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From Insecurity to Agency: Professional Competency Development among Non-Formal Early Childhood Educators in Indonesia

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Abstract
In many non-formal early childhood education (ECE) contexts in Indonesia, especially in rural and community-based institutions, professional competency development remains an underexplored issue despite the prevalence of unqualified teaching staff. This study explores how non-formal early childhood educators without formal educational qualifications develop their professional competencies within the institutional setting of SPS Miftahul Jannah, Sleman, Yogyakarta. Employing a qualitative descriptive case study, data were collected through interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis, then analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's framework. Five core themes emerged: initial professional insecurity as a catalyst for growth, skill transformation through structured training, professional community building via MGMP forums, contextual pedagogical innovations, and the role of mentorship in providing emotional and instructional support. These findings reveal that, despite lacking formal credentials, the educators demonstrated reflective, adaptive, and collaborative professionalism—enabled by sustained institutional support, peer learning, and intrinsic motivation. The study underscores the need to reframe early childhood professionalism to recognize practice-based knowledge and community-embedded expertise. It challenges prevailing assumptions that equate qualification solely with academic degrees and highlights how informal, experiential learning can foster legitimate professional growth. Although this research is limited by its single-site focus and reliance on self-reported data, it offers critical insight into non-traditional pathways of teacher development in under-resourced settings. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on equitable teacher development and call for hybrid certification models that integrate formal education with field-based experiences, thereby institutionalizing inclusive and practice-responsive approaches to professionalization in early childhood education.

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Introduction

The first years of a child's life are widely recognized as a period of extraordinary potential. Early childhood education (ECE), when delivered with quality and care, sets the stage for long-term cognitive, social, and emotional development. Yet while the global discourse is rich with calls for investment in this critical stage, the reality on the ground—particularly in countries like Indonesia—often tells a different story. Many of the adults responsible for nurturing and educating young children, especially in community-based settings, are doing so without any formal pedagogical training. This disconnect between expectations and qualifications quietly persists beneath the surface of national education systems.

Scholars and policymakers have long acknowledged that professional competence among early childhood educators is closely linked to educational outcomes (Wolstein et al., 2021). It is not just about having a certificate; it is about being equipped to create emotionally safe, intellectually stimulating, and developmentally appropriate environments (Anders & Oppermann, 2024; Ranta et al., 2023). From Asia to Europe, this link remains consistently

affirmed: the better the training, the richer the educational experience for children (Hu et al., 2023; La Croix et al., 2023). Teachers who are confident in their abilities are more likely to use responsive teaching strategies, adapt to children's needs, and engage meaningfully with families. But competence doesn't emerge in a vacuum—it requires both initial preparation and sustained professional development.

Interestingly, professional development doesn't always take the form of structured lectures or institutional degrees. Many educators develop expertise informally—through mentorship, peer learning, and reflective practice (Dulcic et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2022). In some contexts, particularly rural and semi-urban areas, educators compensate for their lack of formal credentials with deeply rooted contextual knowledge and strong community ties (Višnjić-Jevtić, 2021). Studies in Southeast Asia and the Caribbean suggest that grassroots ECE practitioners often engage in experiential learning and improvisational pedagogy that resonates more powerfully with the communities they serve than standardized models might allow (Biana et al., 2021; Cheng et al., 2024; Kinkead-Clark, 2023). These forms of learning, though underrecognized, are rich sites of pedagogical growth.

Even in developed contexts, educators emphasize the need for ongoing, context-specific support. Reflective supervision, coaching, and collaborative learning have been identified as particularly effective in sustaining teachers' motivation and growth (Huffhines et al., 2024). In Germany, for example, integrated early childhood teacher preparation programs increasingly include emotional, cultural, and social competencies alongside academic content (Striebich et al., 2024). Meanwhile, studies from Thailand and Finland point to a shared belief that quality ECE requires a blend of theory and lived experience—an insight especially relevant to informal education providers (Khayankij, 2024; Ranta et al., 2023). When this kind of blended competence is absent, quality suffers—not because educators lack dedication, but because they lack access to meaningful learning pathways.

In non-formal ECE institutions like Indonesia's SPS, the challenges are both structural and personal. Public interest in formal ECE teacher training programs remains low, often due to limited career prospects and low compensation (Putri Nazidah, 2021). Many educators, especially women, find themselves teaching by necessity, with few opportunities for advancement (Hasbi, 2022). Yet these educators carry enormous responsibilities. They are the first to welcome children into learning, often the first to notice developmental delays, and sometimes the only adult outside the family with a consistent presence in the child's life (Mncanca et al., 2021; Topal et al., 2024). These realities place non-formally trained teachers at the center of a paradox: underprepared, yet indispensable.

Despite the clear significance of these educators, research remains disproportionately focused on formally trained teachers in urban or institutional contexts. There is a glaring absence of empirical studies that trace how educators in settings like SPS Miftahul Jannah develop their competencies in the absence of formal credentials (Jaoza & Kanda, 2024). Most teacher competency frameworks fail to account for the adaptive strategies, improvisational pedagogy, and locally driven innovations that occur outside conventional systems (Marinšek et al., 2020; Peters et al., 2022). Moreover, much of the literature treats professional development as a top-down process, overlooking the possibility that valuable competencies might also emerge from below—within community networks, through mentorship, or in response to lived classroom challenges (Cheng et al., 2024; Gomez et al., 2023). These gaps call for a closer, more nuanced exploration.

This study seeks to understand how non-formally trained early childhood educators at SPS Miftahul Jannah develop professional competencies in real-world conditions. Rather than measuring competence solely through academic certification, this research looks at how training programs, peer collaboration, mentorship, and institutional adaptation collectively support educator growth. By spotlighting a site where formal qualifications are lacking but educational work continues nonetheless, the study challenges prevailing assumptions about what constitutes "qualified" teaching. It also opens the door to reimagining professional

development policies—ones that recognize local wisdom, community investment, and the power of experiential learning. In doing so, the study hopes to contribute not only to the academic field, but to the everyday lives of teachers and children navigating the informal edges of early education.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive case study design, utilizing thematic analysis to explore the professional development experiences of non-formal early childhood educators without formal educational qualifications. The research was conducted at SPS Miftahul Jannah, a non-formal Early Childhood Education (ECE) institution located in Sleman, Yogyakarta, which was selected due to its sustained operation and relevance in addressing community-based educational challenges. Individual educators served as embedded units of analysis within the institutional context. The study aimed to identify key patterns, challenges, and strategies related to competency enhancement among these educators.

Participants in this study consisted of four female educators with diverse educational backgrounds and teaching experiences (Table 1). Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure variation in perspectives while maintaining relevance to the study's focus on non-formal ECE settings. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis (e.g., lesson plans, training certificates, institutional agendas). The researcher functioned as the primary instrument in the data collection process, and all interactions adhered to ethical research protocols including informed consent, confidentiality assurances, and institutional approvals.

Table 1. Profile of Research Participants

Anonymized ID	Age	Educational background	Years Teaching	Professional Development Activities	Current Role
Teacher A	45	Bachelor	14	Training, Workhsop, Seminar, MGMP Meetings.	Lead Teacher
Teacher B	41	High School	14	Trainings, Workhsops, Seminar, MGMP Meetings.	Senior Teacher
Teacher C	41	Diploma in Education	2	Training, Workhsop, Seminar, MGMP Meetings.	Teacher
Teacher D	23	High School	2	Training, Workhsop, Seminar, MGMP Meetings.	Admin/Operator

Data wesre analyzed using the thematic analysis framework developed by (Braun & Clarke, 2006), involving six steps: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) search for themes, (4) review of themes, (5) definition and naming of themes, and (6) production of the report. Thematic coding was both inductive (emerging from the data) and deductive (informed by existing literature on ECE teacher competencies). The NVivo software was used to support data organization and ensure analytic rigor. Themes were derived from recurring patterns across participants' narratives, which captured shared challenges and learning trajectories in their professional development.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed triangulation across data sources, member checking, and peer debriefing with fellow qualitative researchers. Researcher reflexivity was maintained throughout the process to minimize bias, particularly through field notes and analytical memos. Ethical clearance was obtained from the graduate program in Non-Formal Education at UNY, and all participants were anonymized in reporting to protect their identities.

Result

Following the thematic analysis, five major themes were identified to capture the core experiences of non-formal educators at SPS Miftahul Jannah in developing their professional competencies: (1) Initial Professional Insecurity as a Catalyst for Growth, (2) Skill Transformation through Structured Training, (3) Professional Community Building through MGMP Forums, (4) Contextual Adaptation and Creative Pedagogical Practices, and (5) Mentorship as Emotional and Instructional Support. These themes reflect the dynamic interplay between internal motivation, institutional support, and contextual challenges faced by educators without formal teaching backgrounds. To provide a consolidated overview of the challenges, outcomes, impacts, and personal reflections that shaped each theme, the following table presents a summary of professional development activities undertaken by the participants.

Table 2. Thematic Analysis of Professional Development Activities

Activity Type	Key Challenges	Outcome	Impact on Teaching Practice
Training (Diklat)	- Lack of formal education background. - Initial difficulty managing classrooms - Insecurity about teaching abilities	- Enhanced pedagogical skills. - Improved classroom management. - Increased confidence. - Competency equalization.	- More effective time management. - Better understanding of student needs. - Ability to deliver engaging lessons. - Progressive skill development through three stages.
District-wide SPS Educator Meetings (MGMP)	- Varied teaching experiences - Need for standardized approaches - Isolation in teaching practice	- Knowledge exchange - Collaborative problem-solving - Standardization of teaching practices - Curriculum development aligned with current trends	- Deeper understanding of competencies - Enhanced lesson preparation skills - More enjoyable teaching techniques - Improved RPPH, RPPM, and APE implementation
Workshops and Seminars	- Varying timelines according to organizers. - Need to stay updated with current educational trends - Adapting to diverse teaching methodologies	- Broader professional development opportunities - Exposure to innovative approaches - Valuable networking connections - Diverse perspectives	- Enhanced teaching capabilities - Updated knowledge of early childhood education - Enriched teaching practice - Maintained high-quality educational standards
Visits to Other Institutions	- Limited perspective on institutional management	- Expanded networks - New ideas for application	- Transformed teaching philosophies - Renewed purpose

Activity Type	Key Challenges	Outcome	Impact on Teaching Practice
	- Uncertainty about implementing new methods - Confined viewpoints about early childhood education	- Innovative teaching strategies - Direct observation of effective practices	- Application of best practices - Enhanced institutional vision
Inviting Guest Speakers to the Institution	- Budget constraints - Initial skepticism from teachers without formal backgrounds - Adapting theoretical concepts to practical classroom settings	- Upgraded knowledge and skills - Exposure to contemporary pedagogical theories - Broader reach across district educators - Collaboration with higher education institutions	- Shift from rigid routines to interactive activities - Adoption of more playful, student-centered methods - Increased student engagement - Nuanced integration of theoretical knowledge
Mentoring	- Diverse student characteristics including special needs - Need for adequate competence and patience - Meeting educational standards with limited qualifications	- Regular monitoring and guidance - Prompt addressing of challenges - Systematic oversight - Collaborative sharing with competent colleagues	- Enriched professional experiences - Development of subjective understanding - Improved pedagogical approaches - Active and enthusiastic engagement with students

Initial Professional Insecurity as a Catalyst for Growth

At the outset of their teaching experiences, non-formal ECE educators at SPS Miftahul Jannah expressed strong feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt rooted in their lack of formal educational qualifications. Several participants admitted to struggling with fundamental aspects of early childhood pedagogy, such as lesson planning, class organization, and managing diverse student behaviors. The gap between their personal academic background and the pedagogical demands of the classroom often led them to question their legitimacy as educators. As stated by one participant:

> "*Before attending all of the improvement activities like training, MGMP, workshops, etc., I felt insecure about teaching because I did not have a formal educational background.*" (Teacher B)

This perception of being underqualified created emotional strain and a deep sense of vulnerability, particularly during the early stages of teaching, where most relied heavily on imitation and trial-and-error methods without theoretical grounding.

Despite these constraints, participants reported that this sense of insecurity eventually became a source of intrinsic motivation to improve. The desire to overcome their limitations drove them to actively seek out professional development opportunities, including structured training, workshops, and institutional mentoring. Teachers described a process of personal transformation through which they began to build not only technical competencies but also emotional resilience. As one teacher without a college degree reflected:

> *"Initially I felt insecure because I hadn't gone to college, but after that training I felt more confident in delivering material to students."*

Their engagement in professional learning activities was not driven by formal obligation, but by an acute awareness of their developmental needs and a commitment to providing meaningful learning experiences for children under their care.

Moreover, the role of social and institutional support mechanisms was vital in facilitating this shift from anxiety to agency. Mentorship, both formal and informal, provided a safe environment for educators to articulate their insecurities and collaboratively find solutions. The participatory and collegial atmosphere fostered by MGMP forums and peer feedback enabled educators to reframe their challenges not as personal failures but as common learning experiences. Over time, these support systems contributed to a sense of professional identity that was grounded not in formal certification, but in reflective practice, contextual sensitivity, and adaptive growth. As a result, insecurity functioned less as a barrier and more as a productive tension that fueled continuous professional development.

Skill Transformation through Structured Training

Structured training programs played a pivotal role in the professional growth of educators at SPS Miftahul Jannah, particularly for those lacking formal educational qualifications. Participants described training activities—such as district-organized workshops and institutional capacity-building sessions—as crucial entry points for mastering essential teaching skills. These sessions addressed foundational challenges such as classroom management, time allocation, and student engagement strategies. One participant shared:

> *"Initially I felt insecure because I hadn't gone to college, but after that training I felt more confident in delivering material to students."*

These learning opportunities provided both knowledge and emotional reinforcement, helping educators feel validated in their roles while equipping them with tools to deliver more structured and effective lessons.

Beyond technical improvement, training programs also facilitated a deeper pedagogical awareness among educators. Teachers without formal education backgrounds reported that they previously followed teaching routines without understanding the reasoning behind them. Through guided training, they began to internalize key principles of early childhood education and adapt them to their own contexts. In contrast, teachers with formal academic backgrounds tended to view training as mere reinforcement of pre-existing knowledge. This distinction highlights the transformative impact of structured training for underqualified educators, who often experience a shift from mechanical delivery to reflective, intentional practice.

Furthermore, participants described their skill development as a progressive journey. Training programs did not yield immediate mastery but instead enabled incremental change through structured phases—moving from basic exposure to confident application. The process was marked by growing clarity in lesson planning, improved understanding of children's developmental needs, and increased fluency in using interactive techniques. According to the data in Table 2, teachers experienced "progressive skill development through three stages," indicating that structured training served not only as a corrective tool but as a platform for long-term professional formation. This layered transformation affirms the value of continuous and scaffolded learning opportunities in empowering non-formal ECE educators to bridge competency gaps.

Professional Community Building through MGMP Forums

For many non-formal early childhood educators at SPS Miftahul Jannah, professional isolation marked the early years of their teaching careers. Lacking access to formal teacher training or peer discussion groups, these educators often navigated classroom challenges alone, without benchmarks to evaluate or improve their teaching. This sense of working in a vacuum intensified their feelings of uncertainty and limited their awareness of best practices in early childhood education. The formation of district-wide MGMP (Musyawarah Guru Mata Pelajaran) forums, therefore, responded to a critical gap by offering a dedicated space for interaction and exchange

among educators with diverse experiences. Participants repeatedly highlighted how MGMP disrupted their professional solitude and allowed them to reconnect with a broader pedagogical community.

Beyond social connection, MGMP forums became vital platforms for knowledge sharing and collaborative reflection. Participants engaged in collective problem-solving, shared strategies for overcoming instructional difficulties, and critically examined their teaching routines in light of input from peers. This dialogical process fostered reflective habits and allowed teachers to move beyond rote teaching practices. Teachers noted that observing the ideas and techniques of their colleagues encouraged them to reconsider their own pedagogical assumptions and experiment with new approaches. The MGMP forum thus functioned not only as a technical support mechanism but also as a reflective community of practice that fostered mutual learning.

One of the most tangible outcomes of MGMP participation was the improved ability of educators to plan and implement structured learning experiences. Teachers reported greater familiarity with curriculum tools such as RPPH (Rencana Pelaksanaan Pembelajaran Harian), RPPM (Rencana Pelaksanaan Pembelajaran Mingguan), and the strategic use of APE (Alat Permainan Edukatif). These technical components, often unfamiliar to educators without formal qualifications, were demystified through collaborative workshops and shared planning sessions. As one participant remarked:

> *"Before joining these sessions, I struggled with lesson planning and creating engaging activities."*

Through MGMP, previously improvisational practices became more deliberate and aligned with recognized standards of early childhood pedagogy.

Importantly, MGMP participation also contributed to the construction of professional identity among non-formal educators. In a context where many lacked formal degrees or certifications, being part of a structured professional group offered a form of informal validation and recognition. Participants described gaining not only pedagogical skills but also a renewed sense of purpose and legitimacy in their teaching roles. The experience of contributing meaningfully to peer discussions, and having one's ideas acknowledged by others, helped shift the perception of non-formal educators from informal caregivers to active agents of educational quality. In this way, MGMP played a dual role—as a site for technical enhancement and as a platform for affirming professional dignity.

Contextual Adaptation and Creative Pedagogical Practices

Faced with limited financial and material resources, educators at SPS Miftahul Jannah developed creative teaching practices rooted in their immediate contexts. Rather than relying on commercially produced teaching aids, they designed low-cost, culturally relevant tools using locally available materials. For example, some teachers replaced expensive flashcards with handmade storytelling puppets, integrating traditional narratives into classroom activities. These adaptations were not only cost-effective but also culturally resonant, increasing student engagement and contextual learning. In this way, material limitations catalyzed rather than constrained innovation, prompting educators to reflect deeply on how to deliver meaningful early learning using what was available.

One of the most significant sources of inspiration for these creative adaptations came from visits to other early childhood institutions. These visits provided opportunities for teachers to observe alternative classroom setups, management styles, and instructional methods. Participants described these experiences as "eye-opening" and "humbling," often motivating them to revise their own approaches. As one educator explained:

> *"Walking through those exemplary classrooms, observing their teaching approaches firsthand—I felt simultaneously humbled and inspired."*

Importantly, teachers did not simply replicate what they saw. Instead, they critically selected and adapted observed practices to suit the unique needs and capacities of their own school environment.

In addition to peer observation, collaboration with external experts through guest speaker sessions further enriched teachers' professional perspectives. Initially, some educators expressed skepticism about theoretical presentations that seemed disconnected from the practical realities of non-formal ECE settings. However, as sessions evolved to include dialogical exchanges and hands-on demonstrations, teachers began to see value in adapting theoretical frameworks to their classroom contexts. This led to the emergence of more interactive and student-centered learning activities that were aligned with both pedagogical principles and local constraints. As one teacher shared, theory became meaningful only when it could be "tailored" to the unique dynamics of non-formal education.

These experiences collectively contributed to a shift in how educators at SPS Miftahul Jannah conceptualized innovation and professional competence. Innovation was no longer equated with the introduction of complex or high-tech teaching tools, but rather with the thoughtful adaptation of existing knowledge to local realities. Teachers began to see themselves as reflective practitioners capable of generating their own methods rather than passively adopting externally imposed models. This redefinition of professionalism—anchored in contextual responsiveness, cultural awareness, and pedagogical creativity—demonstrates how non-formal educators can assert agency and expertise even in resource-limited environments.

Mentorship as Emotional and Instructional Support

For non-formal educators at SPS Miftahul Jannah, mentorship emerged as a vital emotional anchor, particularly for those entering the teaching profession without formal pedagogical training. Participants often felt overwhelmed by the complexity of early childhood classrooms, especially when dealing with diverse student characteristics and behavioral challenges. Mentors—whether experienced peers or designated senior teachers—provided affirmation and psychological reassurance, helping novice educators cope with self-doubt and stress. This support system served not only to alleviate emotional burden but also to affirm the educators' sense of belonging within the teaching community. As one institutional reflection noted, mentoring

> "*created opportunities for deep conversations about challenges and obstacles that teachers face*."

Mentoring also offered a pragmatic space for addressing immediate classroom problems in real-time. Rather than relying solely on theory-based training, educators used mentorship sessions to seek context-specific advice and practical strategies for their daily challenges. These included guidance on classroom management, differentiation for students with special needs, and the use of simple yet effective instructional tools. Teachers described mentoring as a flexible, demand-driven mechanism that responded directly to their evolving classroom realities. Through collaborative sharing, educators acquired contextually grounded knowledge that often proved more applicable than generalized training content.

Beyond problem-solving, mentoring provided a structured environment for reflective inquiry. Teachers were encouraged to articulate their reasoning, question their assumptions, and consider alternative approaches to instruction. This process deepened their understanding of pedagogical concepts and facilitated the transition from intuitive teaching to evidence-informed practice. As reflection became routine, educators began to recognize their own growth and develop a sense of professional responsibility. Mentorship, in this way, acted as a bridge between practical know-how and pedagogical consciousness, reinforcing both technical competence and critical awareness.

Over time, mentorship evolved into a shared institutional culture rather than a one-directional support relationship. Educators began to view mentoring not as a remedial

intervention, but as a collective commitment to mutual learning and continuous improvement. It became common practice to conduct informal mentoring sessions during breaks or after school, allowing the mentoring dynamic to be embedded organically within the daily rhythm of the institution. This culture of collaborative support contributed to the sustainability of professional development efforts and helped establish SPS Miftahul Jannah as a learning-centered community. The normalization of mentoring as a communal habit ultimately ensured that capacity building was not episodic, but embedded within the school's ethos.

Discussion

In many Indonesian non-formal early childhood education (ECE) settings, professionalism is shaped not by academic qualifications but by daily improvisations, institutional culture, and community norms. SPS Miftahul Jannah exemplifies this reality—an institution where educators, most without degrees in education, navigate pedagogical expectations through alternative routes. Nationally, the issue is systemic: nearly 45% of ECE educators are high school graduates or below (Hasbi, 2022; Putri Nazidah, 2021). Despite the widespread assumption that certification guarantees competence, a growing body of research emphasizes the importance of reflective practice, situational expertise, and collegial learning in shaping effective teaching (Anders & Oppermann, 2024; Jaoza & Kanda, 2024; Ranta et al., 2023). This study sought to understand how such teachers construct professional identity and competence in an environment that lacks formal educational pathways.

One of the most compelling patterns to emerge was how feelings of professional inadequacy, rather than paralyzing teachers, became a driving force for growth. Rather than passively accepting their lack of credentials, participants actively sought training, discussion forums, and mentorship to compensate (Kovačević et al., 2024; Marinšek et al., 2020). The data reveal a striking emotional arc: from doubt to confidence, from imitation to intentionality. Teachers expressed how institutional training provided the clarity they needed to understand classroom dynamics more systematically (Cheng et al., 2024; Peters et al., 2022; Sevimli-Celik, 2021). Perhaps most unexpectedly, the sense of legitimacy did not emerge from external validation but from their own evolving mastery.

This trajectory resonates with research emphasizing the developmental role of structured professional support in non-formal educational settings (Dulcic et al., 2021; Topal et al., 2024). Teachers in this study were not merely absorbing technical content; they were reconfiguring their teaching philosophies through training and iterative practice (Cheng et al., 2024; McLoone-Richards & Robinson, 2022). In contrast to critiques suggesting non-certified educators are fixed in rudimentary pedagogies, our findings reflect a capacity for adaptive and strategic decision-making (Gomez et al., 2023; Jimerson et al., 2020). This supports calls for models of professional development that acknowledge practical intelligence alongside academic knowledge (Marinsek & Kovac, 2019; Nagimzhanova et al., 2019).

Equally important was the role of MGMP forums in establishing dialogic and collegial spaces for teachers. These gatherings disrupted professional isolation and introduced shared standards of teaching, particularly in areas such as RPPH, RPPM, and play-based learning strategies (Huffhines et al., 2024; Jacobs et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2022). What began as technical sessions evolved into cultural spaces of validation and empowerment, mirroring findings in reflective learning literature (Hu et al., 2023; Valle-Flórez et al., 2024). Such results challenge the prescriptive view that formal credentials are the only means to professional community building (Kim et al., 2024; La Croix et al., 2023). Instead, this case shows that community of practice models can thrive organically when institutional leadership enables them.

Another significant contribution of this study lies in its account of contextualized pedagogical innovation. In the absence of commercial teaching aids, educators created culturally grounded materials and redesigned traditional games to support developmental goals—highlighting the pedagogical potential of local wisdom (Lacambra & Gracia, 2022; Mikuska et al., 2024). These strategies not only reflect adaptation but also a deepening of

teachers' awareness of their learners and community needs. However, while these innovations are laudable, they also point to systemic underinvestment in rural and community-based ECE settings (Biana et al., 2021; Kinkead-Clark, 2023). Without addressing material inequities, reliance on teacher improvisation risks normalizing inadequate support as sufficient.

Mentorship at SPS Miftahul Jannah emerged as an affective as much as instructional mechanism. It provided emotional reassurance, reduced teacher attrition, and fostered the conditions necessary for pedagogical experimentation (Reynolds, 2020; Villarroel et al., 2020). Unlike formal supervisory models, mentorship here was embedded in relational trust and informal dialogue—what some scholars call "pedagogical companionship" (Barghaus et al., 2023; Khayankij, 2024). Yet this kind of mentorship remains fragile, dependent on internal goodwill and individual leadership rather than policy frameworks. For long-term sustainability, such practices need institutionalization within national ECE development strategies (Danilaev & Malivanov, 2020; Kruszewska, 2021).

The findings illuminate a critical opportunity for reimagining teacher qualification systems in Indonesia's non-formal education sector. Instead of enforcing a single pathway based on formal certification, hybrid models that integrate experiential, community-based professional development could be more effective and inclusive (Buell et al., 2020; Jurkic et al., 2023; Striebich et al., 2024). This would acknowledge the legitimacy of learning that occurs in situ—through dialogue, reflection, and practice. For institutions like SPS Miftahul Jannah, this validation would not only improve morale but also strengthen public trust and educational outcomes. As ECE becomes more central to national development agendas, the time has come to widen our definitions of what it means to be a qualified teacher (Falloon, 2024; Gardner-Neblett & Soto-Boykin, 2024; Shabur, 2024).

Conclusion

This study explored how early childhood educators without formal educational backgrounds developed their professional competencies within the institutional setting of SPS Miftahul Jannah. The findings indicate that despite initial insecurity, these educators demonstrated significant growth through structured training, collaborative MGMP forums, mentoring, and creative contextual adaptation. Five key themes emerged—ranging from emotional resilience to reflective practice—that underline a process of transformation shaped by institutional support and internal motivation. Rather than viewing the absence of formal qualifications as a deficit, the educators' development trajectory highlights the validity of practice-based knowledge as a foundation for professionalism. This points to a necessary shift in how competency and legitimacy are defined in early childhood education, especially within non-formal settings.

The implications are far-reaching: institutions should recognize and reinforce the mechanisms already enabling growth—peer collaboration, targeted training, and sustained mentoring—as legitimate pathways to teacher professionalism. However, this study is limited by its single-site focus and reliance on self-reported experiences, suggesting a need for broader comparative and longitudinal studies. Future research could examine similar models across diverse institutions and investigate the integration of formal and informal learning systems through hybrid certification frameworks. Additionally, exploring digital strategies for professional development may further support accessibility and continuity in non-formal education. These steps would help institutionalize an inclusive model of professionalization that validates the lived expertise of educators working beyond traditional academic routes.

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