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Compliance Or Understanding? Rewards And Consequences In An Indonesian Islamic Kindergarten

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Abstrak: Penghargaan dan konsekuensi lazim digunakan untuk membimbing perilaku anak usia dini. Namun, kesediaan anak mengikuti arahan belum tentu menunjukkan bahwa mereka memahami alasan di balik perilaku yang diharapkan. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengkaji bagaimana pendidik di sebuah taman kanak-kanak Islam di Indonesia memaknai dan menerapkan penghargaan serta konsekuensi, khususnya dalam membedakan kepatuhan sesaat dari pemahaman yang sedang berkembang. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus tunggal. Data diperoleh melalui kuesioner terbuka yang diisi oleh sembilan guru, enam sesi observasi di tiga kelas, serta wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan kepala sekolah. Analisis menghasilkan empat tema, yaitu kepatuhan dan tujuan pendidikan, pemaknaan terhadap tindakan mandiri anak, penjelasan dalam pembinaan perilaku, serta pertimbangan profesional guru dan harapan sekolah. Enam guru membedakan tindakan merapikan mainan yang dilakukan karena mengharapkan penghargaan dengan tindakan yang dilakukan atas inisiatif sendiri, sedangkan tiga guru menilai kedua tindakan tersebut serupa atau sama-sama positif. Hasil observasi memperlihatkan bahwa guru memadukan penghargaan dan tindakan korektif dengan penjelasan mengenai keselamatan, partisipasi dalam kegiatan keagamaan, dan hubungan antarteman. Kepala sekolah memandang kepatuhan sebagai kebutuhan dalam situasi tertentu, tetapi bukan sebagai tujuan akhir pendidikan. Ia menekankan pentingnya membantu anak memahami alasan di balik aturan dan harapan perilaku. Penelitian ini memperlihatkan adanya perbedaan cara pendidik dalam menilai keberhasilan perilaku anak serta pentingnya penjelasan dalam pembinaan perilaku sehari-hari. Meskipun demikian, data yang diperoleh belum dapat memastikan apakah anak telah memahami dan menginternalisasi harapan perilaku tersebut sebagai bagian dari kesadaran mereka sendiri.

Kata kunci: *Pembinaan Perilaku, Kepatuhan, Pemahaman Anak, Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini, Penghargaan dan Konsekuensi*

***Abstract*:** *Rewards and consequences are commonly used to guide early childhood behavior. However, children's willingness to follow instructions does not necessarily indicate that they understand the reasons behind the expected behavior. This study aims to examine how educators in an Islamic kindergarten in Indonesia interpret and implement rewards and consequences, particularly in distinguishing immediate compliance from developing understanding. This study employed a qualitative approach with a single-case study design. Data were collected through open-ended questionnaires completed by nine teachers, six observation sessions across three classrooms, and a semi-structured interview with the school principal. The analysis generated four themes: compliance and educational goals, interpretations of children's independent actions, explanations in behavioral guidance, and teachers' professional judgement and school expectations. Six teachers distinguished between tidying up toys in anticipation of a reward and doing so on one's own initiative, while three teachers considered the two actions similar or equally positive. The observations showed that teachers combined rewards and corrective actions with explanations concerning safety, participation in religious activities, and peer relationships. The principal viewed compliance as necessary in certain situations but not as the ultimate goal of education. She emphasised the importance of helping children understand the reasons behind rules and behavioral expectations. This study reveals*

differences in how educators evaluate children's behavioral success and highlights the importance of explanations in everyday behavioral guidance. Nevertheless, the data obtained cannot establish whether children have understood and internalised these behavioral expectations as part of their own awareness.

Keywords: *Behavioral Guidance, Compliance, Developing Understanding, Early Childhood Education, Rewards and Consequences*

A. Introduction

Guiding young children's behavior is an essential part of early childhood education. Teachers establish classroom expectations, acknowledge desirable actions, respond to inappropriate behavior, and support children in developing responsibility towards themselves and others. These practices are intended not only to maintain an orderly learning environment but also to create opportunities for children to develop social, emotional, and moral understanding. Research has documented diverse approaches to preschool behavior management, including praise, corrective interventions, preventive strategies, and social-emotional support (Granger et al., 2024; Ongoren, 2025; Steed et al., 2026). However, the educational significance of these practices cannot be determined solely by whether children immediately comply with instructions.

Rewards and consequences are frequently used to encourage participation, reinforce classroom routines, and address unwanted or unsafe behavior. Praise, stars, and privileges may be used to acknowledge desirable actions, while reminders, temporary restrictions, and other corrective responses may be applied when expectations are not met. Such strategies can serve immediate practical purposes, particularly when children's safety or the well-being of others requires adult intervention. Nevertheless, an important educational question remains: does performing an expected behavior necessarily indicate that a child understands why that behavior is expected?

This developmental perspective is important when considering how children gradually learn responsibility and understand the reasons underlying behavioral expectations. A child who returns classroom materials after being reminded may be responding to an adult's instruction, recalling an established routine, or beginning to recognise a shared responsibility. Conversely, a child who understands that hitting causes pain may still require adult assistance to manage frustration and respond appropriately during conflict. Such examples illustrate why educators need to distinguish children's observable actions from the developing capacities that may contribute to those actions. Behavioral guidance can therefore be understood as an ongoing educational process in which immediate intervention, explanation, modelling, and opportunities to practise appropriate responses serve different but complementary purposes.

This distinction can also be examined through Self-Determination Theory, which differentiates externally regulated behavior from the gradual internalisation of values and expectations (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Compliance refers to performing an expected action or refraining from a prohibited one, whereas developing understanding concerns children's emerging recognition of the reasons underlying

behavioral expectations. For example, a child may return classroom materials to receive a reward, avoid correction, follow classmates, or contribute to a shared responsibility. Although these actions may appear identical, their underlying motivations cannot be established through observation of task completion alone. Moreover, acting independently does not necessarily indicate autonomous motivation, just as requiring adult support does not necessarily indicate a lack of understanding. Accordingly, immediate behavioral compliance and developing understanding should be examined as related but conceptually distinct aspects of children's learning.

Existing research offers important insights into different dimensions of behavioral guidance. Studies of classroom management have examined teachers' strategies, behavioral interventions, and the conditions associated with desirable classroom behavior (Granger et al., 2024; Meran et al., 2025; Ongoren, 2025). Other studies have investigated children's self-regulation, emotional development, and the support provided through classroom interactions (Guedes et al., 2025; Muir et al., 2024; Nilfyr & Plantin Ewe, 2025). Research on moral development has further examined children's judgments about intentions, consequences, and interpersonal transgressions (Essler & Paulus, 2026; Seucan et al., 2024). Together, these studies demonstrate that observable behavior, motivational processes, developmental capacities, and moral reasoning represent related but distinct aspects of children's learning.

However, these strands of research do not fully explain how educators themselves distinguish successful behavioral compliance from developing understanding when making everyday pedagogical decisions. Teachers must often interpret children's responses without having direct access to their motivations or reasoning. A child who follows an instruction may be responding to an anticipated reward, an adult's authority, an established routine, or an emerging appreciation of the expectation. Similarly, a child who requires repeated reminders may understand a rule but still need support in managing emotions or behavior. Understanding how teachers interpret such situations is therefore important for examining the educational purposes they associate with rewards and consequences.

This issue is particularly relevant in Islamic early childhood education, where behavioral expectations are often connected to the development of *akhlak* (moral character), responsibility, respect for others, and participation in religious practices. Within this educational context, routines such as communal prayer, honesty in everyday interactions, and respectful behavior may serve both immediate classroom purposes and broader moral and religious aims. Indonesian research has examined moral education in public and religion-based kindergartens, character development through educational routines, and the institutional management of Islamic early childhood education (Cholimah et al., 2024; Munawaroh et al., 2026; Pamuji et al., 2024). These studies provide important contextual perspectives on how moral and religious expectations are incorporated into early childhood educational practices.

Nevertheless, participation in religious routines or compliance with moral expectations does not necessarily demonstrate that children understand the values associated with those practices. A child who joins Dhuha prayer after receiving a reminder or anticipating recognition may be learning to participate in an established

routine, but observable participation alone cannot establish the child's understanding of its religious significance. Similarly, apologising after an interpersonal conflict may reflect an emerging recognition of harm, familiarity with classroom expectations, or compliance with an adult's instruction. These distinctions are particularly important in educational settings where the development of moral and religious understanding is an intended outcome. Examining how educators explain expectations, interpret children's responses, and balance immediate compliance with longer-term educational purposes may therefore offer a more nuanced understanding of behavioral guidance in Islamic kindergartens.

The research gap addressed in this study concerns the relationship between educators' interpretations of behavioral success, their observed guidance practices, and the institutional reasoning that informs those practices. Although previous studies have examined behavior management, motivation, self-regulation, and moral development, the question of how educators connect immediate compliance with broader educational aims warrants closer examination within a specific school context. In particular, attention is needed to what teachers regard as evidence of understanding, how they communicate the reasons behind expectations, and how their professional judgments relate to classroom interactions. This study addresses these questions without assuming that educators' interpretations provide direct evidence of children's internal motivations or moral understanding.

The study aimed to examine how educators understand and use rewards and consequences in an Islamic kindergarten in Samarinda, Indonesia, and how they distinguish immediate compliance from developing understanding. A qualitative single-case design was employed, drawing on open-ended questionnaires completed by nine teachers, observations in three classrooms, and a semi-structured interview with the school principal. These complementary sources enabled the study to examine reported practices, observed classroom interactions, and institutional perspectives within the same educational setting.

Two research questions guided the inquiry:

RQ1 = How do teachers understand and use rewards and consequences in guiding young children's behavior in an Indonesian Islamic kindergarten?

RQ2 = How is the distinction between behavioral compliance and developing understanding reflected in teachers' accounts, classroom practices, and the principal's institutional perspective?

The study contributes to early childhood education research by examining behavioral guidance as a matter of pedagogical interpretation rather than behavioral responses alone. By comparing teachers' accounts, classroom observations, and the principal's reasoning, it identifies how educators evaluate successful behavior, communicate expectations, and exercise professional judgment. It also situates these interpretations within the developmental characteristics of young children and the moral and religious purposes of Islamic early childhood education. The study clarifies the evidential limits of interpreting children's understanding from observable compliance and may inform professional reflection on how rewards, consequences, explanations, and alternative actions are used to support children's developing responsibility and understanding within everyday classroom interactions.

B. Literature Review

1. Behavioral Guidance: Rewards and Consequences in Early Childhood Education

Behavioral guidance in early childhood education involves more than encouraging desirable actions and discouraging inappropriate behavior. It is a pedagogical process through which children encounter classroom expectations, receive support in managing their actions, and gradually learn to consider the consequences of their behavior for themselves and others. Because young children's emotional regulation, impulse control, and understanding of social expectations are still developing, behavioral guidance needs to address both immediate classroom situations and the developmental support children require. Rewards and consequences should therefore be considered within a broader learning process rather than solely as techniques for obtaining compliance.

Research on preschool classroom management demonstrates that teachers employ a range of practices, including praise, reminders, preventive strategies, and corrective interventions (Ongoren, 2025; Steed et al., 2026). Behavior-specific praise may direct children's attention toward expected actions, although its use can vary according to children's characteristics and classroom behavior (Granger et al., 2024). Evidence from the Good Behavior Game also indicates that reward contingencies can contribute to measurable behavioral improvements under structured intervention conditions (Cooper et al., 2026). These findings demonstrate the potential usefulness of reinforcement in achieving particular behavioral outcomes. However, observable improvements do not necessarily establish that children understand or have accepted the reasons underlying the expected behavior.

This distinction becomes particularly important when educators respond to situations involving safety, participation, and interpersonal relationships. Stopping a child from running indoors may be necessary to prevent injury, while explaining the danger provides an opportunity to connect the instruction with its underlying purpose. Similarly, acknowledging a child's honesty may reinforce a desirable action, but the educational significance of that recognition also depends on how the situation is explained and understood. Immediate behavioral intervention and longer-term developmental aims are therefore related but should not be treated as equivalent.

Within this study, rewards are understood as forms of recognition or benefits offered in response to desirable behavior, whereas consequences refer to educators' responses to unwanted or unsafe actions. Neither category is assumed to be inherently beneficial or harmful. Their educational significance depends on their purposes, implementation, and the opportunities they provide for further learning. This understanding establishes the basis for examining how educators interpret the relationship between behavioral compliance, developing understanding, and the professional decisions involved in guiding young children.

2. Self-Determination Theory: Compliance, Motivation, and Internalization

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides the principal theoretical framework for distinguishing observable behavioral compliance from the developing internalization of behavioral expectations. (Ryan & Deci, 2020) explain

that externally regulated behavior is primarily influenced by external demands, rewards, or anticipated consequences, whereas internalization involves progressively accepting the value or significance of an action. This distinction suggests that performing an expected behavior does not, by itself, establish the motivational process underlying that behavior.

In early childhood classrooms, children may perform identical actions for different reasons. A child may return classroom materials to obtain a reward, avoid correction, follow peers, or contribute to maintaining a shared learning environment. Although the observable outcomes are similar, the motivations underlying these actions may differ. Young children's developing capacities to interpret expectations, regulate emotions, and respond to social situations further complicate the relationship between action and motivation. Behavioral compliance should therefore not automatically be interpreted as evidence of internalization, nor should externally prompted behavior be assumed to have no developmental value.

An additional distinction concerns autonomy and independence. (Ryan & Deci, 2020) describe autonomy in terms of willingness or endorsement, whereas independence concerns acting without relying on others. A child who completes a task without prompting is not necessarily acting autonomously, just as a child who requires assistance is not necessarily acting without understanding. This distinction is particularly relevant during early childhood, when children may recognize the value of an expectation but continue to depend on adult guidance to regulate their actions. Reduced prompting may indicate a change in behavioral performance, but it cannot independently establish autonomous motivation or moral understanding.

SDT also provides a perspective for examining how rewards and explanations function within behavioral guidance. Recognition may encourage participation, while explanations may help make the purposes of expectations more accessible to children. However, neither the presence of a reward nor the provision of an explanation is sufficient evidence that internalization has occurred. The significance of these practices depends on how they are experienced and interpreted, including whether children have opportunities to recognize the reasons behind expected actions.

In the present study, SDT functions as an interpretive framework for examining how teachers distinguish actions performed in anticipation of rewards from actions undertaken without immediate external incentives. It also informs the analysis of educators' explanations, concerns about continued dependence on rewards, and interpretations of children's developing responsibility. Because children's motivations were not directly investigated, SDT is used to analyze educators' professional judgments rather than to classify individual children's motivational regulation.

3. Self-Regulation and Developing Moral Understanding

Self-regulation and moral understanding provide complementary developmental perspectives on children's responses to behavioral expectations. Whereas SDT addresses the motivational significance of actions, self-regulation

concerns children's developing capacity to manage attention, emotions, and behavior in response to situational demands. Moral understanding concerns their emerging recognition of the social and moral reasons underlying particular expectations. These dimensions are related in everyday classroom interactions but represent different aspects of development.

Self-regulatory capacities develop through interactions between individual characteristics and social environments, including the support provided by educators (Nilfyr & Plantin Ewe, 2025). Research also indicates that behavioral persistence, executive functioning, and motivation should not be treated as interchangeable developmental capacities. (Guedes et al., 2025) identified different associations between early executive functions and subsequent learning behaviors, while (Coelho et al., 2026) examined self-regulation alongside classroom interaction quality and psychological adjustment. These findings support the importance of distinguishing immediate behavioral responses from the broader developmental capacities involved in producing them.

Adult guidance is particularly relevant because young children may understand an expectation while still experiencing difficulty following it consistently. Excitement, frustration, disappointment, or interpersonal conflict may require support beyond a verbal reminder. (Kostol & Manty, 2024) highlight educators' interpretations and decision-making in emotionally demanding classroom situations. From this perspective, repeated reminders or adult intervention should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of limited understanding. They may also indicate that children require continuing assistance in translating an expectation into appropriate action.

Moral understanding introduces another dimension of behavioral guidance. Research on preschool children's moral judgments and punishment attributions examines how children interpret intentions, consequences, and interpersonal harm (Seucan et al., 2024). (Essler & Paulus, 2026) further investigate children's developing responses to moral and conventional transgressions. These perspectives are relevant because expectations concerning safety, classroom routines, honesty, and harm to others may involve different forms of reasoning. Following a routine may demonstrate familiarity with an expectation, whereas recognizing the harm caused by hitting another child involves an additional social or moral consideration.

The relationship between self-regulation and moral understanding can be illustrated through everyday classroom situations. A child may recognize that hitting causes pain but still require adult assistance to manage anger. Similarly, a child may apologize after being instructed to do so without necessarily demonstrating an understanding of the harm experienced by another person. These examples show that knowing an expectation, regulating behavior in accordance with it, and acting based on an accepted reason are conceptually distinguishable. Consequently, educators need to consider not only whether children perform the expected actions but also the explanations, emotional support, and alternative responses made available to them.

For the present study, research on self-regulation and moral development extends the motivational perspective provided by SDT. Together, these perspectives clarify why observable compliance, independent action, and repeated prompting cannot serve as direct measures of children's understanding. They also provide a developmental basis for examining educators' explanations, alternative actions, and responses to children's individual needs. Nevertheless, the study does not directly assess children's moral reasoning or self-regulatory development, and conclusions about these capacities remain beyond the available evidence.

4. Teachers' Professional Judgment and Institutional Expectations

Behavioral guidance requires professional judgment because educators must respond to situations that differ in urgency, developmental demands, and social significance. Teachers may need to stop unsafe behavior immediately, acknowledge a desirable action, explain an expectation, or provide additional support when a child experiences difficulty. These decisions require consideration of both the immediate situation and the child's developing capacity to understand and respond to expectations. Professional judgment therefore connects the motivational and developmental perspectives discussed above with the practical decisions educators make in everyday classroom interactions.

Research on early childhood education identifies educators' decision-making as situated within classroom interactions and professional responsibilities. (Ukkonen Mikkola et al., 2024) examine the reasoning associated with pedagogical actions, while (Kostol & Manty, 2024) investigate teachers' interpretations of emotional situations. Studies of differentiated instruction further illustrate the importance of considering individual children's needs alongside practical classroom constraints (Demirci Unal & Ozturk, 2025). These perspectives suggest that the appropriateness of behavioral guidance cannot be determined solely by whether an expected response occurs.

Professional judgment is also shaped by institutional expectations. In Islamic early childhood education, classroom routines may involve interconnected behavioral, social, moral, and religious purposes. Research comparing public and religion-based kindergartens in Indonesia identifies moral education across both settings, with additional emphasis on religious practices in religion-based institutions (Cholimah et al., 2024). Research on Islamic preschool management likewise situates character development within school practices and institutional arrangements (Munawaroh et al., 2026).

Within this context, the development of *akhlak* (moral character) may involve expectations concerning honesty, responsibility, respect for others, and participation in religious activities. Such expectations have educational purposes that extend beyond maintaining classroom order. However, participation in prayer or compliance with an instruction cannot independently establish that children understand its moral or religious significance. Teachers' explanations, responses to children's difficulties, and opportunities for children to explore the reasons behind expectations therefore become important considerations.

The developmental characteristics of young children also require educators to distinguish between immediate intervention and subsequent learning

opportunities. When an action threatens safety or causes harm, stopping the behavior may be the immediate priority. Explanation, emotional support, and opportunities to practice alternative responses may follow when the situation permits. This sequence represents a possible pedagogical response rather than a universal developmental progression from compliance to understanding. Its appropriateness depends on the child, the situation, and the educational purpose of the intervention.

In this study, professional judgment provides a complementary analytical perspective for examining how teachers select and adjust rewards and consequences, how the principal interprets appropriate behavioral guidance, and how institutional expectations inform classroom responses. It also directs attention to differences between educators' stated intentions, observed practices, and the reasons offered for particular decisions.

5. Theoretical Integration and Analytical Application

The theoretical perspectives outlined above are integrated to examine behavioral guidance as a relationship between observable actions, developing capacities, and educators' pedagogical interpretations. Each perspective addresses a distinct analytical concern. Behavioral guidance research identifies the strategies educators use and the immediate responses they seek. SDT clarifies why the same observable action may reflect different motivational processes. Research on self-regulation and moral development explains why children's capacity to act appropriately and their understanding of expectations may develop unevenly and require continuing support. Professional judgment and institutional perspectives situate these considerations within the decisions teachers make and the educational purposes of an Islamic kindergarten.

These perspectives are complementary rather than interchangeable. Behavioral compliance describes an observable response, whereas motivation, self-regulation, and moral understanding concern processes or capacities that cannot be established through that response alone. Professional judgment concerns how educators interpret available evidence and decide what guidance is appropriate. Accordingly, the analytical framework does not assume that rewards necessarily prevent internalization, that independent action demonstrates understanding, or that compliance must always precede moral learning.

The integration of these perspectives informs four interconnected areas of analysis:

a. Immediate compliance and educational aims: How educators understand the immediate purposes of rewards and consequences and relate them to broader developmental expectations.
b. Educators' interpretations of independent action: How teachers distinguish actions performed with external incentives or prompting from those initiated without immediate adult direction, while recognizing the limitations of these indicators.
c. Explanation in behavioral guidance: How educators communicate the reasons underlying expectations, respond to children's developing self-regulatory capacities, and offer alternative actions.

d. Professional judgment and school expectations: How teachers and the principal interpret behavioral situations, consider individual developmental needs, and relate classroom responses to institutional moral and religious purposes.

These four areas guide the analysis of teachers' questionnaire responses, observed classroom interactions, and the principal's interview. Comparison across the three sources makes it possible to examine how educators' stated purposes relate to observed practices and institutional reasoning, while retaining differences or uncertainties in the evidence.

The framework does not function as a direct assessment of children's motivation, moral understanding, or internalization. Instead, it supports a critical examination of what educators consider evidence of successful behavioral guidance, how they interpret children's responses, and what remains uncertain about developing understanding. In this way, the theoretical integration connects children's developmental characteristics with the professional and institutional processes through which rewards and consequences acquire educational meaning.

C. Research Methodology

1. Research Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative single-case design to examine how educators understood and used rewards and consequences in an Islamic early childhood education setting in Samarinda, East Kalimantan, Indonesia. The school constituted the case, allowing behavioral guidance to be examined within the everyday classroom routines and institutional expectations in which it occurred (Mtisi, 2022).

Data were collected between August and September 2026 through an open-ended teacher questionnaire, classroom observations, and a semi-structured interview with the school principal. Nine homeroom teachers completed the questionnaire. According to their responses, one teacher taught in the playgroup (Kelompok Bermain, KB), two taught in TK A, and six taught in TK B. Six teachers reported having fewer than five years of teaching experience, while three reported between 11 and 20 years of experience.

All participating teachers held bachelor's degrees in various disciplines, including early childhood education, psychology, English education, Islamic religious education, arts, and primary education, with early childhood education and psychology representing the predominant academic backgrounds. All participants had taken part in professional development activities related to homeroom teaching, coaching, and counselling. Their responsibilities included managing classroom routines, establishing behavioral expectations, and responding to children's everyday interactions.

Classroom observations were conducted in three settings: one KB class, one TK A class, and one TK B class. The principal was purposively selected to provide an institutional perspective on behavioral expectations, the educational purposes of rewards and consequences, and teachers' professional discretion. The school and all participants were anonymized when reporting the findings.

2. Data Collection and Instrument Development

Data collection proceeded sequentially, beginning with the teacher questionnaire, followed by classroom observations and the principal interview. Questionnaire responses informed the focus of classroom observations, while issues identified through these sources subsequently informed the principal interview.

The open-ended questionnaire invited teachers to describe their everyday experiences of encouraging desirable behavior, responding to inappropriate or unsafe actions, and supporting children's understanding of behavioral expectations. The questions addressed the forms and purposes of rewards, the consequences used when children broke classroom rules, the learning outcomes teachers expected from behavioral interventions, and the adjustments made when previous approaches were unsuccessful.

For example, teachers were asked what they wanted children to understand beyond simply stopping inappropriate behavior and how they recognized signs that children were beginning to understand why particular actions were important. Another question invited teachers to describe situations in which they reconsidered their behavioral guidance strategies.

The questionnaire also included a hypothetical scenario involving two children who completed the same task under different circumstances. Child A tidied the toys after being told that a star or praise would be given, whereas Child B tidied the toys without being asked and without knowing whether a reward would follow. Teachers were asked whether they considered the two behaviors similar or different. This scenario was intended to explore the criteria teachers used to evaluate behavioral success, particularly the distinction between completing an expected action and acting independently.

Classroom observations were conducted twice in each of the three classes over one week. Each session lasted approximately 30 minutes, resulting in six observation sessions and a total observation time of approximately 180 minutes. An observation guide focused on the circumstances preceding a behavioral intervention, the child's observable behavior, the teacher's response, any reward or consequence applied, explanations or alternative behaviors offered, and the child's immediate response.

The researcher observed naturally occurring classroom interactions without arranging behavioral incidents or asking teachers to demonstrate particular strategies. Observation records distinguished observable actions and spoken explanations from interpretations of their possible meanings. For example, a child stopping an activity after receiving a reminder was documented as an immediate behavioral response rather than as evidence that the child understood the reason for the instruction.

The principal interview was conducted face-to-face on 30 September 2026. A semi-structured format allowed planned topics to be explored through follow-up questions while accommodating issues introduced by the participant (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The interview addressed the purposes and limitations of rewards and consequences, the relationship between compliance

and understanding, the role of explanation, responses to unsafe behavior, age-related expectations, and teachers' professional discretion. General questions were asked before introducing prompts concerning anonymized classroom episodes. With permission, the interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

3. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed thematically through repeated reading, comparison of responses, and identification of recurring patterns. The analysis began with a careful reading of the nine teachers' open-ended questionnaire responses to understand how they described the purposes of rewards and consequences, evaluated children's behavior, and interpreted the relationship between compliance and understanding.

Responses to the same questions were compared to identify similarities and differences in teachers' reasoning. Particular attention was given to the hypothetical scenario involving two children who completed the same tidying task under different circumstances. Their responses were compared to examine whether teachers evaluated behavioral success primarily in terms of task completion or also considered the circumstances surrounding the action and the child's apparent independence.

Classroom observation records were subsequently reviewed to examine how behavioral guidance occurred during everyday interactions. Attention was given to the situations that prompted teachers' interventions, the rewards or consequences used, the explanations provided, the alternative behaviors suggested, and children's immediate observable responses.

The principal interview transcript was read alongside the questionnaire responses and observation records to examine how institutional expectations and professional judgment related to teachers' reported and observed practices. The three data sources were compared to identify areas of agreement, additional contextual information, and differences in perspective.

Through this process of reading, comparing, and interpreting the data, recurring patterns were organized into four themes: (1) immediate compliance and educational aims; (2) educators' interpretations of independent action; (3) explanation in behavioral guidance; and (4) professional judgment and school expectations. These themes were developed from patterns identified in the available evidence rather than from a predetermined coding framework.

The analysis focused on educators' accounts and observable classroom interactions. Teachers' stated intentions were distinguished from children's immediate behavioral responses, and compliance was not treated as direct evidence of children's internal understanding or sustained behavioral change.

4. Research Quality and Researcher Interpretation

Research quality was supported through the comparison of evidence from the teacher questionnaires, classroom observations, and principal interview. These sources offered different perspectives on behavioral guidance within the same educational setting. Questionnaire responses provided insights into teachers' reported reasoning, observations documented selected classroom interactions, and the principal interview contributed an institutional perspective.

The sources were not assumed to provide identical accounts. Differences between teachers' reported intentions and observed practices were considered relevant to interpretation rather than automatically treated as inconsistencies requiring resolution.

Because children were neither interviewed nor directly assessed, educators' statements about children's understanding were interpreted as professional perceptions rather than verified evidence of children's internal motivation or moral development. The relatively brief classroom observations documented particular interactions and could not establish whether behavioral responses persisted over time or transferred to other situations.

5. Ethical Considerations

School permission was obtained before data collection. Teachers provided consent to participate, and the principal consented to the interview and audio recording. Parents were informed about the classroom observations and raised no objections. This procedure is reported as parental notification rather than documented parental informed consent.

Names and identifying details were removed from analytical and reporting materials. Research records were stored on the author's personal device, with access restricted to the author. Children's responses were reported within the limits of the available evidence, without attributing intentions or understanding that the data could not establish.

D. Compliance Or Understanding? Rewards And Consequences In An Indonesian Islamic Kindergarten

1. Results

Analysis of the nine teacher questionnaire responses, classroom observations, and the principal interview identified four themes: (1) immediate compliance and educational aims; (2) educators' interpretations of independent action; (3) explanation in behavioral guidance; and (4) professional judgement and school expectations. The findings describe educators' reported reasoning and observed practices rather than directly measured changes in children's understanding or motivation.

a. Immediate Compliance and Educational Aims

Teachers described rewards, reminders, and consequences as ways to encourage participation, establish classroom routines, and respond to inappropriate or unsafe behavior. Their reported strategies included verbal praise, applause, stars, stamps, reminders, and temporary restrictions on activities. Beyond immediate behavioral responses, teachers also expressed educational aims involving responsibility, independence, empathy, and positive habits.

Differences emerged in how teachers evaluated behavioral success. In a questionnaire scenario, two children completed the same tidying task: Child A expected a reward, whereas Child B acted without prompting or anticipating a reward. Six of the nine teachers considered the behaviors different, while three

regarded them as similar or equally positive. Thus, teachers did not necessarily use the same criteria when evaluating an identical completed task.

Classroom observations illustrated the immediate purposes of behavioral guidance. In TK B, a teacher stopped children from running indoors and explained the danger. During Dhuha prayer in TK A, stars were used to acknowledge participation, while children who continued playing received reminders and a consequence. Some children responded promptly, whereas others required repeated reminders. These episodes documented children's immediate responses to adult intervention but did not establish their reasons for complying.

The principal distinguished immediate compliance from broader educational goals:

"Sebenarnya enggak cukup sih, enggak cukup hanya sampai di situ."

["Actually, that is not enough; it is not enough to stop there."]

She also stated, "Harus patuh dulu baru paham" ["They have to comply first, then understand"], describing compliance as a possible initial step rather than a sufficient educational outcome. Regarding repeated rewards, she expressed concern that children might participate primarily to obtain recognition rather than because they valued the activity itself.

b. Educators' Interpretations of Independent Action

The questionnaire scenario revealed two approaches to interpreting children's behavior. Six teachers distinguished between acting in anticipation of a reward and completing the same task independently.

G7, a TK B teacher with 11–20 years of teaching experience, explained:

"Menurut saya perilaku kedua murid tersebut berbeda. Murid A merapikan mainan karena adanya motivasi eksternal berupa bintang atau pujian. Sedangkan Murid B merapikan mainan karena adanya motivasi internal, yaitu kesadaran dan tanggung jawab tanpa mengharapkan imbalan."

["In my view, the two children's behaviors are different. Child A tidies the toys because of external motivation, such as a star or praise. Child B tidies the toys because of internal motivation, namely awareness and responsibility without expecting a reward."]

G8 expressed a similar distinction, describing reward-driven tidying as a transaction and independent tidying as a responsibility following play.

In contrast, three teachers considered the behaviors similar or equally good. G3 responded:

"Sama karena sama-sama merapikan mainan."

["They are the same because both children tidy the toys."]

G5, a playgroup teacher with 11–20 years of teaching experience, answered:

"Sama-sama baik."

["Both are equally good."]

These responses illustrate different criteria for evaluating behavior. Some teachers emphasised completion of the expected action, while others

also considered the circumstances surrounding the action and the child's apparent independence.

Teachers also identified behaviors they regarded as possible signs of understanding. G4 referred to children explaining an action in their own words or asking questions. G6 mentioned children behaving appropriately without reminders, such as disposing of rubbish without being instructed. G8 described children giving practical reasons for following safety routines.

These examples reflect teachers' interpretations rather than independently verified evidence of children's internal motivation. The observations primarily documented interactions in which adult intervention remained present and could not establish whether children would sustain the same behavior independently.

c. Explanation in Behavioral Guidance

Explanation emerged as an important feature of teachers' reported approaches to behavioral guidance. Teachers described communicating the reasons for expectations, discussing the consequences of inappropriate actions, and helping children identify more appropriate alternatives.

G1, a TK A teacher, reported:

"Menegur dan memberikan penjelasan bahwa hal tsb berbahaya dan tidak baik. Menjelaskan sebab akibat sesuai pemahaman anak-anak."

["I remind them and explain that the behavior is dangerous and inappropriate. I explain cause and effect in ways the children can understand."]

G6 similarly emphasised helping children understand why a behavior was unacceptable and what they should do instead. When discussing situations involving hitting, the teacher described stopping the behavior before providing an explanation.

Explanations were documented in all three observed classroom settings. In TK B, the teacher explained the danger of running indoors. During Dhuha prayer in TK A, the teacher explained that playing during prayer disturbed others. In the playgroup, after a child hit a peer, the teacher explained that hitting caused pain and sadness. The teacher also suggested alternative responses, including speaking about the problem or asking an adult for help. The child was temporarily separated from play before returning to the activity.

The principal also emphasised the importance of explanation:

"Anak-anak harus tahu alasan di balik semua itu."

["Children need to know the reasons behind all of that."]

She explained that reasons should be communicated in language appropriate to children's level of understanding. She also distinguished situations requiring immediate intervention from those in which explanation could follow once the situation was calmer.

Across the three sources, explanation appeared as a recurring element of behavioral guidance. Nevertheless, the evidence established that

explanations were reported or provided, not that children necessarily understood, retained, or independently applied them.

d. Professional Judgement and School Expectations

Teachers' responses suggested that behavioral guidance involved adjusting strategies according to children's actions, individual circumstances, and previous responses to intervention. Their accounts included reminders, explanations, restrictions, temporary removal from activities, and reconsideration of approaches that had not produced the expected response.

G7 reflected on an earlier assumption about behavioral guidance:

"Awalnya saya kira 'tegas = berhasil' tapi ternyata nggak selalu."

["Initially, I thought 'being firm = success', but that was not always the case."]

The teacher subsequently described moving away from shouting and punishment towards understanding why a child behaved in a particular way before deciding how to respond. G9 similarly acknowledged that the same strategy might not work for every child and described observing children's behavior more closely when an intervention was ineffective.

The TK B observation illustrated how a teacher responded differently to two aspects of the same incident. After stopping children from running indoors, the teacher acknowledged a child's truthful admission with a thumbs-up and a star while continuing to address the unsafe behavior. Honesty was therefore recognised separately from the action that required correction.

The principal supported this distinction, reasoning that an immediate negative response to a truthful admission might discourage honesty in future situations. This was the principal's professional interpretation rather than an outcome directly demonstrated by the observation.

The principal also reflected on the playgroup incident involving a child who hit a peer. She questioned whether requiring an apology was educationally meaningful before helping the child understand why hitting was inappropriate. The observed intervention combined temporary separation, explanation, suggestions for alternative behavior, and a return to play. However, the observation did not establish how the child interpreted these actions.

According to the principal, the school did not have a specific written procedure governing every use of rewards and consequences. Nevertheless, teachers were expected to avoid physical and verbal harm and to consider children's individual circumstances. An institutional recognition programme also provided stamps for positive accomplishments or behaviors.

The differences in teachers' responses raise an important question about what counts as successful behavioral guidance in early childhood education. A child may follow an instruction, complete a task, or stop an inappropriate action, yet teachers may interpret that response differently. In the observed classrooms, explanations often accompanied rewards and consequences, suggesting that teachers were concerned with more than obtaining immediate compliance. Whether these explanations helped children

develop a lasting understanding of the expectations, however, remains beyond what the observations could establish.

Table 1. Themes and Supporting Evidence Across Data Sources

Theme	**Teacher Questionnaires (n = 9)**	**Classroom Observations**	**Principal Interview**
Immediate compliance and educational aims	Teachers used praise, stars, reminders, and consequences to encourage expected behavior. They also described responsibility, independence, and positive habits as educational aims.	In TK B, the teacher stopped children running indoors. In TK A, stars and reminders were used during Dhuha prayer.	The principal regarded compliance as an initial response, not the ultimate purpose of behavioral guidance, and questioned excessive reliance on rewards.
Educators' interpretations of independent action	Six teachers distinguished reward-driven tidying from independent tidying; three considered both actions similar or equally good.	Observations captured children's immediate responses to instructions but offered no direct evidence of their reasons for acting.	The principal wanted children to understand expectations rather than depend entirely on adult reminders or recognition.
Explanation in behavioral guidance	Teachers described explaining rules, discussing consequences, and suggesting appropriate alternatives to unwanted behavior.	Teachers explained the danger of running, the need to respect others during prayer, and the effects of hitting a peer.	The principal emphasised explanations suited to children's age and circumstances, particularly after unsafe behavior had been stopped.
Professional judgement and school expectations	Teachers reported reconsidering strategies when children did not respond as expected and adapting their approaches to individual situations.	In TK B, honesty was acknowledged separately from unsafe behavior. In KB, the teacher combined temporary separation, explanation, and a return to play.	The principal described expectations concerning non-harmful discipline while allowing teachers discretion in responding to individual situations.

Note. Classroom observations covered one KB, one TK A, and one TK B class, with two 30-minute sessions in each. Questionnaire responses represent teachers' reported views and practices; classroom observations document selected interactions rather than long-term behavioral outcomes.

2. Discussion

classroom practice: teachers may agree about the behavior expected of children without agreeing on what makes that behavior educationally successful. Rewards and consequences were familiar features of classroom guidance, but teachers differed in how they interpreted children's responses to them. This difference becomes particularly important when obedience, independence, and moral understanding are treated as related educational aims.

a. Rewards and Consequences in Everyday Classroom Guidance

Rewards and consequences were rarely described or observed as isolated interventions. Teachers combined them with reminders, explanations, temporary restrictions, and suggestions for alternative behaviors. This resembles the range of approaches reported by (Ongoren, 2025) and the combination of behavioral management and social-emotional support examined by (Steed et al., 2026). However, the presence of several strategies does not necessarily indicate that teachers share a consistent understanding of their purposes. (Meran et al., 2025), for example, identified limitations in preschool teachers' knowledge of preventive classroom management.

The three observed incidents illustrate how behavioral guidance could serve different immediate purposes. Stopping children from running indoors addressed safety concerns. During Dhuha prayer, stars and reminders encouraged participation in a shared activity. Following an incident involving hitting, temporary separation was accompanied by an explanation and suggestions for responding differently. Each intervention addressed a particular situation, although its educational aims extended beyond ending the immediate behavior.

Research on classroom prevention provides a useful perspective. (Obee et al., 2024) reported fewer rule violations during preschool transitions when teachers used praise or engagement rather than silent monitoring. (Hosokawa et al., 2024) also found improvements in relevant social-emotional skills and behaviors following a classroom intervention. These studies involved different research designs and cannot establish the effectiveness of the practices observed in the present kindergarten. Nevertheless, they draw attention to what children are offered before difficulties arise, rather than focusing only on how adults respond afterward.

The distinction between an intervention's immediate effect and its motivational significance is especially relevant to rewards. (Cooper et al., 2026) demonstrated that reward contingencies could contribute to behavioral change in an elementary school intervention. (Ryan & Deci, 2020), however, distinguish behavior regulated by external incentives from behavior undertaken with greater personal endorsement. A reward may therefore help secure participation without revealing why a child participates.

The star awarded for honesty during the TK B incident illustrates the complexity of recognition. The teacher acknowledged a child's truthful admission while continuing to address the unsafe behavior. Rather than rewarding the running itself, the teacher responded to a different aspect of the incident. The principal supported this distinction, expressing concern that a negative response to an honest admission might discourage children from telling the truth. Her reasoning is pedagogically relevant, although the observation did not establish whether the recognition influenced the child's future honesty.

(Granger et al., 2024) also found associations involving children's characteristics, challenging behavior, and teachers' use of behavior-specific praise. Their findings raise another question for classroom reflection: which children receive recognition, and for what kinds of actions? The present study did not examine patterns of reward distribution across children, but this question is important when rewards become a routine part of classroom management.

b. When the Same Behavior Means Different Things

The clearest difference in teachers' reasoning appeared in the hypothetical tidying scenario. Six teachers distinguished between a child who tidied in anticipation of a reward and one who acted independently. Three considered the responses similar or equally positive. All nine recognized tidying as desirable behavior; their disagreement concerned the significance of the circumstances in which it occurred.

For the six teachers who distinguished between the responses, independence, initiative, or apparent responsibility contributed to their evaluations. The other three placed greater emphasis on the completion of the expected task. This difference should not be interpreted as evidence that one group possessed better pedagogical knowledge. Young children vary in their familiarity with routines, ability to manage impulses, and need for adult support. Following an instruction may represent meaningful progress for a child who is still learning what a classroom expectation requires.

The distinction is nevertheless important. (Ryan & Deci, 2020) explain that autonomy concerns a person's willingness to act, rather than simply acting without assistance. A child may tidy independently because a reward is anticipated, just as another child may willingly follow a teacher's reminder because the expectation is understood and accepted. The questionnaire scenario revealed how teachers interpreted the circumstances surrounding the behavior; it did not provide access to either child's actual motivation.

Research on early self-regulation offers a similar caution. (Guedes et al., 2025) found that early executive functions were associated differently with later persistence and motivation. (Coelho et al., 2026) examined classroom interaction quality alongside distinct measures of self-regulation and adjustment, while (Ross & Ascetta, 2025) identified conceptual and measurement overlap in research on self-regulation. These studies make it

difficult to justify treating a single observable action as a comprehensive indicator of independence, self-regulation, or understanding.

Adult support also complicates the interpretation of independent behavior. (Nilfyr & Plantin Ewe, 2025) situate emotional regulation within social interactions, while (Kostol & Manty, 2024) draw attention to teachers' interpretations of children's emotional experiences. A child who needs repeated reminders may still understand a rule but struggle to act in accordance with it in a particular situation. Conversely, a familiar routine may be completed without prompting even when its underlying purpose has received little consideration.

The principal's view that children should comply before understanding can be interpreted in light of these distinctions. Immediate intervention is sometimes unavoidable. A teacher cannot allow hitting or unsafe running to continue while waiting for a child to explain the reasons for stopping. However, this practical priority should not be mistaken for a universal developmental sequence in which obedience necessarily produces understanding.

Studies examining children's moral judgments directly demonstrate why this distinction matters. (Seucan et al., 2024) investigated children's reasoning about intentions and punishment, while (Essler & Paulus, 2026) examined developing responses to moral and conventional violations. Such approaches investigate questions that classroom observation alone cannot answer. In the present study, stopping an unsafe action showed that the immediate intervention had changed the child's observable behavior. It did not reveal whether the child understood the danger or would respond similarly in another situation.

c. Explanation and the Possibility of Understanding

Explanation occupied an important place in the teachers' accounts and in the observed incidents. The explanations concerned different kinds of expectations: personal safety, consideration for others during prayer, and the harm caused by hitting a peer. Their presence suggests that teachers were not concerned exclusively with obtaining compliance. They also wanted children to recognize the reasons for behaving differently.

The playgroup incident is particularly instructive. After a child hit a peer, the teacher explained that hitting caused pain and sadness, suggested speaking about the problem or seeking help from an adult, and eventually allowed the child to return to play. The alternative responses mattered because they offered the child something to do when a similar difficulty arose. Prohibiting an action establishes a boundary; helping children recognize another possible response gives the guidance a more explicit learning purpose.

(Chen et al., 2025) examined relationships between teachers' social-emotional teaching strategies and children's classroom expressions in Hong Kong kindergartens. Their findings direct attention to the interactions surrounding an explanation, including opportunities for children to respond. In

the present observations, explanations were documented, but children's interpretations of those explanations were not systematically explored.

Research that examines children's reasoning provides a useful comparison. (Hsieh & Wu, 2026) examined preschool children's justifications following discussions of moral dilemmas, while (Seucan et al., 2024) investigated children's judgments through their responses to stories. These studies illustrate how researchers can move beyond recording an expected action to examining the reasons children give for their decisions. The present findings cannot establish that the explanations provided during classroom incidents produced comparable changes in reasoning.

The principal's concern about requiring children to apologize without understanding the harm involved raises the same issue. Saying sorry may express genuine concern, reflect familiarity with a classroom routine, or simply fulfill an adult's instruction. The words alone cannot distinguish these possibilities. An educator may need to consider what happened before the apology, how the child responds to the other person's feelings, and whether opportunities for repairing the harm follow.

Explanations also require sensitivity to children's circumstances. Teachers sometimes need to intervene immediately and return to a discussion after the situation has settled. At other times, a child may be able to discuss expectations before a problem occurs. (Kostol & Manty, 2024) emphasize the importance of teachers' interpretations of emotional encounters, while (Ryan & Deci, 2020) provide a basis for considering how meaningful rationales may support children's engagement with expectations.

What remains uncertain is how children understood the explanations offered to them. The brief observations did not include follow-up conversations or repeated assessments. For this reason, explanation is best understood here as an element of educators' guidance rather than as evidence that moral understanding had already developed.

d. Religious Practice, Rewards, and Moral Education

The Dhuha prayer episode brings a distinctive dimension to the findings. Participation in prayer is not merely another classroom routine. Within an Islamic kindergarten, it is connected to religious learning, respect for others, and the gradual cultivation of *akhlak*. This gives the use of stars and consequences a significance that extends beyond maintaining an orderly activity.

During the observed session, stars acknowledged participation, while children who continued playing received reminders and a consequence. The teacher also explained that playing disturbed others. This explanation connected the immediate expectation to consideration for fellow participants, offering a reason beyond obtaining recognition or avoiding correction.

Indonesian early childhood research places moral and religious education within repeated routines, classroom experiences, and opportunities for children to engage with values (Cholimah et al., 2024; Habibu Rahman et al., 2026; Putri et al., 2026; Ramona & Cholimah, 2025; Tanfidiyah & Sirait,

2025). (Tiwuk et al., 2025) describe teacher encouragement, praise, and reward stickers within Islamic kindergarten memorization routines. These studies help situate the observed use of recognition within familiar educational practices, but they do not establish that rewards themselves produce religious understanding.

The principal's concern about children participating primarily to receive stars is therefore worth examining. A reward may encourage a child who is still becoming familiar with a practice. Difficulties arise when educators begin to treat the rewarded response as sufficient evidence that the child understands or values the activity. Orderly participation in prayer does not necessarily indicate that a child understands its religious meaning or has developed the corresponding moral disposition.

Moral development also unfolds through relationships and experiences over time. (Kim & Kochanska, 2025) examined links between children's early responses to parental socialization and their later moral self, while (Soldner & Paulus, 2026) explored relationships between early social interaction, prosocial behavior, and moral self-concept. Although these studies concern different developmental contexts, they reinforce the need to distinguish a single instance of appropriate behavior from sustained moral development.

The implication for Islamic early childhood education is not that rewards must be eliminated from religious activities. Rather, teachers need to consider what the rewards acknowledge and whether children have opportunities to explore the meaning of the practice. Recognition may support initial participation, while conversation, modeling, and shared experiences can give educators further opportunities to introduce the values associated with it. Whether these opportunities lead to greater understanding would require evidence from children themselves.

e. Professional Judgement and Shared School Expectations

The findings also show that behavioral guidance requires decisions that cannot always be prescribed in advance. Teachers described adjusting their approaches when an intervention did not work as expected. G7's reflection that being firm did not always lead to success illustrates a willingness to reconsider the assumptions underlying a familiar response.

Variation in teachers' judgments has been documented elsewhere. (Zulauf McCurdy et al., 2025) found substantial differences in preschool teachers' proposed responses to the same hypothetical situation. (Granger et al., 2025) also reported that relationships between teachers' classroom-management self-efficacy and teacher–child conflict varied according to children's relative behavioral characteristics. These findings do not explain the decisions made by the participating teachers in the present study, but they demonstrate why professional judgment deserves attention alongside the strategies teachers report using.

The principal described an institutional expectation that teachers should avoid physical and verbal harm while retaining discretion to respond to individual circumstances. Such discretion can accommodate children's

different needs, but it also requires opportunities for teachers to examine their decisions collectively. Without shared reflection, similar incidents may be interpreted through substantially different assumptions about what constitutes successful guidance.

The temporary separation following the hitting incident illustrates why this reflection matters. The teacher provided an explanation, suggested alternatives, and allowed the child to return to play. These details are important, but they do not establish how the child experienced the separation. (O'Grady et al., 2024) discuss exclusionary practices in early childhood education, while (Shenberger & Zinsser, 2026) examined training intended to address exclusion and reported changes in educators' attitudes and practices. Their work highlights the need to consider children's continued participation and access to support when evaluating consequences.

The teachers also reported communicating with parents, although the present study did not document those conversations or their effects. Research in Indonesian early childhood settings has linked children's social-emotional and character development with family involvement and teacher–parent relationships (Habibah & Pranoto, 2024; Listiana et al., 2026; Nuraini et al., 2025; Sjamsir et al., 2024). Family communication may therefore be relevant when teachers seek to understand recurring behavioral difficulties. However, it should not become a substitute for examining the support available within the classroom.

Professional development provides another avenue for strengthening these judgments. All nine participating teachers had attended training related to homeroom teaching, coaching, and counselling, yet their questionnaire responses still revealed different interpretations of behavioral success. This is not evidence that the training was ineffective. The study did not evaluate its content, quality, or influence on practice.

Research on professional learning nevertheless offers useful considerations. (Muir et al., 2024) examined learning designed to strengthen educators' support for self-regulation, while (McGuire et al., 2024) reported improvements in teachers' knowledge, application, and self-efficacy following professional development. (Torelli et al., 2024) found that many participants needed support beyond universal training to strengthen targeted practices. (Yang & Gong, 2025) also reported differing relationships between teaching experience and professional competencies, suggesting that experience alone should not be treated as a sufficient indicator of preparedness.

Within the Indonesian context, (Christianti et al., 2025) include evaluation and reflection among the competencies assessed in their instrument for early childhood teachers. This is particularly relevant to the present findings. Rather than focusing professional discussions only on whether a consequence stopped unwanted behavior, teachers could examine what the child was expected to learn, how the response was explained, and what opportunities followed for practicing a different action.

Such reflection would also allow teachers to discuss differences in their interpretations of independence and responsibility. The six-to-three division in the questionnaire is not a measure of professional competence. It reveals a substantive question that deserves attention within the school: when does completing an expected action represent sufficient progress, and when should teachers seek further evidence of understanding?

f. Study Contribution and Limitations

The contribution of this study lies in examining how educators interpret behavioral success, rather than treating children's compliance as a sufficient indicator of learning. Differences in teachers' judgments reveal an important dimension of behavioral guidance that may remain unnoticed when attention is limited to observable actions. The study is confined to educators' accounts and selected classroom interactions in one Islamic kindergarten. Without children's own perspectives or observations over time, it cannot establish whether the guidance they received contributed to lasting understanding or changes in behavior.

E. Conclusion

This study found that teachers in an Indonesian Islamic kindergarten did not always interpret successful behavior in the same way. Although they agreed on the importance of children following classroom expectations, their responses differed when considering whether a child acted independently or in anticipation of a reward. This difference highlights why observable compliance should not automatically be treated as evidence of understanding or responsibility.

Classroom observations showed that rewards and consequences were often accompanied by explanations. Teachers addressed safety, the effects of children's actions on others, and possible alternatives to inappropriate behavior. The Dhuha prayer observation also raised questions about the role of recognition in religious learning, particularly when the educational aim extends beyond participation to the development of moral values.

These findings suggest that schools should provide opportunities for teachers to discuss how they interpret children's behavior and evaluate the purposes of their interventions. Professional reflection could help teachers distinguish between securing an immediate response and supporting children's developing understanding.

The study was conducted in one kindergarten and involved questionnaire responses from nine teachers, six brief classroom observations, and one principal interview. It did not directly examine children's motivations or changes in behavior over time. Further research involving children's perspectives and longer observation periods would help clarify how everyday guidance relates to their developing independence and moral understanding.

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