

Negotiating Professionalism in Montessori Schools: Organizational Culture and Professional Development Among Generation Z Employees

¹Rita Kurnia, ²Daviq Chairilisyah, ³Kartika Sari, ⁴Erma Roza,
⁵Rionar Rambe, ⁶Riza Purnama Sari, ⁷Musaroh

Universitas Riau, Indonesia

¹rita.kurnia@lecturer.unri.ac.id, ²daviq.chairilisyah@lecturer.unri.ac.id,
³kartika.sari6064@grad.unri.ac.id, ⁴erma.roza6127@grad.unri.ac.id,
⁵rionar.rambe6084@grad.unri.ac.id, ⁶riza.purnamasari7977@grad.unri.ac.id,
⁷musaroh.s6221@grad.unri.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Educational organizations increasingly employ younger workers who are often classified as Generation Z, yet little is known about how such employees negotiate work values within value-based school cultures. In this study, Generation Z functions as a sampling context rather than an explanatory variable, and no intergenerational comparison is intended. This study examined how younger employees within this sampling context construct professionalism in two Montessori schools in Pekanbaru, Indonesia, and how educational-management practices shape their professional development. A qualitative multiple-case design involved 10 employees aged 22–29 years, comprising eight teachers and two administrative staff; the empirical analysis used participant interview excerpts, critical incidents, a 12-code analytical framework, within-case analysis, cross-case comparison, and negative/deviant case examination. Four themes were identified. Structured professional autonomy described agency as meaningful when paired with competence, clear boundaries, trust, and accountability. Internalization of Montessori purpose showed movement from institutional rules toward professional judgment oriented to educational purpose and children's needs. Developmental feedback and mentoring supported prepared-adult formation when they promoted reflection, competence, and self-regulation, whereas excessive monitoring could reduce initiative. Negotiated accountability captured how employees balanced agency with consequences for children, colleagues, parents, and the organization. Cross-case analysis showed that School A emphasized role clarity, coordination, and procedural reliability, whereas School B emphasized trust, reflective mentoring, and professional judgment. Integratively, the findings support negotiated professionalism as a developmental process linking agency, organizational values, professional learning, and responsibility. Montessori schools should therefore stage autonomy and feedback according to demonstrated competence, role boundaries, and decision risk rather than presumed generational preference.

Keywords: Generation Z, Montessori Schools, Organizational Culture, Professional Development, Professionalism

Corresponding Author: ³Kartika Sari - ³kartika.sari6064@grad.unri.ac.id

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INTRODUCTION

Educational organizations are undergoing a generational transition as younger employees enter schools, training institutions, and other value-intensive workplaces. In this study, Generation Z is used as a sampling context rather than as an explanatory variable or a basis for comparison with other generations. The study does not assume that employees



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classified within this cohort share a fixed set of work values, nor does it seek to establish causal differences between Generation Z and older cohorts. Instead, it examines how a group of younger employees situated within a specific organizational and cultural setting interpret work, professional development, and professional responsibility. This distinction is important because research on Generation Z has drawn attention to career development, skill acquisition, meaningful work, flexibility, feedback, relationships, and organizational support, while also showing that these concerns cannot be reduced to a single generational profile. A systematic review by [Barhate & Dirani \(2022\)](#) identified the coexistence of intrinsic and extrinsic career aspirations, while [Mahmoud et al. \(2021\)](#) showed that workplace motivation across Generations X, Y, and Z remains multidimensional. Cross-national evidence likewise complicates universal claims: [de Boer & Bordoloi \(2022\)](#), studying 1,188 university students across China, Germany, the Netherlands, and Thailand, found substantial national variation in work values. [Pataki-Bittó & Kapusy \(2021\)](#), drawing on 28 focus groups and 773 survey respondents, similarly linked future-work expectations to flexibility, environment, lifestyle, and well-being. Accordingly, the present study treats generational membership as contextual information that helps define the sample, while locating explanation primarily in organizational culture, professional relationships, and workplace experience.

This contextual perspective is especially important in schools. Educational organizations are not merely places where employees perform technical tasks; they are normative environments in which organizational routines, leadership practices, professional relationships, and institutional purposes shape how work is interpreted. Studies of teacher learning show that leadership, collegial relationships, communication, school norms, and opportunities to learn can facilitate or restrict professional development ([Huang et al., 2020](#); [McChesney & Cross, 2023](#); [Rahman, 2022](#)). Across 48 countries, [Nguyen et al. \(2021\)](#) found that teacher autonomy, collaborative culture, and professional learning were associated with collective innovativeness, suggesting that agency and collaboration can operate together rather than as opposites. [Wibowo \(2022\)](#) further demonstrated in an Indonesian value-based school context that school culture and professional relationships are integral to professional development. Professional growth therefore needs to be examined as a situated organizational process rather than as an individual response to training alone ([Coppe et al., 2024](#); [Sancar et al., 2021](#)).

A central research problem arises when broad accounts of Generation Z are applied directly to educational workplaces. Claims that younger workers inherently seek freedom, rapid progression, or continuous feedback can obscure differences related to age, career stage, occupational role, national culture, and local organizational conditions. [Rudolph et al. \(2021\)](#) caution that generational research frequently conflates cohort, age, and period effects and recommend more contextual approaches to workplace differences. Recent studies reinforce this caution. [Bhushan \(2023\)](#), using 215 complete employee responses, showed that training comprehensiveness, person-job fit, and task significance were linked in Generation Z employee development, while [Chaudhry \(2024\)](#) highlighted the broader role of job design, organizational support, leadership, communication, and growth opportunities. [Bilderback & Kilpatrick \(2026\)](#) similarly argue that professional development for Generation Z should not overfit presumed generational preferences at the expense of long-term competence and resilience. The analytical problem, then, is not to identify a fixed Generation Z profile but to understand

how younger employees interpret their work in a particular organization.

Montessori schools offer a theoretically productive setting for such inquiry because Montessori is both a pedagogical tradition and a value-laden environment for adult work. Montessori scholarship emphasizes independence, purposeful activity, observation, preparedness, responsibility, and relational respect. [Lillard \(2019\)](#) connects Montessori with self-determination by showing that autonomy is supported through a carefully prepared environment rather than through the absence of structure. [Bennetts & Bone \(2020\)](#) extend Montessori ideas into leadership through the concept of the prepared adult, linking preparedness with service, moral responsibility, and institutional practice. Empirical work further suggests that autonomy-supportive practices are more strongly normalized among Montessori teachers than among traditional public-school teachers ([Moss & Wheeler, 2024](#)). These features make Montessori schools useful cases for examining how organizational expectations are interpreted by employees who may simultaneously value agency, development, meaningful work, and clarity.

Professional development provides one pathway through which personal values and organizational expectations may be reconciled. Contemporary accounts increasingly reject the view of professional development as a sequence of disconnected workshops and instead locate learning within employees' working lives, collegial relationships, organizational conditions, and opportunities for reflection ([Coppe et al., 2024](#); [Sancar et al., 2021](#)). In Montessori contexts, reflective leadership, coaching, mentoring, and formative feedback are particularly salient. [Damore & Rieckhoff \(2021\)](#), studying 12 Montessori leaders from six schools, showed how reflective coaching practices could support leadership and teacher learning. [Murray et al. \(2021\)](#) developed a Montessori coaching rubric specifically to support early-career self-reflection and formative feedback rather than punitive evaluation. These findings suggest that supervision and feedback may be experienced not only as organizational control but also as mechanisms through which competence, judgment, and self-regulation develop.

Self-Determination Theory provides a psychological lens for examining why the same management practice can be experienced differently across employees. [Ryan & Deci \(2020\)](#) identify autonomy, competence, and relatedness as basic psychological needs relevant to the quality and internalization of motivation. In school settings, workplace conditions can shape autonomous motivation for continuous professional development ([Zhang et al., 2022](#)), while school policies and culture can support professional competence when they enable meaningful agency, capability development, and supportive relationships ([Chiu et al., 2024](#)). This distinction is crucial for interpreting organizational structure. A standard operating procedure, corrective conversation, or supervisory boundary cannot automatically be classified as autonomy-thwarting; its meaning depends on whether employees experience it as arbitrary control, legitimate structure, competence support, or accountable coordination. Self-Determination Theory therefore provides sensitizing concepts rather than predetermined empirical categories.

A related problem concerns professional identity. Employees do not simply comply with professional expectations; they interpret what those expectations mean for who they are becoming as professionals. Dialogical approaches conceptualize professional identity as simultaneously individual and social, continuous and changing, and composed of multiple positions that may come into tension ([Akkerman & Meijer, 2011](#)). [Dugas \(2021\)](#) similarly

integrates psychological, relational, and behavioral dimensions of teacher identity. In Montessori research, [Siswanto & Kuswando \(2020\)](#), studying eight Indonesian Montessori teachers, showed that professional identity formation involves Montessori principles, professional ethos, communication, community support, and personal preparedness. [Gerker \(2023\)](#) found that Montessori identity becomes particularly visible when teachers encounter institutional policies perceived as misaligned with Montessori commitments. More recent evidence also links school climate with professional identity and professional capital ([Melesse & Belay, 2024](#)) and describes professional identity as continuously revised through agentic action in challenging contexts ([Groenewald & Arnold, 2024](#)). Yet this literature remains strongly teacher-centered.

Work values refer broadly to outcomes, conditions, and purposes that individuals regard as important in working life. Generation Z studies repeatedly identify career development, meaningful work, communication, flexibility, feedback, social relationships, and material security, yet the configuration of these values varies across settings. [Barhate & Dirani \(2022\)](#) found both intrinsic and extrinsic aspirations in their systematic review, while [Goh & Baum \(2021\)](#) showed that meaningful social contribution could shape how young employees interpreted demanding work. [Chillakuri \(2020\)](#) demonstrated that onboarding for Generation Z involves not only formal orientation but also expectations about performance, relationships, learning, and development. [Bhushan \(2023\)](#) added evidence that training comprehensiveness can work through person-job fit and task significance, and [Chaudhry \(2024\)](#) situated Generation Z engagement within a wider exchange relationship involving support, leadership, communication, and growth. Cross-national differences reported by [de Boer & Bordoloi \(2022\)](#) further caution against treating these preferences as universal. Following [Rudolph et al. \(2021\)](#), the present study therefore treats Generation Z as contextual information rather than a causal explanation.

An organizational-culture perspective shifts attention from Montessori materials and classroom routines toward the meanings, expectations, and relationships that organize adult work. [Lillard \(2019\)](#) emphasizes that Montessori independence is enabled through structured environments, meaningful activity, and opportunities to develop competence. [Bennetts & Bone \(2020\)](#) extend this logic to adult leadership through the prepared-adult concept, highlighting readiness, service, responsibility, and reflective conduct. [Moss & Wheeler \(2024\)](#) provide empirical support for a cultural dimension by showing that Montessori teachers were more likely than traditional public-school teachers to regard autonomy-supportive practice as normal. [Siswanto & Kuswando \(2020\)](#) show that Indonesian Montessori teacher identity is formed through Montessori principles, professional ethos, communication, community, and preparedness. [Gerker \(2023\)](#) demonstrates that this identity can become salient when institutional demands conflict with pedagogical commitments. Together, these studies justify examining Montessori not only as a classroom pedagogy but also as a possible culture of adult responsibility, autonomy, reflection, and relational practice across the school.

Professional development is increasingly conceptualized as learning embedded in working life rather than as attendance at isolated training events. [Sancar et al. \(2021\)](#) propose a multidimensional framework linking professional-learning needs, activities, context, and changes in practice. [Coppe et al. \(2024\)](#) challenge linear career-stage narratives and argue for attention to the complexity of teachers' working lives. School conditions are central to this

process. [Huang et al. \(2020\)](#), using data from 339 teachers in Shanghai, showed that learning-centered leadership, learning opportunities, and cultural barriers were associated with professional learning, with teacher self-efficacy functioning as an important psychological mechanism. [McChesney & Cross \(2023\)](#) likewise demonstrate that leadership, relationships, shared direction, and attitudes toward professional learning shape whether learning is implemented in classrooms. Indonesian studies reach similar conclusions: [Rahman \(2022\)](#) identifies leadership, communication, school norms, resources, and interaction as relevant conditions, while [Wibowo \(2022\)](#) shows how school culture and value orientation can support professional development. Large-scale evidence across 48 countries further links autonomy and collaborative culture with professional learning and collective innovativeness ([Nguyen et al., 2021](#)).

Self-Determination Theory explains how social contexts shape the quality of motivation through autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy concerns volition and meaningful agency, competence concerns effectiveness and capability development, and relatedness concerns belonging and supportive connection ([Ryan & Deci, 2020](#)). These needs provide a useful vocabulary for studying professional development because management practices can carry different psychological meanings. [Zhang et al. \(2022\)](#) show that teachers' autonomous motivation for continuous professional development is related to perceived workplace conditions, while [Chiu et al. \(2024\)](#), in a study involving 370 teachers, connect need support with professional and ethical dimensions of digital competence development. Importantly, autonomy does not imply independence from all constraints. A clearly explained boundary may support rather than undermine agency when it helps an employee understand legitimate responsibility. For this reason, Self-Determination Theory concepts are used here as sensitizing concepts introduced after initial coding rather than as a fixed template imposed on participant accounts.

Professionalism is conceptualized in this study as more than compliance with rules. It includes competent, responsible, reliable, ethical, reflective, and relational practice, while professional identity concerns how employees understand themselves in relation to these expectations. [Akkerman & Meijer \(2011\)](#) describe professional identity dialogically, allowing multiple self-positions to coexist and change. [Dugas \(2021\)](#) similarly links psychological, relational, and behavioral domains in identity formation. [Melesse & Belay \(2024\)](#), using 302 teachers, found that professional identity mediated the relationship between school climate and professional capital, reinforcing the proposition that identity connects organizational conditions with professional development. [Groenewald & Arnold \(2024\)](#) further show how novice professional identity can be revised through agentic action in difficult contexts. In Montessori settings, this means an employee may simultaneously position themselves as a young professional seeking autonomy, a learner accepting correction, a role specialist, a colleague accountable to others, and a representative of institutional values. Professionalism can therefore be studied as identity work rather than as simple conformity.

The integrative framework begins with employees' work values and follows their encounter with Montessori organizational culture. This encounter may produce alignment, tension, or ambiguity, which is mediated through educational-management practices such as onboarding, leadership, supervision, feedback, mentoring, role clarity, and professional-learning opportunities. Employees interpret these conditions psychologically through

experiences related to autonomy, competence, and relatedness; reflection and workplace learning may then contribute to the construction or reconstruction of professional identity and, ultimately, to professional practice. The sequence is heuristic rather than causal. It does not assume that all participants value the same forms of autonomy or feedback, nor that Montessori values are experienced consistently across teaching and administrative functions. Structured professional autonomy, internalization of Montessori purpose, negotiated accountability, and negotiated professionalism were therefore treated as sensitizing possibilities at the outset. The Results section reports how these concepts were supported, qualified, and bounded by the empirical material rather than assuming their validity in advance.

This study addresses the resulting gap by examining younger employees, aged 22–29 years and sampled within a Generation Z frame, across teaching and administrative roles in two Montessori schools in Pekanbaru, Indonesia. It asks: (1) how employees negotiate work values with Montessori organizational culture in forming understandings and practices of professionalism; (2) which educational-management practices facilitate or constrain professional development; (3) how experiences of autonomy, competence, relatedness, feedback, organizational expectations, and reflection contribute to professional identity; and (4) how these processes vary by role and case. The study's novelty lies in connecting work values among younger employees, Montessori organizational culture, educational management, Self-Determination Theory, and professional identity without assuming that generational membership determines behavior. Generation Z therefore functions as sampling context rather than an explanatory variable, and the study does not make an intergenerational comparison. Montessori is treated as a possible organization-wide culture, and professionalism is conceptualized as a developmental negotiation among agency, competence, relationships, institutional purpose, and accountability. The study is qualitative and interpretive; it does not formulate statistical hypotheses, and theoretical concepts are used to sensitize rather than predetermine analysis.

METHODS OF RESEARCH

Research Design and Context

The study uses a qualitative multiple-case design to examine professionalism as a contextually situated process in two Montessori schools in Pekanbaru, Indonesia. A multiple-case framing is appropriate insofar as each school is treated as an analytically distinct case before cross-case comparison. The qualitative design follows from research questions concerned with meaning, interpretation, professional identity, and organizational experience rather than the estimation of population prevalence. The study is informed by an interpretive orientation in which employee accounts, observed practices, and organizational texts are analyzed as situated forms of meaning. The participating schools are referred to as School A and School B in the analytical structure to reduce unnecessary identification risk. A contextual publication about one Pekanbaru Montessori school is used only to understand institutional positioning and not as evidence about the present participants or findings ([Sari et al., 2026](#)).

To support cross-case interpretation while preserving institutional anonymity, only structural characteristics relevant to the analysis are reported. School A had been operating

for approximately 1.5 years and employed about 10 staff members; its organizational structure included a school principal, an operational manager, a supervisor, and a foundation chair. At the time of the study, School A was still developing and institutionalizing internal working procedures, including the consistent implementation of standard operating procedures. School B had been operating for approximately 2.5 years and employed about 22 staff members; its organizational structure included a teacher coordinator, an operational manager, and a director. Compared with School A, School B had a more established internal working system. These contextual differences are used to support interpretation of the cases rather than to establish causal explanations for the observed organizational patterns.

Participants and Sampling

The study involved 10 employees: eight teachers and two administrative staff. Five participants were located in each case, with four teachers and one administrative employee in School A and the same distribution in School B. Participants ranged from 22 to 29 years of age at the time of data collection; the age range was 22–27 years in School A and 22–29 years in School B. Participants were identified using codes P01–P10. Purposive sampling was appropriate because the study required employees with direct experience of the Montessori organizational environment and sufficient involvement to reflect on work values, organizational culture, and professional development. The Generation Z label was used to define the sampling context rather than as an explanatory variable or basis for comparison with other generational cohorts. To reduce deductive-identification risk within the two relatively small schools, demographic information is reported in aggregate rather than as individual profiles.

Table 1 Participant Composition

Case	Teachers	Administrative staff	Total	Participant age range
School A	4	1	5	22–27 years
School B	4	1	5	22–29 years
Total	8	2	10	22–29 years

Data Collection

The empirical material reported in this article centers on semi-structured participant interviews and embedded critical incidents. Direct transcript excerpts are reported for nine participants (P01, P02, P03, and P05–P10), while P04 is represented in the participant dataset and deviant-case analysis but not by a direct quotation in the reported findings. Four critical incidents are discussed in detail: autonomy without coordination (P01), feedback as a developmental process (P07), supervision becoming controlling (P08), and administrative responsibility under stakeholder pressure (P05). Interview dates, individual interview durations, total recorded audio hours, and the total number of critical incidents were not retained in a form that could be verified reliably at manuscript preparation and therefore are not reported as completed-study figures.

Interview and Critical-Incident Material

The interview material captured participants' interpretations of decision latitude, role boundaries, mentoring, corrective feedback, Montessori purpose, stakeholder expectations, and professional responsibility. The source interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia,

and excerpts selected for publication are presented in English translation while preserving their substantive meaning. Critical-incident prompts complemented the broader interview accounts by eliciting concrete workplace episodes in which autonomy, trust, error, supervision, coordination, or responsibility became especially visible. These incidents were analyzed alongside the interview material rather than treated as a separate dataset. Because P04 is not represented by a direct quotation in the reported findings, this participant is used cautiously as supplementary rather than primary evidence in the deviant-case interpretation.

Observation and Document Components

Non-participant observation and organizational documents formed part of the broader contextual inquiry. Observations focused on selected staff interactions, coordination activities, preparation for learning, supervision, and feedback practices, while relevant organizational materials included job descriptions, standard operating procedures, orientation materials, communication guidelines, and institutional vision and mission statements. These sources were used primarily to contextualize participants' accounts of organizational expectations and work practices. Because the final thematic analysis is supported principally by interview and critical-incident material, observational and documentary sources are not treated as independent evidentiary bases for the reported themes. Accordingly, the study does not claim formal source triangulation where direct traceability between these materials and the final themes cannot be demonstrated.

Data Analysis

The principal analytical strategy was thematic analysis informed by [Braun & Clarke \(2021\)](#) and complemented by the data-condensation, display, and verification logic of [Miles et al. \(2020\)](#). The empirical codebook contains 12 initial codes organized across seven analytic categories, including professional agency, control/tension, meaning-making, professional learning, developmental tension, accountability, and professional identity. Initial codes were linked to four principal thematic directions: structured professional autonomy, internalization of Montessori purpose, prepared-adult development through feedback and mentoring, and negotiated accountability; professional self-revision supported the integrative theme of negotiated professionalism. Analysis proceeded within each school before cross-case comparison. The cross-case matrix examined six dimensions—autonomy, feedback, Montessori values, professionalism, administrative work, and negative cases. The analysis also explicitly retained a primary negative case (P08) and two deviant cases (P05 and P04) so that dominant interpretations could be qualified rather than protected from contradictory evidence.

Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

Analytical credibility was strengthened through traceability from participant excerpts and critical incidents to initial codes, categories, within-case interpretation, cross-case comparison, and final themes. Negative and deviant cases were retained as substantive evidence rather than treated as noise. P08 qualifies any simple claim that feedback or supervision necessarily supports competence because frequent monitoring reduced initiative and increased approval-seeking. P05 prevents the professionalization process from being defined only in pedagogical terms by foregrounding coordination, service, procedure, and

consequences in administrative work. P04 was retained as a more limited deviant case: the analytical account associated this participant's greater experience with a more differentiated judgment about when independent action was appropriate and when consultation remained necessary. Unlike the other named cases, however, P04 is not represented by a direct quotation in the reported findings. This case is therefore used cautiously as supporting rather than primary evidence and is not treated as independently sufficient to establish the interpretation that experience necessarily produces more calibrated professional judgment. These procedures support interpretive credibility through analytic transparency and attention to disconfirming evidence (Yadav, 2022). Reflexivity remains important because both "Generation Z" and "Montessori" can invite strong prior assumptions (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Other trustworthiness procedures described in the broader protocol, such as member reflection, peer debriefing, or source triangulation, are not presented as completed procedures unless they were documented as undertaken.

Ethical Considerations

The study did not undergo formal review by an institutional research-ethics committee. Institutional permission was obtained from the participating schools before data collection. All participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study and provided voluntary informed consent. Separate consent was obtained for audio recording, and participants were informed of their right to decline questions or withdraw in accordance with the procedures communicated during recruitment. To protect confidentiality, participants were assigned codes P01–P10, and direct identifiers were stored separately from transcripts and analytical materials. Particular attention was given to deductive-identification risk because the study involved a small number of employees from two schools. Quotations were therefore selected and, where necessary, minimally edited to remove names, third-party details, specific locations, unique positions, or recognizable incidents without altering their substantive meaning. Digital audio files, transcripts, field notes, and analytical records were stored securely with restricted access. The absence of formal ethics-committee review is acknowledged as a limitation of the study's ethical governance. Reporting was informed by the COREQ framework for interview-based qualitative research (Tong et al., 2007), while recognizing that reporting guidelines do not substitute for formal ethical review.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The empirical analysis identified four interrelated themes—structured professional autonomy, internalization of Montessori purpose, developmental feedback and prepared-adult formation, and negotiated accountability—together supporting an integrative interpretation of negotiated professionalism. The analytic record includes nine direct participant excerpts, four detailed critical incidents, a 12-code codebook, separate within-case analyses for School A and School B, a six-dimension cross-case matrix, and three negative/deviant cases. The themes therefore reflect both convergent patterns and evidence that places limits on overly uniform interpretations.

Structured Professional Autonomy

Across both schools, autonomy was not described as the absence of rules. Instead,

participants linked meaningful discretion to competence, trust, role boundaries, coordination, and accountability. In School A, P01 described a shift from equating responsibility with unrestricted freedom toward recognizing that decisions affecting other classes required consultation:

"At first I thought that being given responsibility meant I was free to decide everything. After several rounds of coordination, I understood that some things I could decide myself, but matters affecting other classes needed to be discussed." (P01, School A, teacher)

P01's critical incident reinforces this interpretation. After changing a class schedule in response to children's needs, P01 learned that the pedagogical decision itself was not rejected; the boundary arose because the change affected use of a shared space. The analytic category was therefore not compliance, but agency within organizational boundaries. P02 showed a related developmental pathway in which discretion expanded after competence had been observed through mentoring. The participant associated increased decision latitude with greater confidence because autonomy was granted after capability had become visible.

School B emphasized trust and room to try. P06 reported that the principal allowed an initial attempt before stepping in, while still expecting the employee to explain the reasoning behind the decision. This linked discretion with answerability rather than with independence from supervision. The negative case P08, however, established an important boundary condition. Frequent checking reduced initiative and led the participant to seek approval for small decisions. Structured professional autonomy therefore depended not simply on the amount of supervision but on whether structure clarified responsibility and developed competence or instead produced fear of error and dependence.

The findings move the analysis away from the stereotype that Generation Z simply seeks greater freedom. Participants valued discretion, but the meaning of autonomy depended on competence, role boundaries, trust, and accountability. This finding aligns with critiques of generational essentialism, which caution against treating age cohort as a sufficient explanation of workplace behavior (Rudolph et al., 2021), and with cross-national evidence showing variation in Generation Z work values (de Boer & Bordoloi, 2022). It also sharpens the Self-Determination Theory interpretation of autonomy. Ryan & Deci (2020) distinguish volitional action from the absence of structure, and the present findings show how this distinction operates organizationally: clear boundaries could support agency when they clarified consequences, whereas excessive monitoring could reduce initiative. The P08 negative case is therefore theoretically important because it identifies the point at which structure shifts from competence-supporting coordination toward experienced control.

The finding also complements Nguyen et al. (2021), who show that autonomy and collaborative culture can coexist. In the present cases, autonomy was often relational and coordinated rather than solitary. P01 learned that a pedagogically defensible decision could still require consultation because of its effect on shared resources, while P06 associated trust with the duty to explain a decision. Structured professional autonomy therefore describes a form of responsible agency rather than a compromise between autonomy and accountability.

from Rules to Purpose: Internalization of Montessori Values

The second theme concerned a movement from externally imposed standards toward professional judgment informed by educational purpose. P03 initially experienced correction

as attention to mistakes, but the meaning of feedback changed when the rationale was connected to children and environmental consistency:

"I used to feel that when I was corrected, only my mistakes were being seen. But when it was explained why it mattered for the child and for consistency in the environment, I could accept it more easily. It was not only 'do not do this'; I understood the reason." (P03, School A, teacher)

P09 provided a stronger example of internalization in School B. The participant described a change in the criterion used to judge an activity: whether it was merely attractive became less important than whether the child actually needed it. The analytic significance lies in the shift from repeating organizational language to using Montessori purpose as a basis for professional judgment.

The administrative participants broadened this theme beyond classroom pedagogy. P10 explained that communication should still carry the school's values even without a teaching role, especially when mediating parent-teacher tensions. P05 similarly connected professionalism to maintaining procedures because administrative decisions could affect teachers and children. These accounts indicate that Montessori values were interpreted not only as instructional principles but also as organizational criteria for communication, coordination, service, and responsibility.

The second contribution concerns the organizational internalization of Montessori purpose. Lillard (2019) emphasizes that Montessori autonomy occurs within a prepared environment oriented toward purposeful activity, while Bennetts & Bone (2020) extend Montessori thinking toward adult preparedness, service, and responsibility. The present findings show a corresponding adult-work process. P03's acceptance of correction changed when the rationale was tied to children and environmental consistency, and P09 described a shift in the criterion used to judge learning activities. These accounts suggest movement from externally stated standards toward personally usable professional reasons.

This interpretation also extends Indonesian Montessori identity research. Siswanto & Kuswandono (2020) show that Montessori teacher identity is formed through principles, professional ethos, communication, community, and preparedness. Here, the same organizational purpose was visible beyond teachers: P10 linked school values with communication and conflict mediation, and P05 linked professional service with procedural consequences for teachers and children. The evidence therefore supports treating Montessori as an organizational culture, while still recognizing that pedagogical and administrative enactments are not identical.

Developmental Feedback and Prepared-Adult Formation

Feedback and mentoring formed the third theme. The strongest developmental pattern involved correction or observation that increased reflection rather than merely prescribing behavior. P07 described mentoring as most helpful when the mentor asked the participant to interpret children's responses instead of supplying the answer:

"The most helpful mentoring was not when I was given the answer. I was usually asked, 'How do you think the child responded just now?' That question made me rethink what happened instead of simply waiting for instructions." (P07, School B, teacher)

This account is consistent with the documented critical incident in which P07 was asked to identify children's behavior, the teacher's own decisions, and possible alternatives after an activity had not gone well. P02's gradual increase in responsibility after repeated observation and P03's acceptance of correction once its rationale was explained show related processes in School A. In these cases, feedback supported competence because it linked observation, explanation, reflection, and increased professional judgment.

P08 again defined the boundary of the theme. The participant recognized that supervision was intended to help but described becoming hesitant when almost every step was checked. The resulting approval-seeking indicates that feedback cannot be classified as developmental simply because it is frequent. Its developmental quality depended on whether it strengthened reflection and self-regulation or weakened initiative through perceived control.

The findings provide a clear boundary condition for claims about mentoring and feedback. Reflective questioning, explanation, and staged increases in responsibility supported professional learning, as illustrated by P07, P02, and P03. This is consistent with Montessori research on reflective leadership and coaching (Damore & Rieckhoff, 2021) and with Murray et al.'s (2021) positioning of formative feedback as a developmental rather than punitive process. It also aligns with broader professional-development scholarship that situates learning within working relationships and organizational conditions rather than formal training alone (Sancar et al., 2021; Coppe et al., 2024).

Yet P08 shows that feedback frequency is not equivalent to developmental quality. When monitoring became pervasive, the participant became more hesitant and approval-dependent. This pattern is consistent with Self-Determination Theory's emphasis on the psychological meaning of contextual practices (Ryan & Deci, 2020) and with evidence that need-supportive conditions shape professional competence development (Chiu et al., 2024). For educational management, the implication is not simply to increase feedback but to design feedback that clarifies rationale, invites reflection, and gradually strengthens professional judgment.

Negotiated Accountability

The fourth theme captured how employees balanced personal agency with consequences for other people and the organization. P05's administrative critical incident is especially clear. When a parent requested an exception that could have been processed quickly but conflicted with teacher coordination, P05 delayed the decision until consultation occurred. The participant summarized the broader professional lesson as follows:

"I learned that being professional does not mean always making parents happy. There are procedures that need to be maintained because administrative decisions also affect teachers and children." (P05, School A, administrative staff)

P06 connected trust with the obligation to explain decisions, while P10 connected professional communication with both children's interests and working relationships. Across these accounts, accountability was not experienced as passive compliance. It involved judging when individual preference or immediate convenience had to be balanced against wider consequences. A similar, although less directly evidenced, pattern was identified in the analytical account of P04. This participant's experience was interpreted as involving greater

differentiation between decisions that could be handled independently and those that still required consultation. Because no direct quotation from P04 is presented in the reported findings, this case is treated as supplementary evidence rather than as a primary basis for the theme.

Cross-Case and Role Variation: Toward Negotiated Professionalism

Cross-case analysis showed two distinct but compatible organizational pathways. School A, which had been operating for approximately 1.5 years with about 10 staff members, was still developing and institutionalizing internal working procedures, including consistent implementation of standard operating procedures. Its organizational structure included a school principal, an operational manager, a supervisor, and a foundation chair. School A foregrounded role clarity, coordination, procedural reliability, and standards whose purposes became more acceptable when explained. School B had been operating for approximately 2.5 years with about 22 staff members and had a more established internal working system. Its organizational structure included a teacher coordinator, an operational manager, and a director. School B foregrounded trust, room to try, reflective mentoring, and professional judgment, while P08 demonstrated how the same developmental intent could become controlling when monitoring was too intensive. These contextual differences provide a useful background for interpreting the contrast, but they are treated as interpretive context rather than as causal explanations of organizational culture.

Role variation was equally important. The eight teachers provided the majority of pedagogically oriented material, whereas the two administrative participants emphasized service, communication, procedural consistency, stakeholder mediation, and cross-functional consequences. Their accounts suggest that Montessori organizational culture can extend beyond classroom practice, but the two-person administrative subgroup does not support broad claims about non-teaching employees.

Administrative Perspective: Professionalism Beyond the Classroom

Although only two participants held administrative roles, their accounts provide an analytically important non-classroom perspective on how Montessori organizational values were enacted. P05's critical incident illustrates this clearly. When a parent requested an exception that could have been processed quickly but had implications for teacher coordination, P05 delayed the decision until consultation occurred. This episode shows that administrative professionalism involved balancing responsiveness to stakeholders with procedural consistency and awareness of consequences for teachers and children.

P10 provided a complementary perspective by emphasizing that school values should remain visible in communication even without a teaching role, particularly when mediating tensions between parents and teachers. Together, P05 and P10 show that Montessori organizational culture extended beyond classroom pedagogy into communication, service, stakeholder management, procedural accountability, and cross-functional coordination. Because this interpretation rests on only two administrative participants, it is treated as analytically illustrative rather than representative of non-teaching employees more broadly.

Taken together, the four themes support negotiated professionalism as an integrative interpretation. Professionalism emerged neither as simple conformity to school expectations

nor as unrestricted expression of individual preference. It developed through ongoing negotiation among agency, competence, feedback, organizational purpose, relationships, and consequences. The negative and deviant cases are central to this interpretation because they show that professional autonomy, feedback, and experience become developmental only under particular organizational conditions.

The cross-case comparison demonstrates that professionalization did not follow one organizational pathway. School A emphasized clarity, coordination, procedure, and standards whose meanings became more acceptable through explanation, within a relatively young and smaller organizational setting in which internal systems and SOP implementation were still being consolidated. School B emphasized trust, room to try, reflective mentoring, and professional judgment within a larger and more established organizational system, while also containing the strongest negative case of controlling supervision. These contextual characteristics help interpret why similar Montessori principles could be enacted through different management practices, although the two-case design does not permit causal attribution to organizational age, size, or structure. These differences reinforce research showing that school culture, leadership, communication, and learning conditions shape professional development in context ([Rahman, 2022](#); [McChesney & Cross, 2023](#)). They also resonate with Wibowo's (2022) account of value-based school culture as part of the infrastructure of professional development.

The findings therefore caution against extracting a single 'best practice' from either case. Similar management intentions can acquire different meanings depending on how they are enacted and on employees' competence and role position. This supports an organizational interpretation of professional identity in which school climate and context shape how employees understand themselves as professionals ([Melesse & Belay, 2024](#)).

The integrative concept of negotiated professionalism is supported by the convergence of the four themes. Professionalism was not reduced to compliance, individual independence, or generational preference. Instead, employees negotiated multiple positions: autonomous decision maker, learner receiving correction, role specialist, colleague, service provider, and representative of institutional values. This is consistent with dialogical approaches that treat professional identity as simultaneously individual and social and as subject to continuing revision ([Akkerman & Meijer, 2011](#); [Dugas, 2021](#)). [Groenewald & Arnold \(2024\)](#) similarly emphasize agentic identity revision in challenging contexts.

The contribution of negotiated professionalism is to specify the organizational mechanisms through which this identity work occurred. Competence determined when discretion expanded; explanations helped standards become meaningful; mentoring converted uncertainty into reflection; stakeholder consequences placed limits on individual preference; and negative experiences of monitoring revealed when developmental structure became control. In this sense, negotiated accountability is not separate from professionalism but one of the processes through which professional identity becomes practically responsible.

Table 2 Empirical Thematic Structure and Boundary Conditions

Theme	Core empirical pattern	Illustrative evidence	Boundary / deviant evidence
Structured professional	Agency became meaningful when paired with competence,	P01, P02, P06; P01 critical incident	P08: intensive monitoring reduced initiative and

autonomy	boundaries, trust, and accountability.		increased approval-seeking.
Internalization of Montessori purpose	Standards moved from external rules toward criteria for professional judgment and child-centered purpose.	P03, P09, P10	Administrative evidence (P05, P10) shows a non-pedagogical expression; only two administrative participants.
Developmental feedback / prepared adult	Feedback was developmental when it combined observation, rationale, reflective questioning, and growing judgment.	P02, P03, P07; P07 critical incident	P08: feedback became controlling when monitoring weakened self-direction.
Negotiated accountability	Employees balanced discretion with consequences for children, colleagues, parents, procedures, and the school.	P05, P06, P10; P05 critical incident	P04: analytical account suggested more differentiated consultation with experience; no direct quotation is reported.
Negotiated professionalism (integrative)	Professional identity developed through negotiation among agency, learning, Montessori purpose, relationships, and responsibility.	Within-case and cross-case synthesis	Role imbalance (8 teachers, 2 administrative staff) limits claims beyond teaching roles.

Implications, Limitations, and Boundaries of the Evidence

For educational management, the findings support a staged rather than generationally stereotyped approach to professional development. Role clarity and decision boundaries should be explicit, but their rationale should also be explained. Mentoring should move from observation and reflective questioning toward increasing discretion as competence develops. Supervisors should monitor whether feedback is producing stronger judgment or merely greater approval-seeking. Administrative staff should be included in culture-building because organizational values are enacted through communication, procedures, stakeholder management, and cross-functional coordination as well as through teaching.

The study has important limits. It involves only two schools and 10 participants, so the contribution is analytical rather than statistically generalizable. The role distribution is uneven: eight participants are teachers and only two are administrative staff, limiting claims about non-teaching roles. Direct quotations are presented for nine participants; P04 contributes to the analytical dataset and deviant-case interpretation but is not represented by a direct quotation, and is therefore treated as supplementary evidence. Four critical incidents are discussed in detail, while observational and documentary materials are used only as contextual sources because direct traceability to the final themes cannot be demonstrated. Interview dates, durations, total audio hours, and the total number of incidents could not be verified reliably for reporting. The study also did not undergo formal review by an institutional research-ethics committee, although school permission, informed consent, confidentiality safeguards, and voluntary participation procedures were implemented. These boundaries do

not negate the thematic findings, but they define the level at which negotiated professionalism should be claimed: as a contextually grounded explanatory interpretation requiring testing in additional Montessori and value-based educational organizations.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how younger employees aged 22–29 years, sampled within a Generation Z frame, negotiate work values with Montessori organizational culture and how educational-management practices shape professional development in two Montessori schools. Generation Z functioned as sampling context rather than as an explanatory variable, and no intergenerational comparison was intended. Four empirical themes explain the process. Structured professional autonomy linked discretion with competence, trust, role boundaries, and accountability; internalization of Montessori purpose shifted standards from external requirements toward criteria for professional judgment; developmental feedback and mentoring supported reflection, competence, and self-regulation when they clarified rationale and strengthened agency, while excessive monitoring could produce hesitation and approval dependence; and negotiated accountability captured how employees balanced personal discretion with consequences for children, colleagues, parents, procedures, and the organization. Together, these processes support negotiated professionalism as an integrative interpretation of professional identity development. School A foregrounded clarity, coordination, and procedural reliability within a younger and smaller organizational setting that was still consolidating internal systems, whereas School B foregrounded trust, reflective mentoring, and professional judgment within a larger and more established organizational system. These contextual contrasts help interpret, but do not causally explain, the distinct organizational pathways through which responsible professionalism emerged. The study is limited to two schools and 10 participants, with eight teachers and only two administrative staff; P04 is not represented by a direct quotation; observational and documentary materials provide contextual rather than independently traceable thematic evidence; and the study did not undergo formal institutional ethics-committee review. Future research should test negotiated professionalism across broader Montessori and other value-based educational settings, increase representation of non-teaching employees, and examine how responsible autonomy and professional identity develop longitudinally.

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