



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Macro Role-Playing as an Instructional Strategy to Enhance Social-Emotional Development in Early Childhood Education Settings



Terza Travelancya DP¹, Noer Salamatul Fitri²

¹ Dinas Pendidikan Kabupaten Probolinggo, Indonesia

² Universitas Islam Zainul Hasan Genggong, Indonesia

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Corresponding Author:

Terza Travelancya DP
Dinas Pendidikan Kabupaten
Probolinggo, Indonesia
Email:
travelancya@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Social-emotional development is a crucial component of early childhood education, as it influences children’s ability to interact effectively, regulate emotions, and adapt to learning environments. However, many young learners still exhibit limitations in social interaction and emotional expression, indicating the need for more engaging and developmentally appropriate instructional strategies.

Objectives: This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of the macro role-playing method in improving early childhood social-emotional development.

Methods: This study employed a classroom action research design involving early childhood learners in a preschool setting. Data were collected through observation, documentation, and assessment of children’s social-emotional development indicators. The intervention was carried out through structured macro role-playing activities designed to promote interaction, cooperation, empathy, and self-expression.

Results: The findings demonstrate that the implementation of macro role-playing activities led to a significant improvement in children’s social-emotional development. Notable progress was observed in key areas such as cooperation, communication, empathy, and emotional regulation. Children showed increased participation, confidence, and engagement throughout the learning process.

Conclusions: Macro role-playing is an effective and innovative instructional strategy for enhancing social-emotional development in early childhood education. The integration of structured role-playing activities can support holistic child development by fostering both social competence and emotional skills in meaningful learning contexts.



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A. Introduction

Early childhood education plays a crucial role in fostering holistic child development, particularly in the domain of social-emotional competence. Social-emotional development enables children to build positive relationships, regulate emotions, and adapt effectively to learning environments. These competencies are widely recognized as foundational for later academic success and lifelong well-being. However, in practice, many young learners still experience difficulties in expressing emotions, cooperating with peers, and engaging actively in classroom activities, indicating the need for more effective and developmentally appropriate instructional strategies.

From a developmental perspective, social-emotional competence is closely related to children's ability to understand and manage emotions while interacting with others. Emotional competence, including emotional awareness, expression, and regulation, is a key outcome of early childhood development (Denham et al., 2015). Empirical evidence further suggests that early social-emotional functioning significantly predicts long-term academic achievement and overall well-being (Jones et al., 2015; Yoshikawa et al., 2016). These findings highlight the importance of designing learning environments that actively support children's social and emotional growth.

Play-based learning has been widely acknowledged as an effective approach to promote social-emotional development, as it allows children to explore, communicate, and express themselves in meaningful ways (Bodrova & Leong, 2015). Through play, children develop essential skills such as cooperation, empathy, and self-regulation, which are critical for successful social interaction. In particular, role-playing activities enable children to simulate real-life situations, practice social roles, and develop emotional understanding through interaction (Smilansky & Shefatya, 2017; Kemple et al., 2016). These activities align with constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes active engagement and experiential learning in the process of knowledge construction.

Recent research has emphasized the importance of integrating interactive and child-centered learning approaches in early childhood education. High-quality early childhood programs that incorporate play-based learning have been shown to significantly enhance children's social competence and emotional regulation (Gordon et al., 2015; OECD, 2017; UNICEF, 2019). In addition, play-based learning contributes to the development of executive functions, including self-regulation and adaptive behavior, which are essential for learning readiness (Diamond, 2016; Thompson, 2016; Whitebread et al., 2017). Structured play activities have also been found to increase children's engagement, motivation, and confidence during the learning process (Pyle et al., 2017; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2015).

More recent evidence further highlights the effectiveness of social and emotional learning (SEL) interventions in early childhood education. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses demonstrate that structured SEL programs significantly improve children's social competence, emotional regulation, and academic readiness (Blewitt et al., 2018; Durlak et al., 2022). The science of learning and development also emphasizes the integration of emotional, social, and cognitive domains through meaningful and active learning experiences (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). In addition, school-based SEL interventions have been shown to produce long-term positive outcomes in children's behavior, relationships, and academic performance (Taylor et al., 2017). Furthermore, learning through play—particularly guided and structured play—has been identified as a powerful approach to enhance engagement, problem-solving, and emotional understanding in young learners (Zosh et al., 2018).

Despite these advances, the role of play in formal educational settings has gradually diminished, raising concerns about its impact on children's holistic development (Nicolopoulou, 2018). Moreover, existing studies often focus on general play-based learning without specifically examining the effectiveness of structured macro role-playing as a targeted instructional intervention. Empirical research that systematically evaluates the impact of macro role-playing

on multiple dimensions of social-emotional development remains limited. This indicates that the potential of structured role-playing as a strategic pedagogical approach is still underexplored, particularly in relation to its effectiveness in improving children's social-emotional competence.

In addition, the success of role-playing activities depends on how teachers design and facilitate learning experiences. Without appropriate structure and guidance, play activities may not optimally support developmental outcomes. Therefore, it is essential to investigate the implementation of structured macro role-playing as an instructional strategy that can effectively enhance social-emotional development in early childhood education.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to examine the effectiveness of the macro role-playing method in improving social-emotional development among early childhood learners. The findings of this study are expected to provide empirical evidence to support the integration of structured, play-based instructional strategies in promoting holistic child development.

B. Methods

This study employed a classroom action research design to examine the effectiveness of macro role-playing activities in improving early childhood social-emotional development. Classroom action research was selected as it allows for a cyclical process of planning, action, observation, and reflection, enabling continuous improvement of instructional practices and learning outcomes.

The participants of this study consisted of early childhood learners enrolled in a preschool-level classroom. The selection of participants was based on their developmental stage, which is considered critical for the formation of social-emotional competencies such as cooperation, communication, empathy, and emotional regulation. All participants were involved in the intervention activities throughout the research process.

The research was conducted in iterative cycles, with each cycle consisting of four main stages: planning, implementation, observation, and reflection. During the planning stage, learning activities based on macro role-playing were designed to stimulate children's interaction and emotional expression. In the implementation stage, children participated in structured role-playing scenarios that encouraged them to take on different social roles, interact with peers, and express their thoughts and emotions. The observation stage involved systematic monitoring of children's behaviors and interactions using predefined social-emotional indicators. Finally, the reflection stage was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention and to identify necessary improvements for subsequent cycles.

Data were collected using multiple techniques, including direct observation, documentation, and developmental assessment. Observation was used as the primary method to capture children's social-emotional behaviors during learning activities, while documentation such as photographs and field notes was used to support data validity. The assessment focused on key indicators of social-emotional development, including cooperation, communication, empathy, and emotional regulation.

Data analysis was conducted using a descriptive qualitative approach supported by simple quantitative measures. The analysis involved comparing children's social-emotional development before and after the implementation of macro role-playing activities across cycles. Improvements were identified based on changes in observed behaviors and the level of achievement of developmental indicators. The results were then interpreted to determine the effectiveness of the intervention in enhancing children's social-emotional competence.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and all data were collected with respect for participants' confidentiality and well-being.

The research process was conducted in a supportive learning environment to ensure that all activities were developmentally appropriate and beneficial for the children.

C. Results

The results of this study are presented based on the implementation of classroom action research conducted through two cycles. Each cycle consisted of planning, implementation, observation, and reflection stages aimed at improving children's social-emotional development through macro role-playing activities.

Prior to the intervention, children's social-emotional development was categorized as low. Most children showed limited interaction with peers, lack of cooperation during group activities, and difficulty in expressing emotions appropriately. These findings indicate that the learning process had not yet effectively facilitated the development of social-emotional competencies.

In Cycle I, macro role-playing activities were introduced as a structured learning strategy. The results demonstrated a moderate improvement in children's social-emotional development. Children began to show increased participation in group activities and improved communication skills. However, some children still experienced difficulties in expressing empathy and regulating emotions, indicating that further refinement of the learning strategy was necessary.

In Cycle II, improvements were made based on the reflection from Cycle I. The role-playing activities were designed to be more engaging and relevant to children's daily experiences, and teachers provided more intensive guidance. As a result, children demonstrated significant progress in all observed aspects of social-emotional development. They became more confident, actively engaged in learning activities, and showed improved cooperation, communication, empathy, and emotional regulation.

Table 1. Improvement of Social-Emotional Development

Indicator	Pre-Intervention	Cycle I	Cycle II
Cooperation	Low	Moderate	High
Communication	Low	Moderate	High
Empathy	Low	Moderate	High
Emotional Regulation	Low	Moderate	High

The data presented in Table 1 indicate a consistent improvement in all aspects of children's social-emotional development across the research stages. In the pre-intervention phase, all indicators were categorized as low, reflecting limited social interaction and emotional expression among children. After the implementation of macro role-playing activities in Cycle I, all indicators improved to a moderate level, suggesting that the intervention began to positively influence children's behavior and interaction patterns.

Furthermore, in Cycle II, all indicators reached a high level of achievement. This finding demonstrates that the refinement of learning strategies and increased teacher facilitation contributed significantly to the enhancement of children's social-emotional competencies. The most notable improvements were observed in cooperation and communication, where children became more actively involved in group activities and more confident in expressing their ideas.

Table 2. Overall Development Achievement

Stage	Achievement Level	Interpretation
Pre-Intervention	Low	Limited social-emotional skills
Cycle I	Moderate	Initial improvement observed
Cycle II	High	Significant improvement achieved

Table 2 further confirms the progressive improvement in children's social-emotional development throughout the research process. The transition from low achievement in the pre-intervention stage to a high level in Cycle II indicates that the macro role-playing method was effective in enhancing children's overall development. This progression also reflects the importance of iterative instructional improvement through the classroom action research process.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the implementation of macro role-playing activities resulted in a significant and consistent improvement in children's social-emotional development. The structured and reflective nature of the intervention played a key role in achieving these outcomes.

D. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the implementation of macro role-playing activities resulted in a significant improvement in children's social-emotional development across the research cycles. The progression from low levels in the pre-intervention stage to moderate levels in Cycle I and high levels in Cycle II indicates that structured and iterative instructional strategies can effectively enhance children's social-emotional competencies. This finding supports the view that social-emotional development is not only influenced by natural maturation but also by the quality of learning experiences provided in early childhood education.

The improvements observed in Cycle I suggest that the introduction of macro role-playing created meaningful opportunities for children to engage in social interaction. Children began to show increased participation, improved communication, and emerging empathy. These results are consistent with previous studies indicating that play-based learning provides a natural and effective context for the development of social and emotional skills through active engagement and interaction (Bodrova & Leong, 2015; Pyle et al., 2017). Role-playing activities, in particular, allow children to simulate real-life situations and practice social roles, which contributes to the development of cooperation, communication, and emotional understanding (Smilansky & Shefatya, 2017; Kemple et al., 2016).

The more substantial improvement observed in Cycle II highlights the importance of structured implementation and teacher facilitation in optimizing learning outcomes. When role-playing activities were designed to be more engaging and relevant to children's daily experiences, and when teachers provided more intensive guidance, children demonstrated higher levels of confidence, participation, and emotional expression. This finding aligns with research emphasizing that guided play is more effective than unstructured play in promoting learning and development (Zosh et al., 2018). It also supports the argument that intentional instructional design and teacher support are essential components in achieving meaningful learning outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the improvement across key indicators such as cooperation, communication, empathy, and emotional regulation reflects the multidimensional nature of social-emotional development. These findings are consistent with evidence from social and emotional learning (SEL) research, which shows that structured interventions can significantly enhance children's competencies across multiple domains (Durlak et al., 2022; Blewitt et al., 2018). In addition, early social-emotional competence has been strongly associated with long-term academic success and well-being, reinforcing the importance of early intervention in this domain (Jones et al., 2015; Yoshikawa et al., 2016).

The findings of this study also highlight the importance of maintaining play-based learning in early childhood education. Despite concerns about the decreasing emphasis on play in formal

educational settings (Nicolopoulou, 2018), this study demonstrates that structured play activities, such as macro role-playing, are highly effective in promoting children's engagement and development. Play-based learning not only enhances motivation and participation but also supports the development of executive functions and adaptive behavior (Diamond, 2016; Whitebread et al., 2017; Thompson, 2016).

In addition, the results emphasize the importance of the classroom action research approach in improving instructional practices. The cyclical process of planning, implementation, observation, and reflection allowed for continuous improvement of teaching strategies, resulting in more effective learning outcomes in Cycle II. This finding indicates that reflective and adaptive teaching practices are essential for optimizing children's development in early childhood education.

Overall, this study provides empirical evidence that structured macro role-playing is an effective instructional strategy for enhancing social-emotional development in early childhood learners. The integration of play-based learning, structured instructional design, and reflective teaching practices contributes significantly to children's holistic development. These findings highlight the importance of adopting innovative and developmentally appropriate teaching strategies in early childhood education to support children's social, emotional, and cognitive growth.

E. Conclusion

This study concludes that the implementation of macro role-playing activities effectively improves children's social-emotional development in early childhood education. The findings demonstrate a progressive enhancement across the research cycles, indicating that structured and iterative instructional strategies can significantly support the development of cooperation, communication, empathy, and emotional regulation.

The results also highlight that the effectiveness of role-playing activities is strongly influenced by how learning experiences are designed and facilitated. When implemented in a structured and engaging manner, macro role-playing provides meaningful opportunities for children to actively participate, interact with peers, and express their emotions. This confirms that play-based learning, when supported by intentional instructional design, can serve as a powerful approach to promote holistic child development.

Overall, the integration of structured role-playing activities and reflective teaching practices contributes significantly to improving children's social-emotional competence. These findings emphasize the importance of adopting innovative and developmentally appropriate learning strategies in early childhood education.

F. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed. First, teachers are encouraged to implement structured macro role-playing activities as part of daily learning practices to enhance children's social-emotional development. Teachers should design role-playing scenarios that are relevant to children's real-life experiences and provide appropriate guidance to support active participation.

Second, early childhood education institutions should support the implementation of play-based learning by providing adequate learning resources, training programs, and professional development opportunities for teachers. Strengthening teachers' competencies in designing and facilitating interactive learning activities is essential for optimizing educational outcomes.

Third, policymakers are recommended to reinforce the integration of social-emotional learning and play-based approaches within early childhood education curricula. Providing flexible and supportive policies will enable educators to implement innovative teaching strategies more effectively.

Finally, future research is encouraged to explore the effectiveness of role-playing activities in different educational contexts and to examine additional variables such as learning environment, teacher competence, and parental involvement. Further studies using diverse research designs are needed to strengthen the evidence on the role of play-based learning in promoting children's development.

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