

Teachers' Strategies in Developing Early Childhood Social Skills Through Play Activities

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Article history

Submitted: 2026/05/01; Revised: 2026/06/11; Accepted: 2026/07/25

Abstract

This study aims to describe teacher strategies in developing social skills of early childhood through play activities at RA Sonec Al Malik, Pinrang Regency, and to identify the obstacles faced by teachers in their implementation. Social skills represent a fundamental developmental aspect that needs to be stimulated from an early age, particularly through play-based activities appropriate to children's developmental characteristics. This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach with pedagogical and psychological perspectives. Data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation involving teachers and the school principal of RA Sonec Al Malik. Data analysis was conducted through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The results indicate that teachers implement various strategies including role play, cooperative activities, structured group games, and open communication with parents. Obstacles encountered include differences in children's character and lack of home environmental support. This study concludes that well-planned and collaborative play strategies between teachers and parents can significantly optimize the development of social skills in early childhood.

Keywords

Teacher Strategy; Social Skills; Early Childhood; Play Activities



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INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education (PAUD) is a level of education that plays an important role in laying the foundation for children's development as a whole, both in cognitive, linguistic, social-emotional, moral, and physical aspects. The age period of 0–6 years is known as the golden age, which is a period when brain development takes place so rapidly that the stimulation given in this phase will affect the quality of individual development in the next stage of life (Suyadi & Maulidya, 2013). Therefore, the implementation of learning in PAUD needs to provide a learning experience that is able to optimize all aspects of child

development in a balanced manner.

One of the developmental aspects that has received important attention in early childhood education is social skills. Social skills are the ability of individuals to establish positive interpersonal relationships, work together, communicate, understand the feelings of others, and resolve conflicts constructively (Cartledge & Milburn, 1995). Children who have good social skills tend to adapt more easily to the environment, build healthy friendships, and show more optimal learning readiness at the next level of education (Gresham & Elliott, 2008). On the other hand, low social skills can hinder the process of self-adjustment, affect emotional development, and reduce children's ability to cooperate and interact with the surrounding environment.

The development of social skills is influenced by various factors, both internal and external. Hurlock (2004) explained that individual characteristics, emotional maturity, family parenting, school environment, and intensity of social interaction are factors that determine the success of children's social development. In the context of modern life, various challenges have arisen that affect the social development of early childhood, such as the increase in the use of gadgets, reduced opportunities to play with peers, and parenting patterns that tend to be protective. This condition causes some children to have difficulty sharing, cooperating, waiting for their turn, or resolving conflicts independently.

Learning in PAUD basically places play as the main activity that supports children's development. Play not only provides a fun experience, but also a means for children to learn to interact, communicate, understand rules, negotiate, and develop empathy for others. According to Piaget (1962), play is an assimilation process that allows children to understand their environment through direct experience. Meanwhile, Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that play activities create a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is a condition when children are able to achieve a higher level of development through interaction with peers and adults. Thus, play activities have a strategic function as an effective learning medium in developing children's social competence.

The effectiveness of play activities is greatly influenced by the learning strategies applied by teachers. Early childhood teachers not only play the role of delivering material, but also as facilitators who design learning experiences according to the characteristics of child development. The Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) approach emphasizes

that learning strategies must be tailored to the child's developmental stage, individual needs, and cultural context (Bredekamp & Copple, 2009). Various strategies, such as role play, cooperative games, project-based learning, and traditional games, have been proven to improve children's communication skills, cooperation, and empathy (Suyanto, 2005). In addition, the success of stimulating social development is also influenced by parental involvement through good communication with teachers so that the learning process at school can continue consistently in the family environment (Epstein, 2011).

Various studies have examined the effectiveness of play activities in improving early childhood social skills. Anggraini and Wahyudi (2021) reported that the application of cooperative games was able to improve children's cooperative skills at Pertiwi Kindergarten Surakarta. Research by Rahayu (2020) shows that the method plays an effective role in improving empathy and sharing skills in children aged 4–5 years at PAUD Harapan Bangsa Makassar. Mahmud and Suharno (2019) also found that the active involvement of parents in school play programs has a positive impact on children's social development. In addition, Whitebread et al. (2017) concluded that rich play experiences contribute to improved self-regulation, cooperative ability, and overall social competence of children.

Although these studies show that play activities have a positive effect on children's social development, most studies still focus on the effectiveness of certain types of games. Studies that comprehensively explore teachers' strategies in developing social skills through play activities in Islamic-based PAUD institutions, especially in the Pinrang Regency area, are still relatively limited. In addition, the aspect of communication between teachers and parents as part of the social skills development strategy has also not been studied in depth. The research gap shows the need for a study that is able to describe the implementation of teachers' strategies in a complete manner in accordance with the characteristics of Islamic educational institutions and the socio-cultural conditions of the local community.

RA Sonec Al Malik Pinrang Regency is one of the Islamic-based PAUD institutions that consistently implements learning through play activities to stimulate children's social development. Based on the results of initial observations, teachers have developed various forms of games that encourage cooperation, communication, and interaction. However, the implementation of the strategy still faces various challenges, such as differences in family backgrounds, diverse characteristics of children, and variations in social environment

support that affect the learning process.

Based on this description, this study aims to describe teachers' strategies in developing early childhood social skills through play activities at RA Sonec Al Malik, Pinrang Regency and identify various obstacles faced during the implementation process. The results of the research are expected to make an empirical contribution to the development of learning strategies in early childhood education, especially in improving children's social skills through play activities in Islamic-based early childhood education institutions.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative research method with a descriptive design. The qualitative approach was chosen because this research aims to understand in depth the phenomena that occur in the field, especially related to teachers' strategies in developing children's social skills through play activities. This approach allows researchers to explore the perspectives, experiences, and behaviors of research subjects holistically and contextually (Creswell, 2014). This research was carried out at RA Sonec Al Malik which is located in Pinrang Regency, South Sulawesi. The selection of the location is based on the consideration that the school is an early childhood education institution that actively develops play-based learning programs, and has openness to be researched. The research was carried out for four months, starting from September to December 2024, including the preparation stage, data collection, analysis, and report writing.

The research subjects were determined through purposive sampling techniques. The main informants consisted of 3 classroom teachers, 1 principal, and 5 parents of students who were selected based on the activeness of communication with the school. As a triangulation, the researcher also observed 20 students who became a sample of social behavior observations. The data collection techniques used include three methods. First, participatory observation is carried out to directly observe the process of play activities, teacher-child interaction, and children's social behavior during learning. Observation uses structured observation guidelines developed based on early childhood social skill indicators in accordance with the Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture Number 137 of 2014 concerning National Standards for Early Childhood Education. Second, in-depth interviews were conducted with teachers, principals, and parents to dig up information

about the strategies implemented, the obstacles faced, and the solutions developed. The interview guide is developed based on the theoretical study and the purpose of the research. Third, documentation is used to collect secondary data in the form of Daily Learning Implementation Plans (RPPH), child development records, activity photos, and school profile documents.

The data analysis followed the Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) model which included three stages. The first stage is data reduction, which is the process of selection, concentration, and transformation of rough data that emerges from field records. The second stage is the presentation of data in the form of narrative descriptions, tables, and charts that make it easier to draw conclusions. The third stage is the drawing of conclusions and verification based on the data that has been reduced and presented. The validity of the data is guaranteed through four examination techniques. First, triangulation of data sources is carried out by comparing information from teachers, principals, and parents. Second, the triangulation method was carried out by comparing observation, interview, and documentation data. Third, member checks are carried out by confirming research findings to informants. Fourth, observation diligence is carried out through repeated observation to ensure the consistency of the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Profile of RA Sonec Al Malik Pinrang Regency

RA Sonec Al Malik is an Islamic-based early childhood education institution established under the auspices of the Al Malik Islamic Education Foundation in Pinrang Regency, South Sulawesi. This institution provides education for children aged 4-6 years by combining the national curriculum of early childhood education with Islamic values. Currently, the school has 3 study groups with a total of 48 students, 3 educators, and 1 principal. The school's vision is the realization of students who are faithful, intelligent, creative, and have noble character. In realizing this vision, the school develops a learning approach that balances cognitive, social-emotional, spiritual, and physical-motor aspects. One of the school's flagship programs is a play-based learning program designed to stimulate all aspects of child development in an integrated manner.

Teachers' Strategies in Developing Social Skills Through Play

Based on the results of observations and interviews, five main strategies were identified by RA Sonec Al Malik teachers in developing children's social skills through play activities, as follows:

a. Role Play

Teachers consistently apply role-playing activities in the daily learning process. Role-playing is carried out with themes that are close to children's lives, such as playing doctors, markets, families, and teachers. Through this activity, children learn to take perspective-taking, understand different social roles, and practice communication skills in a safe and fun context. The teacher acts as a facilitator who guides the child in choosing roles, negotiating the storyline, and resolving conflicts that arise during the game. One of the class teachers revealed in an interview: 'When role-playing, children learn that everyone has different feelings. Children who are usually shy slowly dare to speak up because they feel protected by their role as a certain character.'

b. Structured Cooperative Games

Teachers design cooperative games that require children to work together to achieve common goals, not compete to be winners. Examples of games applied include putting together puzzles, building blocks in groups, and collaborative art activities such as painting murals together. In cooperative play, each child has a valued contribution so that the sense of ownership of the shared outcome becomes stronger. The results of observations show that children who initially tend to dominate begin to learn to listen to and appreciate the ideas of their friends, while shy children begin to dare to contribute because of a supportive environment. The principal explained that this strategy is consistently applied to build a culture of mutual respect among students.

c. Traditional Games Based on Local Cultural Values

RA Sonec teacher Al Malik creatively integrates traditional games from the South Sulawesi region into daily play activities. Games such as modified 'ma'raga', 'engklek', and traditional circle games contain the values of cooperation, honesty, and respect for common rules. The integration of this traditional game also functions as a medium for the preservation of local culture to the younger generation. Teachers observed that children were more enthusiastic and emotionally engaged in traditional games than in modern technology-

based games. This enthusiasm creates optimal conditions for deep social learning as children are in a state of authentic relaxation and joy.

d. The Use of the Morning Circle as a Social Ritual

Every morning, before the core activity begins, the teacher guides the child to sit in a circle formation. In this morning's circle session, children were invited to share stories about their experiences, express their feelings, listen to their friends speak, and discuss class rules. These daily rituals build a sense of community, practice active listening skills, and create a culture of mutual respect within the group. The teacher consistently guides the child to use positive, empathetic sentences during the circle session. Phrases like 'I feel...', 'I like when...', and 'I need...' It is introduced to help children express their feelings and needs verbally, rather than through aggressive or withdrawn behavior.

e. Active Collaboration with Parents

Teachers build intensive and ongoing communication with parents through a variety of communication channels, including monthly face-to-face meetings, online communication groups, and daily liaison books. In this communication, teachers share information about play strategies implemented in schools, children's social development, and suggestions for implementing similar strategies at home. Parents are positioned as strategic partners, not just report recipients. This strategy has proven effective in creating consistency between the learning environment at school and at home. Parents who understand the importance of playing together will be more motivated to provide quality time playing with their children at home, so that the stimulation of social development takes place in a sustainable manner.

Obstacles in Strategy Implementation

Although these strategies have been implemented consistently, there are a number of obstacles that teachers face in their implementation. The first obstacle is the heterogeneity of the child's character. Every child has a different temperament, background, and level of development. Children with a very active or very shy temperament require a more individualized approach, which requires extra time and energy from the teacher. The second obstacle is the limited support from the home environment. Some parents still apply over-protective parenting or do not give enough attention to their children, so that the continuity of social stimulation built at school is not optimally continued at home. This condition is a

challenge considering that the success of children's social development is highly dependent on the consistency of experiences in various environments of children's lives.

The third obstacle is the limitation of playing facilities and infrastructure. Some of the ideal play tools for social stimulation require a significant investment, while school budgets are limited. Teachers must be creative by utilizing simple materials and the surrounding natural environment as a medium for play. The fourth obstacle is the teacher-student ratio which is still not ideal. With an average of 1 teacher for every 16 children, teachers have difficulty giving optimal individual attention to each child, especially for children who need more intensive guidance in their social development.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that RA Sonec Al Malik teachers have developed a fairly comprehensive strategy in optimizing children's social skills through play activities. The role-playing strategies applied are in line with the findings of Whitebread et al. (2017) who prove that sociodramatic play significantly develops perspective-taking and empathy skills in early childhood. The application of cooperative play found in this study is also consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social development about scaffolding and ZPD. In cooperative play, children who are more socially competent naturally become scaffolds for their friends, so that an organic and effective social learning process occurs. This finding is in line with the research of Anggraini and Wahyudi (2021) who found a significant increase in children's cooperative skills through cooperative play.

The innovation in the use of traditional games found in this study is quite a unique contribution. The integration of traditional games not only serves as a medium for social development, but also as an effort to preserve local cultural identity that is increasingly eroded by the currents of modernization. This is in line with a critical pedagogical perspective that emphasizes the importance of education based on local wisdom as the foundation for the formation of national identity and character. The strategies of collaboration with parents found in this study validate Epstein's (2011) findings on the importance of parental involvement in early childhood education. The model of parental involvement as strategic partners, not just recipients of information, has been shown to be more effective in creating consistency in children's learning experiences across contexts.

These findings are also in line with Bronfenbrenner (1979) who emphasized that child development is ecological and influenced by the interaction between the surrounding ecological systems, including the relationship between the school and the family micro-system.

The obstacles found, especially related to the heterogeneity of children's characters and the limitations of parental support, reflect the universal challenges faced by early childhood educators in many contexts. The solution in the form of intensive communication with parents implemented by teachers at RA Sonec Al Malik is the right response, although it still needs to be strengthened with a more structured and sustainable parenting program. Overall, the results of this study confirm that play activities that are designed in a planned, diverse, and contextual way can be a very effective medium for developing early childhood social skills. Teachers as play designers and facilitators play a key role in ensuring that each play activity has a clear development goal and is implemented in a safe, inclusive, and exploratory environment.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the research and discussions that have been described, several conclusions can be drawn. First, teachers of RA Sonec Al Malik Pinrang Regency have developed and implemented five main strategies in developing early childhood social skills through play activities, namely: (1) contextual role play, (2) structured cooperative games, (3) traditional games based on local wisdom, (4) morning circles as daily social rituals, and (5) active collaboration with parents as learning partners. These strategies are implemented in an integrated and consistent manner as part of the school culture. Second, the obstacles faced in the implementation of the strategy include the heterogeneity of children's character, limited support from the home environment, limited play facilities, and a teacher-student ratio that is not ideal. Nonetheless, teachers have managed to develop adaptive solutions, especially through strengthening communication with parents and creativity in utilizing available resources.

Third, in general, the strategies implemented show the positive impact that can be observed from changes in children's social behavior over time, even though the development is gradual and requires a continuous process. Children begin to show improvements in cooperative, empathy, and conflict management skills, which are fundamental indicators of

social skills. This study recommends that: (1) the professional development program of early childhood teachers include training in more varied and innovative play strategies; (2) schools develop more structured parent engagement programs; (3) local governments increase budget allocation for quality play facilities in PAUD institutions; and (4) follow-up research is carried out with a longitudinal design to examine the long-term impact of play strategies on children's social development.

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