025). Accordingly, infrastructural limitations in this study help explain constraints

on instructional optimization while simultaneously highlighting the potential impact of targeted improvements.

The findings also reveal institutional responses to these constraints, including coordinated communication between teachers, school leaders, and the school committee. Such patterns can be interpreted as forms of school-level problem-solving governance, demonstrating that the institution actively negotiates material challenges rather than passively accepting them.

Finally, the continuation of CPD amid infrastructural limitations reflects a dual professional strategy: strengthening human capacity while advocating for improved resources. This balanced response portrays professionalism as adaptive and resilient, shaped by ongoing interaction between individual agency and institutional conditions rather than dependent on ideal material circumstances.

Based on the integrated interpretation of the empirical findings across all themes, this study inductively develops a conceptual framework of teacher professionalism (Figure 1). Rather than proposing a normative or externally imposed model, the framework reflects how professionalism is enacted and negotiated in everyday school practice through relational-moral engagement, continuous learning, instructional leadership, and adaptive responses to structural constraints

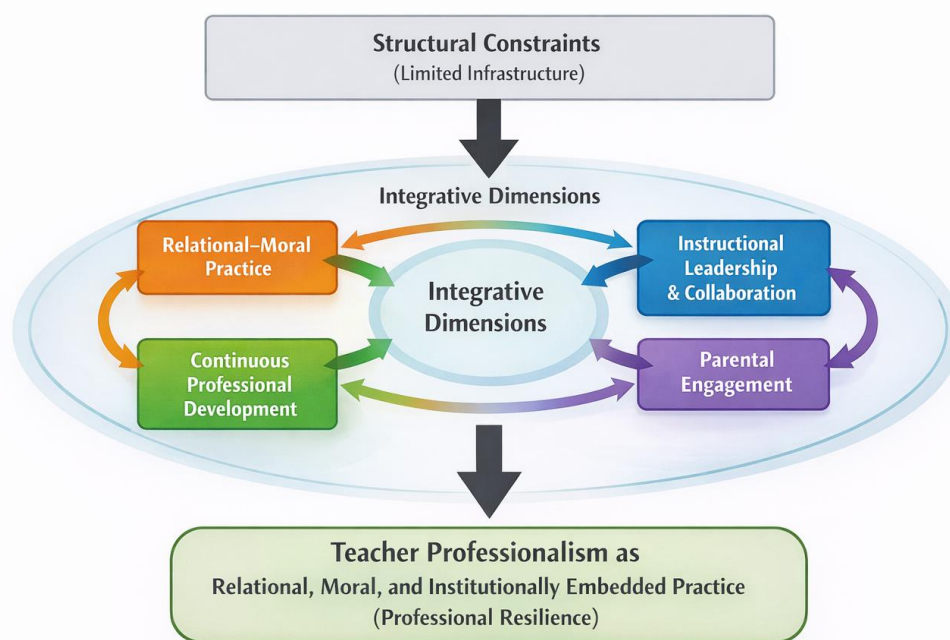


Figure 1. Empirically Grounded Conceptual Framework of Teacher Professionalism in Primary Education

The framework is derived inductively from the study's empirical findings and illustrates how teacher professionalism is constructed through the interaction of relational-moral practices, continuous professional development, instructional leadership, and parental engagement, while being shaped by structural constraints and enacted through professional resilience.

Conclusion

This study concludes that teacher professionalism in primary education is constructed through the interaction of relational-moral practices, continuous

professional development, instructional leadership, and professional resilience under infrastructural constraints. Emotional support, parental-like care, and character education emerge as core professional practices that shape meaningful learning environments, while sustained professional learning and supportive leadership enable reflective and adaptive teaching beyond individual classrooms.

By proposing an integrative and context-sensitive framework, this study contributes to the international literature by positioning teacher professionalism as a socially embedded and morally grounded practice rather than a purely technical competence. Although the findings are derived from a single school context, the conceptual framework offers a transferable lens for understanding professionalism in similar primary education settings, with future research encouraged to test and refine this model across diverse contexts and methodological designs.

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