

The Ethical Paradox of Teacher Gift-Giving in Indonesia: Professionalism, Reciprocity, and Educational Equity

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Abstract

This study examines the ethical paradox of teacher gift-giving in relation to professionalism, reciprocity, and educational equity through an embedded qualitative case study conducted in four private schools in Muara Bungo, Indonesia. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis involving 16 participants, consisting of four principals, six teachers, and six parents. Data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model. The findings indicate that gift-giving was primarily understood as a form of social appreciation and cultural reciprocity; however, the practice also created ambiguity regarding professional boundaries, perceptions of risks to equity, and policy uncertainty. Five themes were identified: the social meaning of gift-giving, ethical dilemmas concerning teacher professionalism, perceptions of equity risks and potential bias, variations in practices and policy ambiguity, and ethical boundaries of gift-giving. Based on these findings, the study develops a relational-ethical boundary typology comprising symbolic collective appreciation, reciprocal collective appreciation, personal relational gifts, and high-value personal gifts. Although no direct evidence was found that gift-giving altered teachers' decisions or treatment of students, the practice nonetheless presents risks of perceived inequity and blurred professional boundaries when not supported by clear institutional guidelines.

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Introduction

Teacher professional integrity has become a central concern in contemporary educational governance, particularly in education systems that emphasize accountability, transparency, and fairness. Beyond pedagogical competence, teachers are expected to exercise professional judgment, maintain impartial relationships with students and parents, and navigate ethical dilemmas arising from increasingly complex school interactions. Previous scholarship has highlighted several ethical dimensions relevant to teacher professionalism, including trust in educational relationships, moral obligation and fairness in teachers' behavior, and ethical school leadership (Gurr et al., 2025; Hong et al., 2022; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Recent research further emphasizes that teacher professionalism involves ethical judgment, moral responsibility, and relational trust in responding appropriately to complex demands in everyday educational contexts (Kristjánsson, 2024; Roos & Bagger, 2024). Professional integrity therefore functions not only as an individual virtue but also as an institutional condition that sustains public trust and perceptions of fairness within schools.

Within this context, teacher gift-giving has emerged as an ethically significant issue because it lies at the intersection of gratitude, reciprocity, professional authority, and educational fairness. Research on teacher gift-giving indicates that accepting gifts may affect teachers' objectivity and their ability to treat students equally (Aydin et al., 2021). More broadly, scholarship on professional ethics

emphasizes that teachers must exercise professional judgment when navigating ethical dilemmas involving competing values, fairness, and responsibilities in educational practice (Kristjánsson, 2024; Roos & Bagger, 2024). Mauss's theory of the gift provides an important foundation for understanding gift-giving as a socially embedded practice involving giving, receiving, and reciprocal obligations. Recent scholarship has revisited this framework by emphasizing that gift exchange involves not only reciprocity but also social relationships, mutual obligations, trust, and relational expectations. Jones (2025) demonstrates that the Maussian cycle of giving, receiving, and reciprocating can generate mutual obligations, trust, and respect, while also potentially producing unequal power relations. Vandenberghe (2025) further revisits the Maussian gift paradigm as an anti-utilitarian approach to social action, highlighting the symbolic and relational dimensions of exchange. Together, these perspectives suggest that gifts should not be understood merely as material expressions of gratitude, but as socially embedded practices that may generate reciprocal expectations, obligations, and relational consequences between givers and recipients (Jones, 2025; Mauss, 1990; Vandenberghe, 2025).

In Indonesia, gift-giving to teachers is closely associated with expressions of respect, gratitude, and social relationships. Such practices may become ethically problematic, however, when gifts create expectations of preferential treatment or influence teachers' professional judgment. Indonesian scholarship on teacher-student gift-giving highlights the importance of maintaining professional integrity and avoiding favoritism or unequal treatment in accepting gifts from students or parents (Arifin & Setiawan, 2024). More broadly, teacher professional ethics requires educators to maintain professional responsibility and ethical judgment in their interactions with students and other educational stakeholders (Permana et al., 2021).

Despite growing attention to teacher professionalism and educational integrity, existing research has generally examined professional ethics, reciprocity, and educational equity as separate domains. Research on teacher professional ethics emphasizes ethical awareness, professional responsibility, and appropriate professional conduct (Permana et al., 2021), while research on teachers' fairness behavior highlights the role of moral obligation in shaping teachers' responses toward students (Hong et al., 2022). Meanwhile, research on gift exchange often interprets gift-giving in terms of appreciation, reciprocity, and social relationships. Recent scholarship has further emphasized the importance of teacher professionalism, professional agency, ethical perception, and moral competencies in responding to the complex demands of educational practice (Lopes et al., 2024; Ribers et al., 2024). Consequently, the ethical boundary between culturally accepted appreciation and professionally consequential reciprocity remains insufficiently theorized, particularly in educational settings where informal social relationships coexist with professional responsibilities. This gap is especially significant in Indonesia, where culturally embedded practices of gratitude and reciprocity may intersect with teachers' professional authority and responsibilities toward students.

This study addresses that gap by conceptualizing teacher gift-giving as a relational ethical-boundary problem situated at the intersection of professionalism, reciprocity, and educational equity. Rather than treating gift-giving solely as a cultural practice or ethical dilemma, the study examines how reciprocal relationships interact with teachers' evaluative authority and shape perceptions of professional integrity and fairness. It proposes an empirically grounded relational ethical-boundary framework that explains how different relational configurations of gift exchange

generate varying implications for professional independence, impartiality, and educational equity. The framework distinguishes symbolic appreciation, relational reciprocity, and professionally consequential gift exchange, thereby clarifying the mechanisms through which culturally embedded reciprocal practices may create ethical boundary ambiguity and perceived fairness risks. By integrating theories of professionalism, trust, reciprocity, and social capital into a single analytical framework, the study moves beyond descriptive accounts of gift-giving and offers a theoretically integrated explanation of professional boundary ambiguity in culturally embedded educational contexts. This approach contributes to scholarship on educational ethics by explaining how reciprocal relationships can shape perceptions of fairness and professional integrity without assuming that gift exchange necessarily results in differential treatment or compromised professional judgment.

Accordingly, this study investigates a single bounded embedded qualitative case involving four private schools in Muara Bungo, Indonesia, with the four schools treated as embedded units of analysis rather than as separate cases. It aims to examine how gift-giving practices are understood and enacted within teacher–parent relationships, how they shape perceptions of professional integrity and fairness, and how ethical boundaries are negotiated within culturally embedded reciprocal relationships. The study contributes to scholarship on educational ethics by providing an empirically grounded relational framework for understanding professional boundary ambiguity and perceived fairness risks in culturally embedded educational contexts.

Method

This study employed a bounded qualitative embedded case study design. The case was defined as the practice of teacher gift-giving within private-school settings in Muara Bungo, Jambi Province, Indonesia, while the four participating schools functioned as embedded units of analysis rather than as four independent cases. An embedded case-study design is appropriate when a single bounded phenomenon is examined through multiple analytically relevant units that allow the researcher to explore variation within a shared contextual setting (Budiyanto et al., 2019; Yin, 2018). The purpose of including four schools was therefore not comparative case analysis, but analytical replication across different school contexts to strengthen the robustness of the emerging interpretations and identify recurring ethical patterns across organizational settings (Giamellaro et al., 2025).

The study was conducted in four private schools, comprising two elementary schools and two junior high schools. The schools were selected through purposive sampling to capture variation in educational level, organizational characteristics, and parent–school interaction patterns. One selection criterion was that the schools had experienced teacher gift-giving practices during occasions such as National Teacher’s Day, report-card distribution, grade promotion, or graduation ceremonies. This criterion was adopted to ensure access to information-rich cases in which participants had direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation. Importantly, the inclusion of schools where gift-giving was present did not assume that the practice was ethically problematic. To minimize confirmation bias, the study explicitly sought evidence of multiple and competing interpretations, including appreciation, reciprocity, ethical neutrality, professional concern, and perceived fairness risks. During data collection and analysis, attention was given to confirming, disconfirming, and contradictory accounts across principals, teachers, and parents. This strategy is consistent with contemporary qualitative case-study approaches that emphasize conceptual clarity, triangulation, and the examination of alternative explanations to enhance

analytical rigor (Budiyanto et al., 2019; Giamellaro et al., 2025).

Participant recruitment and saturation

Participant recruitment combined purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling was initially used to identify participants who met predefined inclusion criteria and were considered capable of providing information-rich and diverse perspectives on teacher gift-giving practices. This approach is widely recommended in qualitative research when participants possess direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation and can provide analytically relevant insights (Parker et al., 2019; Levitt et al., 2021). The final sample consisted of 16 participants: four school principals, six teachers, and six parents. Principals were selected because of their responsibility for school governance, ethical oversight, and school–parent relations. Teachers were required to have a minimum of three years of teaching experience and regular interaction with parents during report-card distribution, grade promotion, graduation, or comparable school events. Parents were selected because they had children in final or transitional grades or had direct experience with teacher gift-giving practices during school-related events.

Snowball sampling was subsequently used to identify additional participants with relevant experience. Recruitment began with school principals and teachers who met the initial eligibility criteria. After each interview, participants were asked to recommend other individuals who had direct knowledge of or involvement in gift-giving practices. Snowball sampling can be useful for accessing participants with relevant experiential knowledge through existing social or professional networks, particularly when potential participants are not readily identifiable through formal recruitment procedures (Alam, 2021; Parker et al., 2019). All referred individuals were screened against the same inclusion criteria before recruitment. Two referred individuals were not eligible because they had no direct experience with gift-giving during the relevant school events, and one eligible parent declined participation because of scheduling constraints. No participants withdrew after providing informed consent.

Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved across the combined sample of principals, teachers, and parents. Saturation was assessed through iterative coding during data collection and was considered reached when additional interviews no longer generated new codes, categories, or explanatory themes and primarily confirmed patterns that had already emerged. Specifically, the final three interviews did not produce substantively new interpretations regarding appreciation, reciprocity, professional boundaries, or perceived fairness risks. This approach is consistent with contemporary qualitative methodology, which conceptualizes saturation as the point at which additional data no longer contribute meaningful conceptual variation or theoretical insight relevant to the research questions (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Saunders et al., 2018). Saturation was evaluated across the integrated stakeholder sample because the embedded case design sought to develop a holistic understanding of the phenomenon through the interaction of multiple stakeholder perspectives rather than to construct separate subgroup theories. The transparent procedures for recruitment, screening, and saturation strengthen the credibility, dependability, and analytical rigor of the qualitative findings (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Saunders et al., 2018; Yin, 2018).

Participant identities were anonymized using role-based codes that were applied consistently throughout the manuscript. School principals were coded SC1–SC4, teachers HT1–HT6, and parents PC1–PC6.

Table 1. Participant profiles

Code	Stakeholder group	School Level	Experience	Selection rationale
SC1-SC4	School Principals	Elementary and Junior High School	5-18 years	Responsible for school governance, ethical oversight, and parent relations
HT1-HT6	Teachers	Elementary and Junior High School	3-15 years	Active teachers with direct interaction with parents during key school events
PC1-PC6	Parents	Elementary and Junior High School	Not applicable	Parents with direct experience of teacher gift-giving practices

Note. The study included 16 participants across four embedded school units. Role-based codes (SC = school principal, HT = teacher, PC = parent) were used consistently throughout the Results section to preserve confidentiality and ensure analytical traceability.

Data collection techniques

This study employed a bounded embedded qualitative case study design involving four private schools in Muara Bungo, Jambi Province, Indonesia. Data were collected between Mei and Desember 2025. The embedded case design enabled the investigation of teacher gift-giving through multiple stakeholder groups within a bounded institutional context, thereby facilitating a holistic understanding of ethical boundary negotiation across school leadership, teachers, and parents (Yin, 2018).

Data were collected using three complementary techniques: semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and document analysis. A total of 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted, with interview durations ranging from 45 to 75 minutes (average approximately 58 minutes). Interviews were distributed evenly across the four schools to ensure representation from each stakeholder group and institutional setting: School A (1 principal, 2 teachers, 1 parent), School B (1 principal, 1 teacher, 2 parents), School C (1 principal, 2 teachers, 1 parent), and School D (1 principal, 1 teacher, 2 parents). This distribution enabled cross-case comparison while preserving the embedded stakeholder structure of the research design.

In addition to interviews, the researcher conducted 12 non-participant observations, comprising three observations in each school. Each observation lasted between 60 and 120 minutes and focused on teacher–parent interactions during report-card distribution, school meetings, graduation preparation, Teacher’s Day activities, and other school events where gift-giving practices could be observed. Observation field notes documented interaction patterns, forms of gift exchange, participant responses, and the contextual conditions surrounding gift-giving practices.

Document analysis involved 24 institutional documents, including school regulations, parent communication materials, meeting records, event guidelines, graduation committee documents, teacher code-of-conduct materials, and administrative records related to school ceremonies and parent engagement. These documents were analyzed to triangulate interview and observational data, identify formal and informal institutional norms, and examine whether gift-giving practices were explicitly regulated or managed within school governance structures.

Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved across the combined sample of principals, teachers, and parents. Saturation was assessed through iterative coding during data collection and was considered reached when additional interviews no longer generated new codes,

categories, or explanatory themes and primarily confirmed patterns that had already emerged. Specifically, the final three interviews did not produce substantively new interpretations regarding appreciation, reciprocity, professional boundaries, or perceived fairness risks. This approach is consistent with contemporary qualitative methodology, which conceptualizes saturation as the point at which additional data no longer contribute meaningful conceptual variation or theoretical insight relevant to the research questions (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Saturation was evaluated across the integrated stakeholder sample because the embedded case design sought to develop a holistic understanding of the phenomenon through the interaction of multiple stakeholder perspectives rather than to construct separate subgroup theories.

Participant identities were anonymized using role-based codes that were applied consistently throughout the manuscript. School principals were coded SC1–SC4, teachers HT1–HT6, and parents PC1–PC6. All participants received written information about the study, provided informed consent prior to participation, and were assured that their identities and institutional affiliations would remain confidential. The transparent procedures for recruitment, screening, data collection, triangulation, and saturation strengthen the credibility, dependability, and analytical rigor of the qualitative findings (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Levitt et al., 2021; Yin, 2018).

Data analysis

Data analysis employed the interactive model of Miles et al. (2014), consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification, which were conducted iteratively throughout the research process. Analysis began concurrently with data collection, allowing emerging interpretations to inform subsequent interviews, observations, and documentary review. Interview transcripts, observation field notes, and documentary materials were analyzed as an integrated dataset within the embedded case-study framework. Contemporary qualitative research emphasizes that iterative analysis enhances analytical depth by enabling continuous comparison between data collection and interpretation (Saunders et al., 2018).

The first author served as the primary coder and conducted all stages of coding and thematic analysis. All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and repeatedly reviewed together with observation notes and documentary evidence to identify meaningful units relevant to the research objectives. An initial round of open coding generated descriptive codes representing participants' experiences, interpretations, and ethical concerns. Early codes included *gratitude*, *social obligation*, *reciprocity expectations*, *professional boundaries*, *perceived fairness*, *policy ambiguity*, *symbolic appreciation*, *material gifts*, *favoritism concerns*, and *teacher neutrality*. Open coding was conducted inductively to allow categories to emerge from the data while remaining informed by the study's conceptual framework (Oliveira, 2023; Saunders et al., 2018).

A codebook was developed during the initial coding stage and evolved iteratively through constant comparison across interviews, observations, and documents. Codes were refined, merged, split, or redefined as additional data were analyzed. For example, the initial code *gratitude* was differentiated into *symbolic appreciation* and *collective appreciation*, while *professional concern* was refined into *professional boundary ambiguity* and *fairness-related concerns*. The evolving codebook was documented through analytic memos, which recorded coding decisions, category revisions, emerging conceptual relationships, and reflections on alternative interpretations. Maintaining a documented codebook and analytic audit trail is increasingly recognized as a key strategy for enhancing transparency, consistency, and methodological rigor in qualitative thematic analysis

(Oliveira, 2023; Roberts et al., 2019).

To strengthen analytical credibility, peer debriefing was conducted with two qualitative researchers with expertise in educational ethics and qualitative methodology. They independently reviewed a subset of transcripts, the developing codebook, and the thematic categorization. Their feedback focused on the consistency of coding, the distinction between cultural reciprocity and ethical boundary concerns, and the interpretation of policy-related data. Disagreements were discussed until conceptual consensus was reached, and the codebook was revised accordingly. Recent qualitative methodology literature highlights peer debriefing and collaborative review as important mechanisms for reducing interpretive bias and improving the trustworthiness of thematic analysis (Sauder & Gilson, 2023; Saunders et al., 2018).

Member checking was conducted with six participants (two principals, two teachers, and two parents) after the preliminary thematic analysis had been completed. Participants received concise summaries of the preliminary interpretations and were invited to comment on whether the findings accurately represented their experiences and perspectives. Their feedback largely confirmed the interpretations while clarifying the distinction between symbolic appreciation and expectations of reciprocity. These clarifications were incorporated into the final thematic interpretation. Member checking was used to enhance the credibility of the findings and to ensure that the analytical interpretation remained closely aligned with participants' intended meanings (Roberts et al., 2019; Saunders et al., 2018).

The analysis also explicitly incorporated negative case analysis. Accounts that did not support the dominant interpretation were retained and examined systematically. Several participants emphasized that gifts were purely symbolic expressions of gratitude and had no influence on teacher decision-making. Rather than treating these accounts as exceptions to be discarded, they were used to refine the analysis by distinguishing perceived fairness risks from demonstrated changes in professional conduct. The inclusion of contradictory evidence strengthened the explanatory depth of the analysis and prevented the overstatement of causal claims. Examining divergent cases is widely recommended in contemporary thematic analysis because it challenges emerging interpretations and improves the robustness of qualitative explanations (Saunders et al., 2018).

During the data display stage, thematic matrices were constructed to compare codes across stakeholder groups (principals, teachers, and parents) and across the four embedded school units. The matrices mapped the convergence, divergence, and contextual conditions associated with each category and facilitated systematic comparison across interviews, observations, and documentary evidence. Matrix-based analysis enabled the researcher to identify recurring patterns while preserving contextual variation across schools and stakeholder groups (Miles et al., 2014).

Thematic matrices played a central role in generating the five final themes. Initial codes were first organized into higher-order conceptual categories, and relationships among categories were examined through repeated cross-case and cross-source comparison. Through iterative refinement, the analysis produced five analytically distinct but interconnected themes: (1) the social meaning of gift-giving, (2) ethical dilemmas in teacher professionalism, (3) perceptions of fairness and potential bias, (4) variations in school practices and policy ambiguity, and (5) the ethical-boundary typology of teacher gift-giving. These themes emerged from the convergence of interview, observation, and documentary evidence rather than from a single data source, consistent with contemporary approaches to thematic synthesis and qualitative pattern development (Oliveira, 2023; Saunders et

al., 2018).

Finally, conclusions were continuously verified through ongoing comparison of interview, observation, and documentary data. When alternative interpretations emerged, the researcher returned to the original transcripts, observation notes, and documents, re-examined the coding structure, and assessed whether the evidence supported, contradicted, or qualified the emerging themes. Triangulation across data sources, peer debriefing, member checking, negative case analysis, and the maintenance of an explicit coding audit trail enhanced the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings and ensured that the final interpretations remained grounded in the empirical evidence collected throughout the study (Sauder & Gilson, 2023; Saunders et al., 2018).

Result and Discussion

Result

The findings of this study address the main research objective, namely to analyze teacher gift-giving practices from the perspectives of teacher professionalism and educational equity. Based on thematic analysis of interview, observation, and documentary data, five main themes were identified: (1) the social meaning of gift-giving, (2) ethical dilemmas in teacher professionalism, (3) perceived fairness risks and concerns about potential bias in educational services, (4) variations in school practices and policy ambiguity, and (5) ethical boundaries of gift-giving within school governance.

The findings indicate that gift-giving was widely understood by participants as a culturally embedded form of appreciation and reciprocity. Across interviews, observations, and documentary evidence, participants consistently described gift-giving as a practice that strengthened social relationships between parents and teachers and reflected local norms of respect and gratitude. This was the primary observed finding across the three data sources.

Participants also expressed concerns that gift-giving might create perceptions of unfairness, expectations of reciprocity, or ambiguity regarding professional boundaries. These concerns represent participants' perceptions and anticipated risks rather than observed changes in teachers' professional conduct. Importantly, the data did not provide direct evidence that gift-giving resulted in differential treatment of students, changes in teachers' evaluative decisions, preferential academic outcomes, or systematic favoritism in educational services. Interview, observation, and documentary evidence did not demonstrate that teachers altered grades, classroom treatment, promotion decisions, or access to educational opportunities because of gifts received from parents. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as evidence of perceived fairness risks and ethical boundary ambiguity, not as evidence that gift-giving caused differential treatment or compromised professional judgment.

Gift-giving as a practice of collective reciprocity and social appreciation

The findings indicate that teacher gift-giving was predominantly understood as a collective practice of social appreciation embedded in reciprocal relationships within the school community. Across interviews and observations, participants consistently described gift-giving as a routine expression of gratitude and respect for teachers rather than as an individual strategy for obtaining educational advantages. The evidence suggests that the principal observed function of gift-giving was the maintenance of social relationships between parents and teachers during culturally significant school events. One parent explained:

"We give it as a form of gratitude, not to influence anything. It is already a habit." (PC-2)

This account suggests that gift-giving was generally perceived as a culturally accepted and collectively organized practice. Similar interpretations were expressed by teachers, who emphasized that gifts were typically coordinated at the class level and presented collectively during formal school occasions. One teacher stated:

“Every year there are always gifts during farewell events or at the end of the semester, usually organized collectively by the class.” (HT-1)

Another teacher added:

“It has become a habit among parents, especially at the end of the academic year and during farewell ceremonies.” (HT-2)

A third teacher further explained:

“Usually it is not from individuals, but collected from the whole class. So it is more like a shared memento.” (HT-3)

These interview data indicate that gift-giving was structured through class-based parental coordination rather than through individualized exchanges directed toward particular teachers. The collective organization of gifts suggests that reciprocity operated primarily as a shared social practice within the school community. This pattern was further confirmed by a homeroom teacher:

“Coordination is usually done through the parents’ group chat. They organize the contributions and decide the type of gift to be given.” (HT-1)

Field observations supported these accounts. Gift exchanges were observed during formal school activities, particularly farewell ceremonies and report-card distribution, and were typically organized through class parent groups or class committees. The gifts most commonly consisted of class hampers, food packages, parcels, flowers, and modest souvenirs representing the collective experiences of students within a class. In several instances, gifts were presented publicly in the presence of teachers, students, and parents, often accompanied by expressions of gratitude delivered by student representatives. A school committee member explained:

“Here, there is usually an automatic contribution for farewell gifts. Parents are already aware of it.” (SC-3)

Observation data indicate that the implementation pattern was relatively consistent across classes within the participating schools, with gift-giving occurring at similar points in the academic calendar and being organized collectively. No instances of individual gift-giving directed to specific teachers during routine instructional activities were observed. This distinction is important because the empirical evidence primarily documents collective symbolic exchanges rather than private individualized gift transactions.

Although participants acknowledged that the material value of gifts could vary across classes depending on parents’ economic capacity, these variations did not alter the collective character of the practice. As one parent noted:

“Sometimes some classes contribute more, so the gifts are also more substantial.” (PC-5)

Taken together, the interview and observation data indicate that teacher gift-giving functioned primarily as a collective practice of reciprocity and social appreciation embedded in routine school events. The findings show that gift-giving was organized through collective parental

participation and publicly enacted during formal school occasions, reinforcing its character as a shared symbolic expression of gratitude. At the same time, the findings do not provide evidence that this collective practice was intended to secure preferential educational treatment. Rather, the observed evidence indicates that gift-giving primarily served to express appreciation and maintain social relationships within the school community, thereby providing the foundation for the subsequent themes concerning professional dilemmas and perceived fairness risks.

Ethical dilemmas in negotiating professional boundaries

The findings indicate that teacher gift-giving created ethical dilemmas primarily related to the negotiation of professional boundaries within culturally embedded reciprocal relationships. Across interviews, teachers consistently described experiencing tension between their professional commitment to impartiality and their desire to maintain respectful relationships with parents. The dilemma was therefore not presented as evidence that gifts influenced professional decisions, but as a situation in which both accepting and refusing gifts carried social and professional consequences. One teacher explained:

"If I accept it, I am afraid I will be considered unprofessional; if I refuse it, I am afraid I will offend them." (HT-3)

Another teacher added:

"It is often a dilemma, because if we do not accept it, it may be seen as not respecting parents." (HT-4)

These accounts indicate that teachers perceived themselves as navigating competing normative expectations. Accepting gifts could create concerns about professional integrity and public perception, whereas refusing gifts could be interpreted as rejecting parents' expressions of gratitude and violating local norms of politeness and reciprocity.

School leaders expressed similar concerns regarding the management of professional boundaries. One principal stated:

"This practice can create conflicts of interest if it is not handled carefully." (SC-2)

Another principal explained:

"We usually only remind teachers to maintain boundaries, because there are no specific written regulations." (SC-3)

These interviews suggest that school leaders recognized the potential ethical sensitivity of gift-giving practices, but participants consistently reported that formal written policies governing gift acceptance were generally absent in the participating schools. As a result, teachers relied largely on informal norms, professional judgment, and situational considerations when responding to gift-giving practices.

Parents also described gift-giving as a socially expected practice. One parent explained:

"We usually just follow it; it has always been done during farewells." (PC-3)

Another parent stated:

"If we do not participate, we sometimes feel uncomfortable because it has already become a class tradition." (PC-5)

These accounts suggest that gift-giving was embedded within collective social expectations,

and participation was often influenced by a desire to conform to established class-level practices rather than by explicit attempts to obtain educational advantages.

Observation data supported the interpretation that gift-giving was primarily organized collectively during formal school events, including the end of the semester, report-card distribution, National Teacher's Day, and student farewell ceremonies. Gifts were typically coordinated through class-based parent groups or parent committees and were presented openly during school activities. As one class committee member explained:

"Usually there is already an agreement in the group, so all parents contribute collectively." (PC-1)

The observed evidence indicates that gift-giving occurred within recurring institutionalized school routines and collective parental coordination mechanisms. Observation also documented frequent communication between teachers and some parents regarding school activities and students' academic development. However, the observations did not provide evidence that these communication patterns resulted in preferential academic treatment, differential assessment practices, or unequal educational services.

A teacher summarized the practical implications of the absence of formal guidance:

"So far, there is no written regulation, so we just adjust to the situation in the field." (HT-2)

Taken together, the interview and observation data indicate that the principal ethical dilemma concerned professional boundary ambiguity rather than demonstrated professional misconduct. Teachers were required to balance professional impartiality with culturally valued reciprocal relationships in the absence of clear institutional guidance. The findings therefore suggest that ethical uncertainty emerged primarily from policy ambiguity and competing social expectations, providing an important foundation for understanding the subsequent theme concerning perceived fairness risks.

Perceived fairness risks and concerns about potential bias in educational services

The findings indicate that gift-giving practices were associated with perceptions of fairness risk among some participants rather than with documented evidence of differential treatment. Across interviews, observations, and documentary data, no direct evidence was found that teachers changed their evaluative decisions, classroom treatment, assessment practices, or educational services because of gifts received from parents. Instead, several parents expressed concerns that gift-giving could create perceptions of preferential attention, even when they acknowledged that such differential treatment had not been observed.

One parent stated:

"There is a concern that those who give more may receive more attention." (PC-4)

Another parent added:

"Even though it may not be true, there is still a feeling of unease that children whose parents frequently give gifts might be treated differently." (PC-6)

These accounts indicate that parents' concerns were primarily based on perceived possibilities rather than on observed evidence of favoritism. The interview data suggest that gift-giving could generate psychological unease and uncertainty regarding fairness, particularly in situations where personal relationships between parents and teachers were perceived to be closer

than usual.

Teachers consistently emphasized their commitment to equal treatment. One teacher stated:

"We treat all students equally; there is no difference even if gifts are given." (HT-2)

Another teacher explained:

"There is no special treatment; all students are still served according to their learning needs." (HT-3)

Similarly, a school principal stated:

"We always emphasize to teachers the importance of remaining professional and not discriminating between students." (SC-2)

Observation data documented both formal interactions (parent meetings, report-card distribution, and school activities) and informal interactions (messaging applications, class group chats, and direct conversations during student drop-off and pick-up). Some parents were observed to communicate with teachers more frequently and to participate more actively in class-related activities and discussions concerning their children's academic development. As one homeroom teacher explained:

"There are indeed parents who are more active in communication, so they appear to interact more frequently with teachers." (HT-2)

These observations provide evidence of variation in communication intensity between teachers and parents. However, they do not demonstrate that teachers provided preferential academic treatment, different assessment practices, or unequal educational services to students whose parents communicated more frequently or participated more actively in school activities.

Taken together, the interview and observation data suggest that gift-giving practices may become associated with perceived fairness risks because they occur within broader patterns of social interaction and reciprocity between teachers and parents. The findings indicate that concerns about potential bias were rooted primarily in participants' interpretations of relational closeness and reciprocal expectations rather than in observed evidence of differential treatment. Consequently, this theme supports an interpretation of perceived fairness risk and professional boundary ambiguity, not demonstrated favoritism or actual inequity in educational services.

Variations in school practices and policy ambiguity

The findings indicate that teacher gift-giving practices were implemented through varying school-level practices in the absence of explicit formal regulation. Across interviews, observations, and document analysis, participants consistently described differences in the form, timing, coordination mechanisms, and material value of gifts, while formal written policies governing gift acceptance were generally absent. The observed variation was therefore associated primarily with policy ambiguity and local school practices, rather than with standardized institutional procedures.

School leaders acknowledged that gift-giving practices were generally managed through informal guidance rather than detailed written regulations. One principal stated:

"We only provide guidance not to be excessive; there is no written regulation yet." (SC-1)

This account suggests that school responses to gift-giving were largely based on general normative expectations rather than formally codified rules. Document analysis supported this finding. The reviewed teachers' codes of ethics, school regulations, and administrative documents

did not contain specific provisions concerning the acceptance of gifts from parents. No explicit guidelines regarding acceptable forms of gifts, gift value thresholds, reporting procedures, or mechanisms for accepting or declining gifts were identified in the available documents.

Teachers similarly emphasized that gift-giving practices were generally governed by established school traditions and situational judgment. One teacher explained:

“So far, there has never been any strict regulation; we usually just follow the existing habits in the school.” (HT-3)

Another teacher added:

“We simply adjust to the school traditions because there are no specific guidelines.” (HT-4)

These accounts indicate that teachers relied primarily on informal norms and contextual judgment when responding to gift-giving practices.

Parents also described gift-giving as a socially normalized practice organized through collective class-level coordination. One parent stated:

“In our school, it is already common to give gifts during farewell events, so it has never been considered a problem.” (PC-3)

Another parent explained:

“Usually there is already an agreement in the class group, so everyone just follows it.” (PC-5)

Observation data documented variation in contribution amounts, gift types, and coordination mechanisms across schools and across classes within the same school. In some classes, contributions were formally organized through class committees, whereas in others they were coordinated informally through parent communication groups. The gifts most commonly included class hampers, food packages, parcels, flowers, and modest souvenirs, but their material value varied depending on class-level agreements and parents' economic capacity.

Importantly, the observed variation concerned how gift-giving was organized, not evidence of differential educational treatment. Observation data documented differences in collective fundraising practices and gift presentation procedures, but they did not demonstrate that schools applied different standards of academic assessment, classroom treatment, or educational services based on the value or form of gifts. The variation therefore reflects differences in collective organizational practices rather than evidence of preferential treatment.

Across the participating schools, no standardized procedures were identified regarding how teachers should formally accept, decline, record, or report gifts. As a result, gift-giving practices were managed primarily through informal school traditions, collective parental agreements, and individual professional judgment. Taken together, the interview, observation, and documentary evidence indicate that the principal empirical finding is policy ambiguity rather than policy failure. The findings show that schools operated with relatively consistent collective gift-giving practices but without detailed institutional guidance specifying professional boundaries, thereby contributing to the ethical ambiguity identified in the preceding themes.

A relational ethical-boundary typology of teacher gift-giving

The findings support the development of a relational ethical-boundary typology of teacher gift-giving. Rather than classifying gifts solely according to their material form, the typology distinguishes

gift-giving practices according to their relational configuration, degree of personalization, and implications for professional boundary ambiguity and perceived fairness risks. The typology was developed through iterative comparison of interview, observation, and documentary data across the four participating schools and represents an analytical interpretation of the observed patterns rather than a formal classification used by the schools.

Interview data indicate that symbolic and collective gift-giving constituted the most common pattern across the participating schools. Teachers consistently described gifts as class-based expressions of appreciation organized collectively during farewell ceremonies, the end of the academic year, and National Teacher's Day celebrations. One teacher explained:

"Usually, the gifts from the class are in the form of hampers, not individual gifts." (HT-1)

Another teacher added:

"Personal gifts are rare; most parents contribute collectively as one class." (HT-2)

Parents similarly described gift-giving as a collective practice based on class-level agreement:

"We usually just contribute together to buy gifts for farewell events or Teacher's Day." (PC-2)

Observation data confirmed that symbolic gifts such as greeting cards, flowers, modest hampers, and small souvenirs were typically organized through class parent groups and presented publicly during formal school activities. These gifts were collective in organization, transparent in implementation, and generally understood as expressions of appreciation rather than individualized reciprocal exchanges.

A second pattern involved collective reciprocal appreciation, in which gifts remained collectively organized but reflected stronger reciprocal relationships between parents and teachers through coordinated fundraising, class committee involvement, and repeated participation across school events. Although these practices were generally viewed as socially appropriate, they created greater professional boundary ambiguity because teachers were expected to respond appropriately to parents' collective expressions of gratitude while maintaining professional impartiality.

A third pattern involved personal relational gifts, which were reported less frequently and were generally associated with more individualized interactions between particular parents and teachers. Observation and interview data suggest that these exchanges were uncommon and non-routine. Their ethical significance did not arise primarily from the existence of the gifts themselves, but from their greater degree of personalization and relational exclusivity compared with collective class-based gifts.

A fourth pattern involved higher-value personalized gifts, which participants described as relatively uncommon and typically less visible within formal school settings. Observation data did not document frequent public presentation of high-value gifts during routine school activities. When discussed in interviews, these gifts were generally considered more ethically sensitive because they could create stronger perceptions of reciprocal obligation and greater ambiguity regarding professional independence, even though the study found no direct evidence that such gifts altered teachers' evaluative decisions, classroom treatment, or educational services.

Across these four patterns, the findings indicate that the ethical significance of gift-giving was shaped primarily by the relational configuration of the exchange rather than by gift-giving itself. As gifts became more personalized, exclusive, and less collectively organized, participants perceived

greater potential for professional boundary ambiguity and fairness concerns. Conversely, symbolic and collective gifts were generally interpreted as public expressions of appreciation embedded in routine school traditions and collective parental participation.

Based on these patterns, the proposed relational ethical-boundary typology consists of four categories: (1) symbolic collective appreciation, (2) collective reciprocal appreciation, (3) personal relational gifts, and (4) higher-value personalized gifts. The categories differ in their degree of personalization, relational exclusivity, and perceived ethical sensitivity rather than in any demonstrated effect on teachers' professional conduct. Importantly, the typology should be interpreted as an analytical framework for understanding professional boundary ambiguity and perceived fairness risks, not as evidence that different forms of gift-giving resulted in favoritism, differential treatment, or compromised professional judgment.

Overall, the typology integrates the findings of the preceding themes by showing that teacher gift-giving operates along a continuum of relational boundary ambiguity. The central empirical finding is therefore not that gift-giving changed teachers' professional decisions, but that different relational configurations of gift exchange generated different levels of perceived ethical sensitivity, professional boundary ambiguity, and fairness-related concern within culturally embedded school relationships.

Discussion

The present study examined teacher gift-giving as an ethical and relational practice situated at the intersection of cultural reciprocity, professional judgment, parent-teacher relationships, and educational fairness. Across the four participating private schools in Muara Bungo, gifts were predominantly organized collectively through parent groups or class committees and were commonly presented during formal occasions such as farewell events, report-card distribution, and National Teacher's Day. Participants generally understood these exchanges as expressions of gratitude and social appreciation rather than attempts to secure preferential treatment. Nevertheless, the findings demonstrate that the ethical significance of gift-giving cannot be determined solely by monetary value. Instead, ethical sensitivity increased as exchanges became more personalized, private, relationally exclusive, or suggestive of reciprocal expectation. Importantly, interviews, observations, and documents provided no direct evidence that gifts changed grades, classroom treatment, promotion decisions, or access to educational opportunities. Thus, the study identifies professional boundary ambiguity and perceived fairness risks, rather than demonstrated favoritism, as the central ethical problem. The empirically derived typology—symbolic collective appreciation, collective reciprocal appreciation, personal relational gifts, and higher-value personalized gifts further shows that the relational configuration of an exchange is crucial for understanding its ethical sensitivity.

The findings both converge with and qualify previous international research on gifts in educational settings. Aydın et al. (2021), in a qualitative study involving teachers, administrators, and parents in Türkiye, found that school gift culture could undermine teacher objectivity and equal treatment. Their findings provide one of the closest empirical comparisons to the present study. However, the Muara Bungo evidence does not demonstrate equivalent behavioral consequences. One plausible explanation concerns the configuration of the exchange. In the present study, many gifts were publicly presented, collectively financed, and associated with formal school occasions, whereas ethical risk increased primarily when exchanges became individualized and relationally exclusive.

This distinction suggests that gift-giving should not be treated as an ethically homogeneous category. The relevant questions are who gives, who receives, whether the exchange is collective or individualized, its timing, visibility, value, and whether subsequent expectations are created.

This interpretation is consistent with wider scholarship on reciprocity. Mauss's foundational conception of gift exchange emphasizes that giving, receiving, and reciprocating establish social obligations rather than constituting purely material transactions. More recent experimental evidence similarly demonstrates that gifts may generate expectations and influence reciprocal behavior. Kandul et al. (2023), for example, showed in credence-goods markets that gifts could alter expert sellers' behavior, particularly when recipients expected reciprocity. Dhami et al. (2023) likewise found that gift-exchange behavior cannot be explained solely through material incentives because beliefs and reciprocal expectations also matter. These studies are not educational studies and therefore cannot establish that parent gifts influence teachers. Nevertheless, they reinforce the theoretical importance of examining expectations embedded within exchange relationships. The absence of demonstrable favoritism in the current study should therefore not be interpreted as meaning that relational expectations are ethically irrelevant; instead, the findings suggest that teachers actively negotiate such expectations through professional judgment.

The results also align closely with contemporary accounts of teacher professionalism as an exercise in situated ethical judgment. Kristjánsson (2024) conceptualizes *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, as central to teachers' professional ethics because practitioners routinely encounter circumstances in which abstract rules are insufficient to determine the appropriate action. Roos and Bagger (2024) similarly demonstrate that questions of equity generate ethical dilemmas requiring professional judgment rather than mechanical rule application. Ribers et al. (2024) further emphasize that professional ethical competence develops through reflective collaboration and situated practice, while Lopes et al. (2024) conceptualize teacher professionalism as extending beyond technical performance toward relational, transformative, and socially responsible practice. These perspectives illuminate why teachers in the present study could experience discomfort whether they accepted or rejected gifts: accepting might raise concerns about impartiality, whereas rejection could violate culturally embedded expectations of respect and reciprocity.

The findings further extend professional-boundary research. Andersson and Hedström (2024) found that education professionals frequently negotiate rather than simply obey fixed boundaries between their professional and personal roles; when institutional policies are weak or absent, individuals develop situational strategies for managing potentially ambiguous relationships. Although their study concerned social technologies rather than gift exchange, its boundary-work perspective closely parallels the present evidence. Teachers in Muara Bungo similarly relied on professional discretion, informal school traditions, and interpersonal judgment because explicit written rules concerning gifts were generally unavailable. Hordern (2026) likewise argues that professionalism requires professional knowledge and jurisdiction over complex problems rather than simple procedural compliance. Accordingly, institutional guidance should reduce uncertainty without eliminating the contextual professional judgment required in culturally embedded relationships.

Parent-teacher relationship scholarship provides an additional interpretive layer. Wheeler et al. (2024) demonstrate that parents and teachers may perceive the quality of the same relationship differently, including discrepancies in communication and relational closeness. Keengwe and

Onchwari (2024) similarly underscore the importance of communication, trust, and mutually intelligible expectations in family–school relationships. These findings are particularly relevant because ethical risk in the present study often emerged through interpretation: a relationship viewed by teachers and certain parents as ordinary gratitude could be perceived by other stakeholders as excessive closeness or preferential access. Therefore, educational fairness encompasses not only actual impartiality but also the intelligibility and transparency of professional relationships to observers.

The distinction between perceived and demonstrated favoritism is especially important when considered against empirical favoritism research. Tsai (2022) found that teacher favoritism can affect dimensions of teacher–student treatment, although evidence regarding effects on achievement was comparatively weaker. Schuchart et al. (2021) likewise showed that in-group and out-group preferences can shape disciplinary judgments. Such studies demonstrate why concerns about favoritism should not be dismissed. At the same time, they reinforce the methodological need to distinguish actual preferential behavior from the appearance or perceived possibility of preference. The present data support the latter but not the former. It would therefore be analytically inappropriate to infer inequitable educational outcomes solely from the existence of parent–teacher gifts.

The Indonesian context adds an important ethical and cultural dimension. Arifin and Setiawan (2024), examining an Indonesian fatwa concerning gifts from students and parents to teachers, concluded that such gifts may be permissible when sincerely offered without coercion or expectation of preferential treatment but become ethically problematic when they influence decisions, facilitate favoritism, or contribute to inequality. This distinction strongly parallels the current findings: collective symbolic appreciation was generally regarded as socially legitimate, whereas individualized, higher-value, and reciprocity-laden exchanges produced greater ethical concern. The convergence is notable because both perspectives shift ethical assessment away from a blanket prohibition toward examination of motive, relational context, influence, and fairness.

Indonesian evidence regarding parent–teacher relationships also supports the importance of relational context. Sipayung and Cheng, studying Indonesian kindergartens, found generally favorable parental trust and communication toward teachers and emphasized partnership and participation as important components of family–school relationships. Meanwhile, research on professional ethics among Indonesian elementary teachers indicates that professional conduct encompasses responsibility, fairness, integrity, and appropriate professional relationships. These findings help explain why gift exchange may carry a dual meaning in Indonesian schools: it can strengthen relational appreciation while simultaneously producing anxiety concerning impartiality.

One relevant study located through the Muhammad Sufian research profile also strengthens the institutional dimension of the argument. Rokhman et al., including Muhammad Sufian as co-author, developed an academic-supervision model emphasizing systematic guidance and continuing professional development. Although that research does not investigate gift-giving, it is relevant to the present policy problem because it demonstrates the importance of structured institutional guidance in supporting teacher professionalism. Applied cautiously to the present findings, the implication is that ethical boundary dilemmas should not be left entirely to individual teacher discretion; schools can incorporate discussion of relational ethics, conflicts of interest, and gift acceptance into supervision and professional-development mechanisms.

Theoretically, the study extends reciprocity theory by demonstrating that the ethical meaning of a gift in education depends on the interaction among reciprocity, relational proximity, professional authority, institutional rules, and perceived fairness rather than on material value alone. It also complements professional-judgment perspectives by showing that teachers must reconcile culturally meaningful relationships with obligations of impartiality, thereby positioning gift-giving as a form of relational ethical-boundary work (Kristjánsson, 2024; Roos & Bagger, 2024). Pedagogically, transparent professional relationships can contribute to a classroom climate in which students and parents perceive assessment and access to teacher attention as fair; however, the present study did not directly measure student engagement, emotional well-being, media literacy, online behavior, or identity formation, and those outcomes should therefore not be claimed. Practically, schools could establish clear but context-sensitive protocols differentiating low-value collective appreciation from individualized or higher-value gifts, encourage disclosure where uncertainty exists, provide teachers with a consultation pathway, and communicate expectations to parents before ceremonial occasions. At the policy level, ethical leadership and institutional clarity are especially important because research indicates that ethical school leadership is strongly associated with organizational justice and trust (Özdoğru & Sarier, 2024). Professional supervision can further provide a structured mechanism for discussing ethically ambiguous cases rather than relying entirely on informal precedent.

The novelty of this study lies in moving beyond the binary question of whether teacher gifts are “acceptable” or “unethical” and instead developing an empirically grounded relational ethical-boundary typology. The four-category model identifies increasing ethical sensitivity according to collective versus individualized organization, relational proximity, visibility, material value, and perceived reciprocity expectation. Importantly, the model distinguishes ethical sensitivity from demonstrated misconduct: even higher-sensitivity exchanges are not treated as proof that teachers altered professional decisions. This distinction advances international literature because earlier teacher gift research has emphasized possible consequences for objectivity, whereas the present study identifies conditions under which ethical ambiguity arises even without observable differential treatment. Methodologically, triangulation of interviews, observations, and documentary evidence also enables the study to differentiate participants’ perceptions of favoritism from actual evidence available within the case. The contribution is therefore not a causal claim that gifts produce inequality, but a relational framework explaining when gift practices become professionally difficult to interpret and why institutional clarity matters.

Several limitations delimit these conclusions. The research involved four purposively selected private schools in Muara Bungo, making the relational ethical-boundary typology analytically transferable rather than statistically generalizable. Gift-giving is also socially sensitive, so interviews may be affected by social-desirability bias, particularly when participants discuss impartiality or professional integrity. Furthermore, observations and documents cannot establish whether subtle forms of preferential attention occurred outside the periods observed, and the study did not experimentally or longitudinally test whether receiving gifts subsequently altered teacher judgment. Future research should therefore compare public and private schools, urban and rural contexts, and regions with different reciprocal traditions; incorporate longitudinal observation and vignette experiments; examine teacher, parent, student, and school-leader perspectives; and test whether gift value, timing, privacy, personalization, and relational proximity systematically change perceptions

of fairness. The proposed typology should also be validated across larger samples and cultural settings before it is treated as a general model of teacher gift-giving ethics.

Conclusion

This study examined teacher gift-giving practices through the perspectives of teacher professionalism and educational equity. The findings indicate that gift-giving functioned primarily as a culturally embedded practice of collective reciprocity and social appreciation, while simultaneously creating professional boundary ambiguity and perceived fairness risks within teacher-parent relationships. Importantly, the study found no direct evidence that gift-giving altered teachers' evaluative decisions, classroom treatment, or educational services. The central empirical contribution therefore lies in demonstrating that the ethical significance of gift-giving is shaped primarily by the relational configuration of the exchange and the institutional context in which it occurs, rather than by the material value of gifts alone. The proposed relational ethical-boundary typology provides an empirically grounded framework for understanding how different forms of gift exchange generate different levels of professional boundary ambiguity and perceived ethical sensitivity.

The findings suggest that schools may benefit from clearer institutional guidance regarding professional boundaries in teacher-parent gift-giving practices, particularly where policy ambiguity leaves teachers to rely primarily on informal norms and individual professional judgment. These implications should be interpreted cautiously because the study supports perceived fairness risks and institutional ambiguity rather than causal evidence that gift-giving changed teacher decisions. The study was limited to four private schools in Muara Bungo and primarily reflects the perspectives of principals, teachers, and parents. Future research should examine more diverse educational contexts, including public schools and different socio-cultural settings, and incorporate students' perspectives to further evaluate the transferability of the proposed relational ethical-boundary framework.

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