

Benchmarking Strategy For Improving The Professionalism Of Early Childhood Educators

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Abstract. Teacher professionalism plays a central role in ensuring that education values are internalized effectively through meaningful learning experiences. This study aims to analyze the implementation of a benchmarking strategy to enhance teacher professionalism at SRAMBI PAUD CENTER, Indonesia. This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach using a best practice and institutional benchmarking model. Data were obtained through self-assessment documents, institutional records, reflective evaluations, and observations of educational practices. The results indicate that benchmarking strategies implemented through internal benchmarking, competitive benchmarking, and systematic feedback and evaluation significantly improve teachers' professional competence, pedagogical strategies, and commitment to character-based education. Furthermore, the strategy strengthens institutional quality, public trust, and community engagement. This study contributes practical insights into sustainable quality improvement strategies for early childhood education institutions.

Keywords: Benchmarking Strategy, Educator Professionalism, Early Childhood Education

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia requires high-quality human resources to support national development in an increasingly competitive global environment. Education is a strategic instrument for developing such human resources, as emphasized in Law Number 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, which states that education functions to develop capabilities and shape the character and civilization of a dignified nation. In this context, character education has become a central issue, particularly in early childhood education, where foundational values and behaviors are first formed.

From a global perspective, early childhood education has gained increasing attention as a strategic investment in human capital development. International organizations such as UNESCO and the OECD highlight that high-quality early childhood education contributes significantly to long-term educational outcomes, social cohesion, and economic sustainability. The OECD notes that educator quality is one of the most decisive factors influencing early childhood education effectiveness, emphasizing the need for systematic professional development and institutional learning mechanisms. This reinforces the argument that educator professionalism must be addressed not only at the individual level but also through institutional strategies that support continuous improvement (OECD, 2019, p. 123).

Early childhood education (PAUD) is designed to facilitate holistic child development through play-based learning experiences that nurture cognitive, social-emotional, moral, and spiritual dimensions. Education in PAUD is an integral component of daily learning activities, implemented through habituation, modeling, and meaningful interaction. The success of education is closely related to institutional management and, most importantly, teacher professionalism.

The development of high-quality human resources remains a central concern in national and global development agendas, with education serving as a fundamental instrument for shaping knowledge,

skills, and character. Early childhood education (ECE) plays a strategic role in this process, as early experiences significantly influence children's cognitive, social, and moral development. Character education in early childhood is therefore not merely an instructional objective but a long-term investment in social sustainability.

Educators occupy a critical position in the success of character education. Their professionalism, encompassing pedagogical competence, commitment, and ethical integrity, determines how values are translated into daily learning practices. Despite its importance, educator professionalism in many ECE institutions remains uneven due to limited professional development opportunities, weak quality assurance systems, and insufficient exposure to best practices.

Teachers in early childhood education are not only facilitators of learning but also role models who directly influence children's character formation. Professional teachers are expected to possess pedagogical, personal, social, and professional competencies. However, many PAUD institutions face challenges related to limited teacher capacity, inconsistent quality standards, and lack of systematic professional development. Therefore, strategic management approaches are required to ensure continuous quality improvement.

Benchmarking emerges as a relevant strategic approach within this broader discourse on quality assurance and professional development. In educational contexts, benchmarking enables institutions to engage in structured reflection by comparing internal practices with external reference standards while maintaining sensitivity to local contexts. Camp stresses that benchmarking should be understood as a learning-oriented process rather than a competitive exercise, emphasizing adaptation and innovation over replication. When applied in early childhood education, benchmarking offers a pathway for institutions to strengthen educator professionalism by systematically learning from best practices and integrating them into daily pedagogical routines (Camp, 1989, pp. 12–15).

Despite its potential, empirical research on benchmarking in early childhood education remains limited, particularly in developing country contexts. Most existing studies focus on benchmarking in higher education or corporate settings, leaving a gap in understanding how benchmarking can be operationalized in PAUD institutions to support character education and educator professionalism. Studies by Stoll et al. suggest that improvement strategies are most effective when they are grounded in institutional learning and professional collaboration, highlighting the need for context-specific research in early childhood education settings (Stoll, L., Bolam, R., McMahon, 2006, pp. 223–226).

Benchmarking is one strategic management approach that enables educational institutions to evaluate their performance by comparing internal practices and learning from best practices of other institutions. SRAMBI PAUD CENTER, established in 2006, has implemented benchmarking strategies as part of its institutional quality assurance since receiving national accreditation in 2009 and designation as a model PAUD institution at the district level in 2010. This study examines how benchmarking strategies are implemented at SRAMBI PAUD CENTER and how they contribute to enhancing teacher professionalism in building early childhood character education.

This study addresses this gap by examining the implementation of a benchmarking strategy at SRAMBI PAUD CENTER, an early childhood education institution in Indonesia. The study aims to analyze how benchmarking is operationalized in practice, how it influences educator professionalism, and what impacts it generates at the institutional and community levels. By situating the case of SRAMBI PAUD CENTER within these theoretical and empirical frameworks, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on strategic management and quality improvement in early childhood education. The focus on benchmarking as a mechanism for enhancing educator professionalism and character education provides both empirical evidence and practical insights that may inform policy, institutional leadership, and professional development practices in similar educational contexts. By doing so, this paper offers empirical and conceptual insights into benchmarking as a viable strategy for sustainable quality improvement in early childhood education.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach with a best practice design. The research focuses on institutional experiences in implementing benchmarking strategies to improve teacher professionalism and education practices. The research site is SRAMBI PAUD CENTER, Purwokerto, Central Java, Indonesia.

Data sources include institutional documents such as vision and mission statements, self-assessment reports, standard operating procedures, teacher performance evaluations, curriculum documents, and records of professional development activities. Additional data were obtained through observation of learning activities, reflective evaluations conducted by school management, and documentation of partnerships and community engagement programs.

Data analysis was conducted through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings were interpreted using theories of benchmarking, and teacher professionalism. The credibility of data was ensured through triangulation of sources and consistency of documentation.

Data were collected through document analysis, participatory observation, and reflective evaluation of institutional practices conducted over an extended period. Documents analyzed included institutional self-evaluation reports, curriculum plans, standard operating procedures, educator performance records, and documentation of benchmarking activities such as study visits and professional exchanges. Observational data focused on classroom practices, educator interactions, and the integration of character values into daily learning activities.

Data analysis was conducted thematically, following the stages of data reduction, categorization, and interpretation. The analysis framework was guided by benchmarking theory, focusing on internal benchmarking, competitive benchmarking, and continuous feedback and evaluation (Spendolini, 1992, pp. 29–33; Yin, 2018, pp. 33–35).

RESULT AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the empirical findings and analytical discussion derived from the implementation of a benchmarking strategy at SRAMBI PAUD CENTER. The results are grounded in qualitative data collected through institutional documents, self-assessment records, observations, and reflective practices conducted over a sustained period of organizational development. Rather than reporting activities descriptively, the analysis focuses on how benchmarking was operationalized in daily institutional practices and how it contributed to enhancing educator professionalism, pedagogical quality, and institutional sustainability within an early childhood education context.

The analysis is structured around key dimensions of benchmarking implementation, namely internal benchmarking, competitive benchmarking, and continuous feedback and evaluation mechanisms. These dimensions are examined as interconnected processes that collectively shaped professional learning, decision-making, and organizational culture at SRAMBI PAUD CENTER. By adopting this analytical framework, the study highlights benchmarking not merely as a managerial technique but as a dynamic learning process embedded in institutional routines and professional practices (Camp, 1989, pp. 10–12).

Furthermore, the results are analyzed across multiple levels of impact, including individual educators, institutional performance, and community engagement. This multi-level perspective enables a comprehensive understanding of how benchmarking influenced changes in educators' professional attitudes, instructional strategies, and commitment to character-based education, while simultaneously strengthening institutional credibility and public trust. Such an approach aligns with

contemporary perspectives on educational improvement that emphasize the interdependence between professional capacity building and organizational development (OECD, 2019, p. 110)

This section situates the empirical findings within the broader discourse on educator professionalism and quality assurance in early childhood education. By linking field-based evidence from SRAMBI PAUD CENTER with established theoretical and empirical literature, the analysis seeks to demonstrate how locally grounded benchmarking practices can inform sustainable professional development strategies in similar educational settings. The integration of empirical results with analytical interpretation is intended to provide insights that are both contextually relevant and theoretically meaningful for scholars and practitioners concerned with educational quality improvement.

1. Implementation Needs and Problem-Solving Strategies in Benchmarking

Benchmarking is a continuous and systematic process of measuring and comparing an organization's performance against best practices, either internally or externally, to achieve sustainable improvement. In educational management, benchmarking serves as a tool for setting quality standards, identifying performance gaps, and adopting effective practices from exemplary institutions. Benchmarking aligns with the principles of continuous quality improvement and evidence-based management.

Benchmarking in educational management functions as a strategic tool for identifying quality gaps, setting improvement targets, and institutionalizing best practices. In the PAUD context, benchmarking is particularly relevant because institutions operate with diverse resource levels and managerial capacities. Effective benchmarking therefore requires shared understanding, leadership commitment, and organizational learning culture (Fullan, 2016, p. 45)

In the context of PAUD, benchmarking is particularly relevant because early childhood institutions often operate with diverse levels of resources and management capacity. By adopting benchmarking strategies, PAUD institutions can enhance teacher professionalism, curriculum quality, and service delivery while maintaining alignment with local cultural values.

At SRAMBI PAUD CENTER, initial challenges included limited conceptual understanding of benchmarking among educators and perceptions of benchmarking as an external evaluative mechanism. To address this, the institution prioritized internalization of benchmarking concepts through workshops and reflective discussions, ensuring alignment with institutional vision and character education goals.

The benchmarking process was operationalized through three interconnected stages: internal benchmarking, competitive benchmarking, and continuous feedback and evaluation. Internal benchmarking involved systematic self-assessment of institutional performance, fostering reflective awareness and professional accountability among educators (Irvine et al., 2024, pp. 1911–1922).

The implementation of a benchmarking strategy for enhancing educator professionalism at SRAMBI PAUD CENTER requires adequate knowledge and a shared understanding among institutional actors regarding the concept, processes, and implications of benchmarking in educational management. This need extends beyond technical comprehension to include a deep awareness of the potential impact of benchmarking on educator performance, institutional quality, and community trust. Previous studies emphasize that benchmarking in education functions effectively when it is embedded within an organizational learning framework and supported by reflective professional practices rather than treated as a one-time comparative activity (Camp, 1989, pp. 10–12; Fullan, 2016, pp. 66–68). In addition, successful implementation depends on the institution's understanding of the level of commitment, perseverance, and institutional independence required throughout the benchmarking process. Benchmarking is therefore best understood as a continuous strategic effort that demands sustained leadership commitment, organizational resilience, and long-term investment in professional development (OECD, 2020, pp. 25–27).

To address these challenges, SRAMBI PAUD CENTER adopted a structured problem-solving approach that began with a comprehensive review and internalization of benchmarking as a strategic management tool for improving educator professionalism, particularly in fostering children's character development. This initial stage emphasized conceptual understanding and alignment,

ensuring that benchmarking was not perceived merely as an external comparison exercise but as an internal mechanism for reflective practice and continuous improvement. Such an approach aligns with the view that educator professionalism develops most effectively when institutional strategies are closely aligned with shared values, vision, and pedagogical purpose (Christopher Day, 2004, pp. 7–9; Hargreaves, A., & Fullan, 2012, pp. 89–92)

The operationalization of benchmarking at SRAMBI PAUD CENTER was conducted through a multi-stage process encompassing internal benchmarking, competitive benchmarking, and continuous feedback and evaluation. Internal benchmarking is conducted through self-assessment activities aimed at evaluating institutional performance based on vision, mission, and educational objectives. Teachers and staff participate in vision and mission workshops to ensure shared understanding of character education goals. Student development is monitored through progress reports and alumni testimonials, which provide evidence of character development outcomes. Internal benchmarking focused on systematic self-assessment activities, including the documentation and analysis of the institution's vision, mission, educational practices, and achieved outcomes. This stage enabled the institution to identify performance gaps and strengths while fostering reflective awareness among educators regarding their professional roles and responsibilities. Reflective self-assessment has been widely recognized as a critical mechanism for strengthening professional identity and accountability in early childhood education (Irvine et al., 2024, p. 1912)

Competitive benchmarking involves identifying and learning from leading early childhood education institutions that have successfully implemented character-based and center-based learning models. SRAMBI PAUD CENTER established partnerships with institutions such as Al Falah International School Jakarta and TK/RA Istiqlal Jakarta. Teachers participate in study visits, internships, and professional training programs facilitated by these partner institutions. Best practices are then adapted to the local context of SRAMBI PAUD CENTER, considering cultural values, financial capacity, and managerial readiness. Through partnerships, study visits, and professional exchanges, SRAMBI PAUD CENTER selectively adapted proven practices to its local context, an approach consistent with research emphasizing contextual adaptation rather than direct replication of best practices (Stoll, L., Bolam, R., McMahon, 2006, pp. 221–258)

Feedback and evaluation constituted a critical component of the benchmarking cycle, ensuring that adopted practices were continuously monitored and refined. This process involved systematic observation, performance appraisal, and reflective discussions among educators and management to assess the effectiveness of implemented strategies. These are conducted through systematic performance monitoring and regular review of standard operating procedures. Teacher performance is assessed periodically, and results are discussed collaboratively to promote reflective practice and continuous improvement. Continuous feedback mechanisms play a central role in sustaining professional learning communities and fostering a culture of improvement within educational institutions (DuFour & Fullan, 2013).

Such evaluative mechanisms reinforced a culture of accountability and learning, enabling the institution to respond dynamically to emerging challenges and opportunities for improvement. Building on these stages, strategic development was further strengthened through careful planning and implementation, including the dissemination of best practices across the institution, stakeholder engagement, and the mobilization of partnerships to support sustainable improvement initiatives.

The discussion of benchmarking implementation at SRAMBI PAUD CENTER also highlights the importance of examining its broader impact and sustainability. The strategy contributed to enhanced educator professionalism, reflected in improved pedagogical practices, stronger professional commitment, and increased initiative in self-development activities. These outcomes are consistent with findings that link systematic professional learning strategies to higher-quality instructional practices in early childhood education settings (OECD, 2019). At the institutional level, benchmarking supported more coherent program planning, improved service quality, and growing public confidence in the institution. Furthermore, the process revealed that perseverance, personal and organizational sacrifice, and institutional independence were essential factors in sustaining benchmarking initiatives over time. The capacity to mobilize internal resources, maintain commitment amid challenges, and operate with managerial autonomy has been identified as a key

determinant of sustainability in school improvement efforts (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Fullan, 2016).

The ability of the institution to mobilize internal resources, maintain commitment amid challenges, and operate with relative financial and managerial autonomy played a decisive role in ensuring that benchmarking functioned as a long-term strategy rather than a temporary project. Collectively, these findings underscore that benchmarking, when implemented systematically and supported by strong institutional resilience, can serve as a powerful mechanism for enhancing educator professionalism and educational quality in early childhood education settings.

1.1 Educator Competency Improvement Program

The benchmarking strategy is carried out at SRAMBI PAUD CENTER in an effort to improve the professionalism of educators in building the character of students carried out in several steps, namely: *First, Internal benchmarking*, namely conducting self-evaluation activities (*Self Assessment*) as a foundation for professional and institutional improvement. This stage focused on reviewing and documenting the institution's vision, mission, educational objectives, and daily pedagogical practices, and goals of the institution as a determinant of direction in making policies.

The findings indicate that internal benchmarking functioned as a reflective mechanism that encouraged educators to critically examine their professional roles, instructional consistency, and alignment with institutional goals. Such reflective self-assessment is widely recognized as a core component of professional professionalism, as it enables educators to identify gaps between intended practices and actual implementation (Day & Sachs, 2004, pp. 7–9).

The activities carried out were socialization and dissecting the vision, mission and goals of the SRAMBI PAUD CENTER family planning institution. Educators must understand the vision, mission and goals of the institution so that they have a clear direction in providing the best education, especially the cultivation of students' character. Conducting an assessment of student development achievements through progress reports and alumni tracing/testimony.

Empirical evidence from SRAMBI PAUD CENTER shows that self-assessment activities strengthened educators' awareness of their responsibilities in character-based early childhood education. Through structured discussions and documentation reviews, educators demonstrated increased clarity regarding pedagogical priorities and institutional expectations. This aligns with Camp's assertion that effective benchmarking begins with an honest internal diagnosis of existing performance before engaging in external comparison (Camp, 1989, pp. 12–14). Furthermore, the internal benchmarking process contributed to the development of a shared professional language among educators, facilitating collective accountability and coherence in instructional practices.

From an analytical perspective, internal benchmarking at SRAMBI PAUD CENTER did not merely serve administrative purposes but acted as a catalyst for professional learning. The results suggest that reflective practices embedded in self-assessment fostered professional identity development and commitment to continuous improvement. This finding supports the argument that educator professionalism in early childhood education is strengthened when reflective practice is institutionalized rather than left to individual initiative (Irvine et al., 2023, pp. 1912–1915).

Second, competitive benchmarking, through collaboration with reference institutions recognized for best practices in character-based early childhood education. SRAMBI PAUD CENTER engaged in study visits, professional exchanges, and mentoring activities with selected partner institutions. The results indicate that this stage significantly expanded educators' pedagogical perspectives and professional competencies, particularly in implementing child-centered and character-oriented learning approaches.

Competitive benchmarking is identifying exemplary institutions, and determining which institutions to be partners with SRAMBI PAUD CENTER refers to similar institutions that have developed much more rapidly, including: Al Falah International School Jakarta, TK/RA Istiqlal Jakarta, both of which have first applied the center method in the learning process and the implementation of institutional activities that support efforts to cultivate students' character. Al Falah applies 18 positive attitudes in the development of character education. Educators participated in study visits and short internships, observing best practices in center-based and character education. These

practices were selectively adapted to SRAMBI's local context, consistent with Stoll et al.'s emphasis on contextual adaptation (Stoll, L., Bolam, R., McMahon, 2006, p. 226).

Educators are included in comparative study activities, internships and presenting resource persons from partner institutions, then managers and educators independently take and concoct the institutional needs of SRAMBI PAUD CENTER based on the learning outcomes at other institutions, adjusting to the local culture, funding and managerial capabilities of SRAMBI PAUD CENTER institutions.

The analysis shows that competitive benchmarking was most effective when best practices were selectively adapted rather than directly replicated. Educators and management critically reviewed observed practices and contextualized them according to local cultural values, institutional capacity, and resource availability. This adaptive approach reflects Stoll et al.'s argument that successful benchmarking in education requires contextual interpretation to avoid superficial imitation (Stoll, L., Bolam, R., McMahon, 2006, pp. 227–229). At SRAMBI PAUD CENTER, educators reported increased confidence in experimenting with new instructional strategies while maintaining alignment with institutional identity.

Moreover, competitive benchmarking contributed to professional motivation and openness to innovation. Exposure to alternative pedagogical models encouraged educators to engage in continuous learning and peer collaboration. This finding is consistent with Hargreaves and Fullan's concept of *professional capital*, which emphasizes that professional growth is enhanced through social interaction and collective learning rather than individual effort alone (Hargreaves, A., & Fullan, 2012, pp. 88–89). Thus, competitive benchmarking functioned not only as a source of new ideas but also as a driver of professional culture transformation.

Third, feedback and evaluation, to ensure the sustainability of professional improvement efforts. At SRAMBI PAUD CENTER, this stage involved systematic observation, performance appraisal, and reflective discussions based on standard operating procedures (SOPs) and agreed performance indicators. The results indicate that continuous feedback reinforced accountability and supported consistent instructional quality across educators.

Analytically, feedback and evaluation played a critical role in closing the benchmarking cycle by translating learning into sustained practice. Regular evaluation enabled educators to monitor their progress, identify areas for refinement, and align their performance with institutional standards. DuFour and Fullan emphasize that continuous feedback within professional learning communities is essential for maintaining momentum in school improvement initiatives (DuFour, R., & Fullan, 2013, pp. 35–37). Evidence from SRAMBI PAUD CENTER supports this claim, as educators demonstrated greater consistency in instructional delivery and stronger commitment to institutional goals over time.

In addition, feedback mechanisms strengthened institutional resilience by promoting a culture of openness and shared responsibility. Rather than perceiving evaluation as punitive, educators viewed it as an opportunity for professional growth. This finding resonates with Fullan's assertion that sustainable educational change depends on trust-based evaluation systems that balance accountability and professional autonomy (Fullan, 2016, pp. 53–55). Consequently, feedback and evaluation at SRAMBI PAUD CENTER contributed not only to individual professional development but also to long-term institutional quality assurance.

1.2 Strategy Development: Planning and Implementation of Benchmarking-Based Improvement

Strategy development at SRAMBI PAUD CENTER was conducted through a systematic process of planning and implementation, grounded in the findings obtained from the preceding stages of internal benchmarking, competitive benchmarking, and continuous evaluation. This stage marked the transition from reflective diagnosis to concrete institutional action, ensuring that benchmarking outcomes were translated into sustainable improvements in educator professionalism and learning quality. According to Fullan, effective strategy development in educational institutions requires coherence between analysis, planning, and execution, particularly when the goal is long-term

professional and organizational change (Fullan, 2016, pp. 67–69) , that need to be taken based on the results of the previous three steps, including making several activity plans such as:

1) Reformulation of learning models through increased variation in learning activities and instructional media. SRAMBI PAUD CENTER expanded the number of learning centers from seven to nine, thereby enhancing the diversity of Educational Play Tools (*Alat Permainan Edukatif*– APE) and strengthening the implementation of a center-based learning system (*BCCT*). This reformulation enabled educators to provide richer play-based learning experiences aligned with children’s developmental stages. Research on early childhood pedagogy emphasizes that varied learning environments and play-based center systems significantly contribute to children’s cognitive, social, and character development when supported by competent educators (Bredekamp & Copple, 2009, 16–18).

2) In parallel, strategy development involved the systematic development of syllabi and learning assessment instruments tailored to early childhood developmental stages. This was realized through the preparation and implementation of structured curriculum documents, including annual programs, semester programs, weekly learning plans (*Rencana Pelaksanaan Mingguan/RPM*), and daily lesson plans. Character education was intentionally embedded within these planning documents, ensuring that values education was not treated as an additional program but integrated into daily learning experiences. Darling-Hammond et al. argue that coherent curriculum planning and aligned assessment practices are essential for strengthening educator professionalism and ensuring instructional consistency (Darling-hammond et al., 2020, pp. 97–99) (Darling-hammond et al., 2020)

3) Another strategic component was the implementation of holistic integrative learning programs that extended beyond classroom-based instruction. These programs included outing classes, collaboration with parents and institutional partners, and the involvement of professionals such as psychologists and medical practitioners. Such initiatives supported children’s holistic development while simultaneously enhancing educators’ interdisciplinary understanding and professional competence. The OECD (2019, pp. 54–56) highlights that holistic and integrative approaches in early childhood education strengthen both learning outcomes and educator capacity by fostering collaboration across professional domains (OECD, 2019, pp. 54–56)

4) Strategy development also emphasized collaborative problem-solving as a mechanism for continuous improvement. Educators regularly documented challenges encountered during teaching and learning activities (*KBM*) and engaged in collective discussions to identify practical solutions. This practice reinforced a culture of shared responsibility and professional dialogue. DuFour and Fullan note that collaborative reflection and problem-solving are defining features of effective professional learning communities, enabling educators to transform everyday challenges into opportunities for professional growth (DuFour, R., & Fullan, 2013, pp. 41–43).

5) Furthermore, SRAMBI PAUD CENTER institutionalized the dissemination and transformation of knowledge gained from seminars, training programs, and comparative studies conducted at local, regional, and national levels. Educators who participated in external professional development activities were encouraged to share insights and adapt relevant practices within the institution. This approach aligns with the argument that professional learning has the greatest impact when knowledge is redistributed and contextualized within institutional practice rather than remaining at the individual level (Hargreaves, A., & Fullan, 2012, pp. 92–94).

Finally, strategy development was strengthened through the systematic mobilization of support and partnerships with various stakeholders, including parents, community organizations, and institutional partners. These partnerships contributed to resource sharing, program enrichment, and improved service quality. Camp emphasizes that successful benchmarking strategies rely not only on internal capacity but also on the institution’s ability to build strategic alliances that support continuous improvement (Camp, 1989, pp. 45–47). At SRAMBI PAUD CENTER, partnership development emerged as a critical factor in sustaining benchmarking-driven innovation and service excellence.

The following flowchart shows that the benchmarking strategy is a cyclical and continuous process that starts from internal self-evaluation, followed by learning from reference institutions, adaptation

of best practices, and strengthening through supervision and quality assurance. This cycle ensures the systematic and sustainable improvement of the quality of educators and early childhood education institutions.

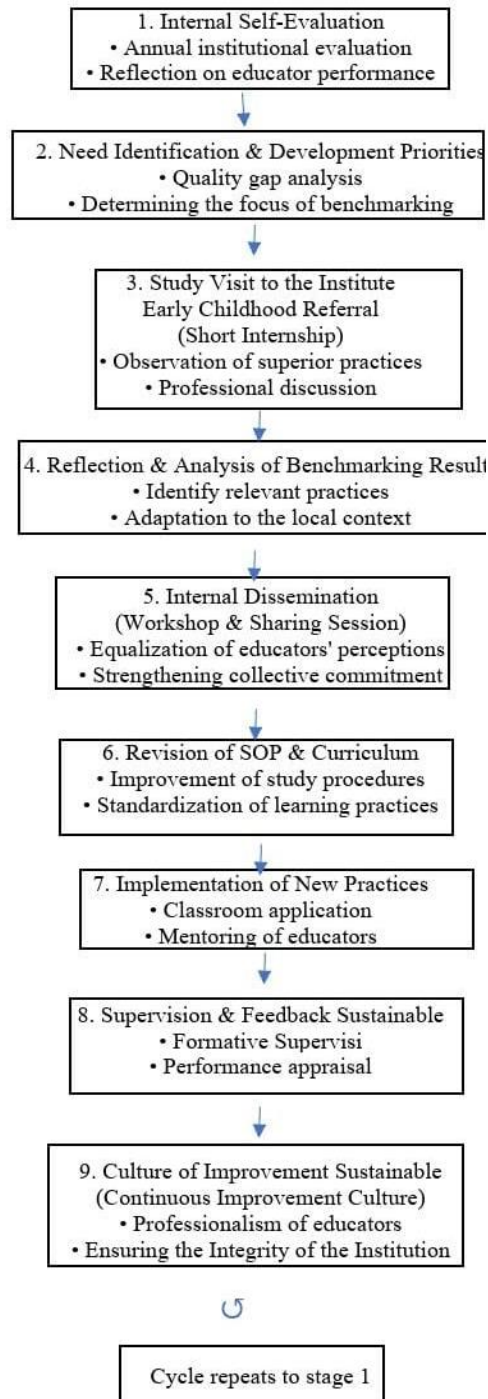


Fig.1. Pedagogical Quality Improvement Benchmarking Strategy Flow Diagram

2. Duration of Development, Motivation, and Strategy Objectives

The implementation of the benchmarking strategy has been implemented at SRAMBI PAUD CENTER since 2010, by continuing to evaluate and improve the performance of institutions on an ongoing basis, supported by the SRAMBI work team, institutional partners, and supporting ecosystems who want to actively participate in the best education efforts of the nation's generation. The motivation and purpose of implementing the benchmarking strategy is to find the best steps in improving the performance of professional educators at SRAMBI PAUD CENTER as an effort to maximize services for students so that children get education in accordance with their growth and development, mainly to instill positive character values in every daily activity, so that in the end the presence of SRAMBI PAUD CENTER is able to provide benefits for similar institutions and society in general.

3. Challenges in Implementing Benchmarking Strategies

The implementation of benchmarking strategies at SRAMBI PAUD CENTER revealed a set of interrelated challenges that required strong strategic management and sustained institutional commitment. One of the primary challenges identified was the limited initial understanding of benchmarking among educators and staff. Benchmarking was initially perceived as a one-time external evaluation or comparative exercise, rather than as a continuous internal process of professional learning and quality improvement. This misconception hindered early implementation, as educators tended to focus on outcomes rather than engaging deeply with reflective processes that are central to effective benchmarking. Camp emphasizes that benchmarking fails to generate meaningful improvement when it is treated merely as comparison, rather than as a systematic learning strategy embedded within organizational processes (Camp, 1989, pp. 12–15).

To address these challenges, SRAMBI PAUD CENTER adopted a collaborative and communicative approach that emphasized intensive interaction among managers, educators, and education staff. Regular coordination and evaluation meetings were institutionalized as formal forums for reflection, monitoring, and collective decision-making. These forums functioned not only as control mechanisms but also as spaces for shared learning and professional dialogue. Fullan highlights that sustained educational change depends heavily on the quality of relationships and communication within institutions, as continuous dialogue enables alignment between strategy, practice, and professional commitment (Fullan, 2016, pp. 53–56).

Another key response to implementation challenges involved systematic coaching and training for educators, conducted both internally and through external professional development opportunities. Internal coaching allowed the institution to contextualize benchmarking concepts according to local needs, while external training exposed educators to broader perspectives and best practices. Darling-Hammond et al. argue that professional development is most effective when it combines internal capacity-building with exposure to external knowledge, thereby strengthening educators' reflective and adaptive competencies (Darling-hammond et al., 2020, pp. 98–101).

Strengthening partnerships and professional networks also emerged as a strategic response to implementation barriers. By improving relationships with institutional partners and engaging more actively with the surrounding educational ecosystem, SRAMBI PAUD CENTER was able to access additional expertise, resources, and learning opportunities. This finding aligns with Hargreaves and Fullan's concept of *professional capital*, which underscores the importance of social and decisional capital in sustaining professional growth and institutional improvement (Hargreaves, A., & Fullan, 2012, pp. 92–95).

The role of leadership commitment proved to be a decisive factor in overcoming challenges associated with benchmarking implementation. Institutional leaders and the core work team consistently maintained strategic alignment with the institution's vision and goals, demonstrated openness to new ideas, and ensured that all benchmarking processes were well understood and carefully documented. Such leadership practices fostered trust, consistency, and resilience within the institution. According to DuFour and Fullan, leadership that prioritizes clarity, documentation, and collective ownership is essential for sustaining improvement initiatives over time (DuFour, R., & Fullan, 2013, pp. 35–38). At SRAMBI PAUD CENTER, this leadership approach enabled

benchmarking to evolve from an initially challenging strategy into an embedded institutional practice that supported long-term professional development and quality assurance .

4. Independence of Strategy Implementation

4.1 Source of Costs and How to Build Independence in Strategy Development and Implementation

SRAMBI PAUD CENTER has been independent since the first year in the implementation of various institutional activities. The main source of funds for institutional implementation is the foundation, parental contributions. Institutional independence is built in collaboration with institutions with companies or partners through organized and systematic financial management in collaboration with banks, fundraising of sponsorship funds and CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) from partners. All of this greatly facilitates the implementation of this strategy in various institutional programs.

4.2 Building a Network and Steps

SRAMBI PAUD CENTER builds a network with related eco-items, synergizing with school committees (SFC - Srambi Family Club) to strengthen cooperation with networks/partners, through various learning support activities, for example parenting activities by collaborating with sponsors. Coordinating with the ecosystem of the District Education Office, with partner organizations such as PKG, HIMPAUDI, PAUD Cluster as a means of transformation and effective information. Steps to build a network to support the independence of the institution are carried out by: (1) Socializing the existence of SRAMBI PAUD CENTER as an institution that intensively provides the best education for early childhood and invites all parties who want to actively participate, through the use of social media, print and electronic media. Socialization of SRAMBI PAUD CENTER with various positive learning activities for early childhood using social media (email, Instagram, facebook, youtube, blog).

(2) Exploration, intensive meetings to make cooperation agreements (MOUs) with partners, for example, cooperation in institutional financial management with banks, sponsorship cooperation and CSR with partners. In the implementation of this strategy, government assistance is supportive for institutions, not the main source of funding for the sustainability of institutional implementation. However, government assistance is a great opportunity to improve the quality of institutional services.

5. Impact of Benchmarking Strategy on Teacher Professionalism

The implementation of benchmarking strategies has significantly influenced teacher professionalism at SRAMBI PAUD CENTER. Teachers demonstrate increased motivation, commitment, and proactive engagement in professional development activities such as workshops, seminars, and peer discussions. Changes are observed in teachers' pedagogical approaches, with greater emphasis on child-centered learning, experiential activities, and character modeling.

Teachers increasingly integrate character values into daily learning activities through habituation, storytelling, cooperative play, and positive reinforcement. The use of diverse learning centers and educational play equipment supports holistic child development and fosters positive behavior patterns.

6. Institutional and Community Impact

At the institutional level, benchmarking has strengthened program implementation and organizational culture. Educational programs are implemented systematically according to annual and semester plans, and character education is embedded in the curriculum. Public trust in the institution has increased, as reflected in the growing number of enrolled students.

SRAMBI PAUD CENTER has also become a reference institution for other PAUD providers, hosting study visits, training programs, and student research activities. Community engagement is enhanced through partnerships with parents, local organizations, and professional associations, contributing to broader educational impact.

Data on Benchmarking Practices and Observed Impacts

To strengthen empirical accountability, Table 1 summarizes key benchmarking practices implemented at SRAMBI PAUD CENTER and their observed impacts on educator professionalism and institutional quality.

Table 1. Benchmarking Practices and Their Observed Impacts

Benchmarking Practice	Description of Field Implementation	Observed Impact on Educators	Institutional Impact
Internal self evaluation	Annual institutional self-assessment involving school leaders and educators	Increased reflective awareness and responsibility	Clear identification of development priorities
Study visits to model ECE institutions	Structured visits and short internships focusing on curriculum and character education	Improved pedagogical skills and openness to innovation	Adoption of best practices adapted to local context
Internal dissemination workshops	Post-benchmarking workshops to share findings with all educators	Shared understanding and collective commitment	Standardization of instructional practices
SOP and curriculum revision	Revision of learning procedures and curriculum documents	Increased consistency in teaching routines	Stronger quality assurance system
Continuous supervision and feedback	Formative supervision and performance appraisal	Enhanced professional discipline and motivation	Sustainable improvement culture

The data indicate that benchmarking functioned as a catalyst for both individual and organizational learning. Educators demonstrated increased initiative in professional development activities and greater consistency in implementing character-based learning routines. These changes align with

research emphasizing reflective and collaborative professional learning as key drivers of instructional improvement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017)

7. Persistence, Sacrifice, and Institutional Independence

The successful implementation of benchmarking strategies at SRAMBI PAUD CENTER requires persistence, sacrifice, and institutional independence. Continuous improvement efforts have been sustained since 2010, supported by strong leadership commitment and collaborative teamwork. Challenges such as limited human resources and resistance to change are addressed through intensive communication, capacity building, and stakeholder engagement.

Financial independence is achieved through diversified funding sources, including foundation support, parental contributions, partnerships, and corporate social responsibility programs. This financial sustainability enables the institution to maintain quality improvement initiatives without reliance on government assistance.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that benchmarking strategies play a significant role in enhancing teacher professionalism in early childhood institutions. At SRAMBI PAUD CENTER, benchmarking facilitates continuous performance improvement, fosters professional commitment among teachers, and enhances institutional quality and public trust. The integration of character education into daily learning activities is most effective when supported by professional teachers who embody character values in their practice. Sustainable implementation of benchmarking strategies requires shared understanding, strong leadership, institutional independence, and collaborative networks. Benchmarking is therefore recommended as a strategic approach for continuous quality improvement in early childhood education institutions.

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