

Role Play as a Learning Strategy for Enhancing Social-Emotional Competence of Children Aged 4–5 Years

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Abstract

Social-emotional competence predicts learning readiness more strongly than early academic skill, yet instruction in many kindergartens continues to prioritise literacy and numeracy over the deliberate cultivation of empathy, cooperation, and emotional regulation. This study examined how role play functions as a learning strategy for enhancing the social-emotional competence of children aged four to five years at RA Darul Muqomah Purwoasri, Gumukmas, Jember. A qualitative descriptive design with a single-case orientation was employed over eight weeks, involving fifteen children in Group A, the class teacher, and the head of the institution. Data were collected through non-participant observation across twelve role-play sessions, semi-structured interviews, and documentation, and were analysed using the interactive model of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, with credibility established through source and technique triangulation and member checking. The findings show that role play was implemented in three stages of preparation, enactment, and recall, and that it supported five dimensions of social-emotional competence: self-awareness, self-regulation, self-motivation, empathy, and social skill. Empathy and social skill developed most visibly, while self-regulation depended heavily on the teacher's mediation during role conflict. The study concludes that role play enhances social-emotional competence when scenarios are contextual and adult mediation is graduated rather than directive.

Keywords

early childhood education; emotional regulation; empathy; role play; social-emotional competence



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INTRODUCTION

The years between four and five mark the point at which a child's social world expands decisively beyond the household. Children of this age begin to sustain cooperative play, to negotiate rules with peers, and to recognise that other people hold intentions and feelings distinct from their own. The competences that support these achievements—collectively described as social-emotional competence—are increasingly understood not as a pleasant by-

product of maturation but as a developmental attainment that requires deliberate stimulation. Longitudinal work indicates that children who enter formal schooling with adequate social-emotional competence adapt to classroom demands more readily than peers with stronger academic preparation but weaker interpersonal skill, and that the gap widens rather than closes over time (Rohmah, 2025).

Social-emotional competence in early childhood is conventionally analysed along five dimensions: self-awareness, or the ability to identify and name one's own emotional states; self-regulation, the capacity to modulate the intensity and expression of those states; self-motivation, the persistence to continue an activity in the face of difficulty; empathy, the recognition and appropriate response to the feelings of others; and social skill, the repertoire of behaviours through which relationships are initiated and maintained. These dimensions develop unevenly and are shaped by both family and institutional contexts. Research on the family side has shown that maternal presence and responsiveness sustain emotional stability even where a paternal figure is absent (Ramadhani et al., 2025), that parenting style bears directly on the social-emotional attainment of children aged five to six (Shaleh, 2023), and that the strategies parents use to help children regulate emotion are frequently well intentioned but developmentally counterproductive (Rahiem, 2023). A systematic review of the field concluded that problematic social-emotional behaviour in early childhood clusters around anxiety, withdrawal, aggression, and difficulty in sustaining peer relationships (Amalia et al., 2023).

The institutional side of the equation has received comparatively less attention. Despite a national curriculum that lists social-emotional development among the core domains, classroom time in many kindergartens is disproportionately allocated to literacy and numeracy, on the assumption that social competence will emerge from unstructured play without further intervention. Preliminary observation at RA Darul Muqomah Purwoasri, Gumukmas, in the first semester of the 2025/2026 academic year indicated the consequences of this assumption. Among the fifteen children in Group A, six regularly refused to share materials, four withdrew from group activities and played alone, and three responded to disagreement by crying or by taking the disputed object by force. The class teacher reported that she resolved such incidents by separating the children involved, a response that ended the immediate conflict without equipping either child to handle the next one. Studies of dyadic interaction in kindergarten settings suggest that this pattern is widespread and that the quality of adult–child interaction is a stronger determinant of social-emotional outcomes than the quantity of free play provided (Al Umairi, 2025).

A second consideration concerns how social-emotional competence is recognised in practice. Unlike letter recognition or counting, it produces no artefact that can be filed, and its indicators are behavioural, situational, and easily misread. A child who plays alone may be withdrawn or may be absorbed; a child who yields a disputed toy may be regulating an impulse or may be avoiding confrontation. Assessment therefore depends on repeated observation across varied situations rather than on a single measurement, and on the observer's access to the context in which a behaviour occurs. This methodological constraint is one reason why the field

contains many studies reporting that an intervention raised social-emotional scores and comparatively few describing what the children actually did. The present study was designed around that gap, prioritising the description of observable behaviour and its situational conditions over the estimation of change in a composite score.

Role play offers a theoretically grounded response to this problem. In role play a child adopts the perspective, language, and behavioural repertoire of a figure other than themselves, and does so within a shared fiction that peers must jointly maintain. Two mechanisms follow. The first is perspective-taking: to play a doctor convincingly, a child must infer what a doctor would notice, say, and feel, and this inference is the elementary operation on which empathy rests. The second is rule-bound self-restraint: the fiction imposes constraints that the child accepts voluntarily, so that a child who would ordinarily seize a desired object refrains because the role forbids it. Vygotsky described this as the paradox by which a child in play achieves a level of self-control unavailable in ordinary activity, and contemporary experimental work has supported the claim. A randomised study of dramatic pretend-play games with four-year-olds from low socioeconomic backgrounds found improvements in emotional control across multiple measures relative to active control conditions (Goldstein & Lerner, 2018), while analyses of social pretend play have documented its role in the development of metacommunication and self-regulation (Whitebread & O'Sullivan, 2012). More recent modelling of pretend-play complexity has qualified these findings, showing a reliable association with social-emotional behaviour during play itself but a weaker and less direct link to general social competence (Smits-van der Nat et al., 2026).

Indonesian research on role play has converged on positive findings while varying considerably in method and rigour. Classroom action research has reported increases in social-emotional attainment from a pre-cycle baseline near zero to more than eighty per cent after two cycles (Harianja et al., 2023), and comparable gains have been documented in Group B classes elsewhere (Linda & Mayar, 2022; Purba, 2022). Qualitative studies have described the contribution of role play to cooperative play, character comprehension, and emotional management among four- to five-year-olds (Musthofiyyah et al., 2025), to the cultivation of empathy (Fauzi et al., 2024), to self-confidence (Amelya et al., 2024), and to expressive language, which mediates much social interaction (Yuniati & Rohmadheny, 2020). Studies situated in Islamic kindergartens have examined the supporting and inhibiting factors that shape implementation (Maghfiroh et al., 2020), the adaptation of role play to pandemic conditions (Ismaiyah, 2022), and its use as a vehicle for moral formation (Khairi & Daulay, 2026). Work integrating local cultural forms into the role-play scenario has extended the approach further (Susmaya et al., 2026), while literature reviews of the last five years report convergent evidence that role play strengthens empathy, cooperation, emotional regulation, and communication (Ramadhanti et al., 2025).

What this body of work has largely not supplied is a detailed account of the teacher's role during enactment. Most studies report that role play was implemented and that social-emotional scores rose, but they describe the intervention at the level of the activity rather than the

interaction, so that a practitioner learns that role play works without learning what to do when two children claim the same role, when a child abandons the fiction mid-scene, or when a shy child accepts a role and then remains silent. Teacher perspectives on role play as an empathy strategy have begun to be documented (Tri Kurniati et al., 2025), and the point has been made that outcomes depend on scenario design and adult mediation (Zannah & Alawiyah, 2025), but the mediation itself is rarely described in enough detail to be reproduced. A second gap concerns dimensional specificity: aggregate scores conceal which of the five dimensions responds to role play and which does not.

This study therefore pursued two objectives. The first was to describe how role play is implemented as a learning strategy in Group A at RA Darul Muqomah Purwoasri, Gumukmas, Jember, with particular attention to the sequence of stages and to the forms of teacher mediation employed during enactment. The second was to identify which dimensions of social-emotional competence become visible through that implementation and under what conditions. A qualitative design was chosen because these objectives concern process and meaning rather than magnitude, and because the mechanisms of interest are observable only in the texture of interaction as it unfolds.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive design oriented toward a single case. The choice follows from the research objectives, which concern how role play is enacted and what social-emotional behaviour becomes visible within it, rather than how much a measured variable changes. A single institution was studied in depth over eight weeks so that patterns could be traced across repeated sessions rather than inferred from a single observation.

The research was conducted at RA Darul Muqomah, Purwoasri Village, Gumukmas District, Jember Regency, East Java, between August and October of the 2025/2026 academic year. The site was selected purposively because the institution had begun using role play in a limited and unsystematic way, which made the practice observable while leaving room for the variation that a descriptive study requires. Participants were the fifteen children of Group A, comprising eight girls and seven boys aged between four years one month and five years three months; the class teacher, who had eleven years of teaching experience; and the head of the institution. Informed consent was obtained from parents, and children were free to decline participation in any session; no child did so on more than one occasion.

Ethical considerations were addressed before and during data collection. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the head of the institution, and written consent was obtained from the parents or guardians of all fifteen children after a written explanation of the study's purpose, the observation procedure, and the handling of data. Children were told in simple language that a visitor would be watching their play and writing notes, and that they could ask the visitor to stop at any time. Two children asked the researcher to move further from the play area during the second session, and the request was honoured. The role-play sessions were part of the school's ordinary programme rather than an additional imposition, and no child

was assigned a role against their stated preference once the rotation list was in operation. Children's names were replaced with codes during transcription, and photographs were taken only with parental consent and are not reproduced in any output that identifies an individual. Field notes were stored separately from the consent records, and interview recordings were deleted after transcription and verification.

Data were collected through three techniques. Non-participant observation was conducted across twelve role-play sessions of approximately forty-five minutes each, distributed over eight weeks and organised around four scenarios: a clinic, a traditional market, a family household, and a classroom. The researcher sat outside the play area and recorded behaviour against an observation guide organised by the five dimensions of social-emotional competence, supplemented by verbatim field notes of children's utterances and of teacher interventions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted twice with the class teacher, at the beginning and at the end of the observation period, and once with the head of the institution, addressing prior practice, perceived changes, constraints, and institutional support. Documentation comprised daily lesson plans, the school's semester programme, children's assessment records, and photographs of the play sessions.

The observation guide covered five dimensions with descriptors adapted from the literature on social-emotional competence in early childhood. Self-awareness was observed through the child's naming of their own feelings and their acknowledgement of the role they had chosen. Self-regulation was observed through waiting for a turn, tolerating the assignment of a less desired role, and recovering from frustration without adult removal. Self-motivation was observed through persistence in the role across the full session and through the initiation of new scenes. Empathy was observed through responses to a peer's distress within and outside the fiction. Social skill was observed through the initiation of interaction, verbal negotiation, sharing of properties, and cooperative maintenance of the shared scenario.

Analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana. Field notes and interview transcripts were first reduced by coding each observed episode against the five dimensions and by discarding material unrelated to the research questions. Reduced data were then displayed in matrices arranged by dimension and by session, which made it possible to see whether a behaviour recurred or appeared only once, and to identify the teacher interventions that preceded it. Conclusions were drawn and verified iteratively, with provisional patterns tested against subsequent observations rather than confirmed from the record already collected. Credibility was pursued through four procedures: source triangulation across children, class teacher, and head of institution; technique triangulation across observation, interview, and documentation; prolonged engagement across eight weeks; and member checking, in which the summarised findings were returned to the class teacher for confirmation or correction. Two of the researcher's initial interpretations were revised as a result of member checking, both concerning the intent behind a child's withdrawal from a scene. The design of the study is summarised in Figure 1.

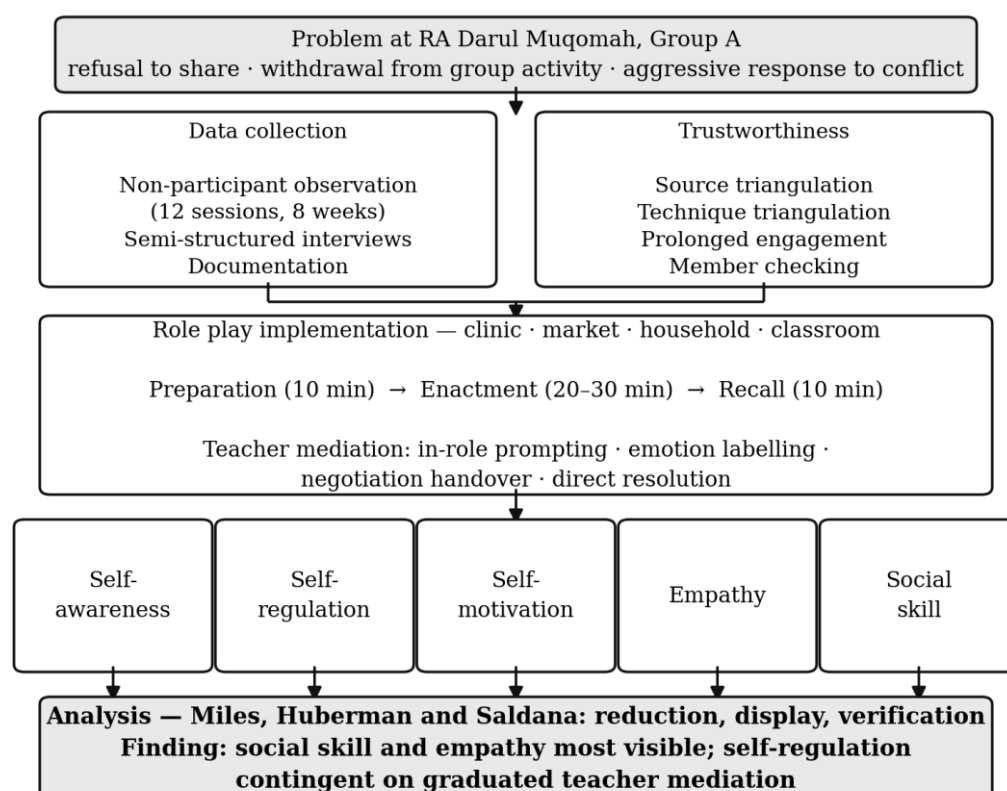


Figure 1. Research design of the study

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Analysis of the twelve observed sessions and the three interviews yielded two clusters of findings. The first concerns the way role play was organised and mediated; the second concerns the social-emotional behaviour that became visible within it. The two are reported in turn, since the second cannot be interpreted without the first.

Role play at RA Darul Muqomah was implemented in three stages that recurred consistently across all twelve sessions. In the preparation stage, lasting approximately ten minutes, the teacher introduced the scenario through a short narrative, displayed the properties, and negotiated the assignment of roles. Role assignment was the most contested part of this stage: in the first four sessions the teacher assigned roles directly, and in eight of those assignments at least one child protested. From the fifth session onward the teacher adopted a rotation list displayed on the wall, and protests fell to two occurrences across the remaining eight sessions. In the enactment stage, lasting between twenty and thirty minutes, children played within the scenario while the teacher remained at its edge, entering only when the fiction collapsed or when a dispute exceeded the children's capacity to resolve it. In the recall stage, lasting approximately ten minutes, children sat in a circle and described what they had done, how their character had felt, and what they would do differently.

The forms of teacher mediation observed during enactment fell into four types, summarised in Table 1 together with their frequency across the twelve sessions.

Table 1. Forms of teacher mediation observed during the enactment stage

No	Form of mediation	Description	Frequency	Sessions
1	In-role prompting	Teacher enters the fiction as a character and redirects the scene from within	34	12 of 12
2	Emotion labelling	Teacher names the feeling a child appears to be experiencing without evaluating it	27	11 of 12
3	Negotiation handover	Teacher restates the dispute and returns the decision to the children	19	9 of 12
4	Direct resolution	Teacher settles the dispute by instruction or by separating the children	12	7 of 12

Source: field notes across twelve sessions, 2025

The distribution in Table 1 is itself a finding. In-role prompting and emotion labelling, the two least directive forms, together accounted for two-thirds of all interventions, while direct resolution—the strategy the teacher had described as her habitual response in the initial interview—accounted for fewer than one intervention per session by the end of the observation period. The shift was gradual: direct resolution occurred five times in the first three sessions and twice in the final three. In the closing interview the teacher attributed the change to the discovery that returning a dispute to the children usually resolved it faster than settling it herself, provided the dispute concerned a property rather than physical safety.

Turning to the second cluster of findings, the five dimensions of social-emotional competence became visible with markedly different frequency and stability. Table 2 summarises the observed indicators by dimension across the four scenarios.

Table 2. Observed indicators of social-emotional competence by dimension

No	Dimension	Principal observed indicators	Sessions in which observed
1	Self-awareness	Naming own feeling; stating chosen role; acknowledging error	9 of 12
2	Self-regulation	Waiting for a turn; accepting a less desired role; recovering from frustration	7 of 12
3	Self-motivation	Sustaining the role for a full session; initiating a new scene	10 of 12
4	Empathy	Comforting a distressed peer; adjusting behaviour to a peer's state	11 of 12
5	Social skill	Initiating interaction; verbal negotiation; sharing properties	12 of 12

Source: processed observation data, 2025

Social skill was observed in every session and in every scenario. The market scenario generated the densest verbal negotiation, since the exchange of goods for tokens required children to agree on quantities and to conduct a sustained dialogue in role. Field notes recorded that children who had previously played in parallel began to coordinate their activity: in the seventh session, three children spontaneously divided the market stall into a seller, an assistant, and a customer without teacher direction, a division that had not been modelled.

Empathy appeared in eleven of the twelve sessions and was most pronounced in the clinic scenario. Children playing the doctor consistently adopted a softened register when addressing the patient, asked where the pain was located, and offered reassurance before administering the imaginary treatment. Two episodes are worth recording in detail because they show empathy crossing the boundary of the fiction. In the fifth session a child playing a patient became genuinely upset when another child pressed too firmly on her arm; the child playing the doctor immediately stopped, apologised outside the role, and then resumed. In the ninth session a child who had been assigned the role of a nurse noticed that a classmate had been left without a role, left the play area, and brought him in as a second patient.

Self-motivation was observed in ten sessions, chiefly in the form of sustained engagement across the full enactment stage. The proportion of children who remained in role from beginning to end rose over the observation period, and by the tenth session children began extending scenarios beyond the teacher's initial narrative, adding a pharmacy to the clinic and a delivery service to the market. These extensions were not prompted and represent the clearest evidence that the fiction had become the children's own rather than the teacher's.

Self-awareness was observed in nine sessions and depended heavily on the recall stage. During enactment children rarely commented on their own emotional states; during recall, when the teacher asked how their character had felt, most children could supply an answer, and several distinguished between what the character felt and what they themselves had felt. This distinction, which appeared in four children by the end of the observation period, is developmentally significant because it indicates that the child is treating the role as a perspective rather than as a costume.

Self-regulation was the least frequently observed dimension, appearing in seven of the twelve sessions, and was also the most dependent on teacher mediation. Waiting for a turn and accepting a less desired role improved after the introduction of the rotation list, but recovery from frustration remained fragile throughout. In the six recorded episodes in which a child became distressed during enactment, four were resolved through emotion labelling followed by re-entry into the scene, while two required the child to leave the activity. Field notes indicate that the decisive variable was whether the teacher named the feeling before proposing a solution; where she proposed a solution first, the child's distress typically intensified.

The interview with the head of the institution added an institutional dimension to these findings. She reported that role play had previously been treated as an occasional enrichment activity rather than as a scheduled component of the weekly programme, and that the properties available were limited to a single set of medical toys donated three years earlier. During the

observation period the school allocated a fixed weekly slot to role play and assembled additional properties from recycled materials. She identified two constraints: the absence of a shared understanding among teachers about what role play is intended to achieve, and the difficulty of assessing social-emotional attainment in a reporting format designed around observable academic products.

Because the four scenarios differed in their social structure, it is useful to set the dimensional findings against the scenario in which they were observed. Table 3 records, for each scenario, the dimensions for which indicators were observed in the majority of the sessions devoted to that scenario.

Table 3. Dimensions of social-emotional competence observed by scenario

No	Scenario	Dimensions predominantly observed	Characteristic episode
1	Clinic	Empathy; social skill; self-awareness	Doctor softens register; stops when patient is genuinely upset
2	Market	Social skill; self-regulation; self-motivation	Children divide the stall into seller, assistant and customer
3	Household	Self-motivation; empathy; social skill	Scene sustained for the full enactment stage without prompting
4	Classroom	Social skill; self-regulation	Highest incidence of dispute over role status

Source: field notes across twelve sessions, 2025

Table 3 shows that no single scenario elicited all five dimensions and that the classroom scenario, which the children knew best, produced the narrowest range. Field notes offer an explanation. In the clinic, market, and household scenarios, the roles carried distinct functions that children could not readily exchange, so the fiction supplied a reason to cooperate. In the classroom scenario, by contrast, the role of teacher carried visible authority while the role of pupil carried none, and children competed for the former. Six of the twelve recorded disputes over role status occurred during the three classroom sessions. The familiarity that made the scenario easy to enter also made its status asymmetry transparent to the children.

The recall stage produced material that the enactment stage did not. Across the twelve sessions, thirty-one utterances were recorded in which a child described a feeling; of these, twenty-four occurred during recall and only seven during enactment. The distribution is not surprising, since enactment demands that the child sustain a fiction while recall invites them to step outside it, but it has a practical consequence: a teacher who abbreviates or omits the recall stage under time pressure removes the phase in which most of the observable evidence of self-awareness is generated. In four sessions the recall stage was shortened to under five minutes because the preceding enactment had overrun, and in three of those four the researcher recorded no instance of a child naming a feeling.

Three episodes recorded in the field notes illustrate the mediation gradient in operation and are reported here because the sequence, rather than the outcome, is what a practitioner would need to reproduce. In the fourth session two children claimed the role of shopkeeper. The teacher entered the scene in role as a customer and remarked that the shop appeared to have two staff that day, and the children resolved the division themselves within the fiction. In the seventh session a child became distressed when the stethoscope was taken from him. The teacher knelt beside him, said that he seemed disappointed because he had been waiting for that turn, and paused; the child nodded, and after a few seconds proposed that he would use it after the current patient. In the ninth session a similar dispute arose and the teacher, under time pressure, instructed the children to share and moved on; the disagreement resumed within two minutes and ended with one child leaving the play area. The contrast between the seventh and the ninth session is the clearest single illustration in the data of the sequencing effect reported above.

Discussion

The findings indicate that role play at RA Darul Muqomah functioned as a learning strategy for social-emotional competence rather than merely as a recreational activity, but that its effectiveness was distributed unevenly across the five dimensions and was conditioned throughout by the form of teacher mediation. Three aspects of this result warrant discussion: the dimensional profile, the mediation gradient, and the boundary conditions under which the strategy operates.

The dimensional profile places social skill and empathy at one end and self-regulation at the other. This ordering is intelligible in terms of what role play structurally requires. Social skill is not merely facilitated by the fiction; it is a precondition of it, since a shared scenario cannot be sustained unless participants initiate interaction, negotiate, and distribute properties. Empathy follows closely because adopting a role is itself an act of perspective-taking, and the clinic scenario in particular scripted a caregiving stance that children then enacted. Self-regulation, by contrast, is not required by the fiction but tested by it: the scenario creates the very scarcity—of roles, of properties, of attention—that provokes dysregulation. Role play therefore generates the occasion for self-regulation without supplying the means, which is why teacher mediation mattered most precisely where the children's independent attainment was weakest.

This reading aligns with the qualitative literature while sharpening it. Studies documenting the contribution of role play to cooperative play, character comprehension, and emotional management in four- to five-year-olds report the same clustering around interpersonal behaviour (Musthofiyyah et al., 2025), and research on empathy formation through role play describes the perspective-taking mechanism identified here (Fauzi et al., 2024). The finding that empathy crossed the boundary of the fiction—children stepping out of role to attend to a genuinely distressed peer—extends this literature, since most accounts describe empathic behaviour within the scenario rather than transfer beyond it. Experimental work supports the plausibility of such transfer: dramatic pretend-play games improved emotional control on measures administered outside the play context (Goldstein & Lerner, 2018), and social

pretend play has been shown to support the metacommunicative skills through which children step outside a fiction to comment on it (Whitebread & O'Sullivan, 2012).

At the same time, the results counsel against overstating the case. Recent modelling of pretend-play complexity found a robust association between play complexity and social-emotional behaviour during play, but no evidence for the hypothesised path from play complexity to general social competence (Smits-van der Nat et al., 2026). The present study cannot adjudicate this question, since it observed behaviour largely within the play context and over a short period. What it can contribute is the observation that transfer, where it appeared, was associated with the recall stage rather than with enactment alone. Children who distinguished between the character's feelings and their own did so during recall, when the teacher's questioning required the comparison. This suggests that the reflective phase may be the mechanism through which in-play behaviour is generalised, and that studies reporting weak transfer may be examining role play implemented without it.

The mediation gradient is the study's second substantive finding. Over twelve sessions the teacher's interventions shifted from direct resolution toward in-role prompting and emotion labelling, and the frequency of unresolved disputes fell accordingly. The pattern maps closely onto Vygotskian scaffolding: support was initially high and external, and was progressively withdrawn as children demonstrated the capacity to manage negotiation themselves. Emotion labelling deserves particular emphasis because the field notes identify a consistent sequencing effect. Where the teacher named the feeling before proposing a course of action, the child typically re-entered the scene; where she proposed a course of action first, distress intensified. This is a specific, reproducible finding of the kind that the existing literature has generally not supplied. Teacher-perspective research has established that practitioners regard role play as effective for empathy (Tri Kurniati et al., 2025) and that scenario design and mediation condition its outcomes (Zannah & Alawiyah, 2025), but the sequence of the intervention itself has rarely been specified.

The finding also bears on the wider problem of how adults respond to children's emotional difficulty. Research on parental practice has documented that adults frequently attempt to regulate a child's emotion by distraction, by granting the desired object, or by instruction, and that these responses may be counterproductive for the development of regulation itself (Rahiem, 2023). A study of emotional behaviour management in an Islamic kindergarten reached a comparable conclusion regarding the coordination of teacher and parent responses (Noviampura, 2023). The present findings suggest that the classroom offers a setting in which the more effective sequence—label first, resolve second—can be modelled and practised, and that role play, by generating emotionally charged but low-stakes situations, supplies unusually frequent opportunities to do so.

The rotation list represents a third finding of practical significance. Protests over role assignment fell from eight occurrences in four sessions to two occurrences in eight after a visible, predictable allocation was introduced. The mechanism is procedural rather than emotional: the list removed the interpretive ambiguity that had made each assignment appealable, and thereby

converted a recurring negotiation into a settled expectation. Comparable devices have been reported in studies of role play and self-confidence, where guaranteed opportunity to perform was associated with increased willingness to take a visible role (Amelya et al., 2024), and in work on role play as a vehicle for moral formation, where predictable turn structures supported the internalisation of rules (Khairi & Daulay, 2026).

Scenario content also mattered, and in ways that have implications for planning. The four scenarios did not elicit the five dimensions equally. The market produced the densest verbal negotiation and therefore the richest evidence of social skill; the clinic produced the most empathy; the household scenario generated the most sustained engagement; and the classroom scenario, which children knew best, produced the least novel behaviour and the highest incidence of disputes over role status. The practical inference is that scenario selection should follow from the dimension a teacher intends to develop rather than from familiarity alone. Studies that integrate local cultural material into the scenario report a similar sensitivity to content, with culturally embedded narratives sustaining engagement and supporting cooperative values (Susmaya et al., 2026), and research on traditional games reaches a comparable conclusion about the relationship between activity structure and social-emotional outcome (Aulia & Sudaryanti, 2023; Kusumawati & Ambarsari, 2021).

The expressive-language dimension deserves brief comment because it conditions everything else. Role play is conducted through talk, and children whose expressive language is limited participate less and therefore receive fewer of its benefits. Research has documented that role play itself develops expressive language (Yuniati & Rohmadheny, 2020), which implies a reinforcing cycle in which initially more verbal children gain most. Field notes from the present study are consistent with this: the four children who withdrew from group activity at the outset were also those whose utterances during enactment were shortest, and two of them remained peripheral through the twelfth session. Teachers should therefore anticipate that role play alone may widen rather than narrow participation gaps unless quieter children are given roles with a scripted verbal function—a role that must speak in order for the scene to proceed.

Two further considerations situate the findings. First, the institutional context of a *raudhatul athfal* provides a values framework in which cooperation, care for others, and restraint are already articulated as religious obligations, which means role play scenarios can draw on a moral vocabulary the children already possess. Studies conducted in comparable settings report that this alignment supports rather than complicates implementation (Maghfiroh et al., 2020; Ismaiyah, 2022; Purba, 2022). Second, role play is not the only route to the outcomes described here. Classroom action research has produced substantial gains through role play (Harianja et al., 2023; Linda & Mayar, 2022), but comparable gains have been reported through traditional games that exercise executive function (Dzakkiyah et al., 2026), through play-based pedagogy more generally (Lazăr, 2025), and through structured activity built around social-emotional intelligence (Fitriyani, 2025). The home learning environment contributes independently and substantially (Li et al., 2023). Role play should therefore be understood as one effective strategy among several rather than as a uniquely privileged one.

The scenario findings summarised in Table 3 have a practical corollary that the literature on role play has not generally drawn. Scenario selection is usually justified by familiarity, on the reasonable ground that children can only enact what they have observed. The present data qualify that principle. The classroom scenario was the most familiar and the least productive, because familiarity brought with it a status hierarchy that the children reproduced and then contested. The clinic scenario was less familiar but more productive, because its roles were functionally differentiated and its central relationship was one of care rather than of authority. The inference is that the relevant criterion is not how well children know the setting but what relational structure the setting scripts. Teachers seeking to develop empathy should look for scenarios organised around care; those seeking to develop negotiation should look for scenarios organised around exchange; and scenarios organised around authority should be used sparingly and with explicit attention to the allocation of the authoritative role.

The concentration of self-awareness evidence in the recall stage carries a comparable implication for lesson structure. Twenty-four of the thirty-one recorded emotion-naming utterances occurred in a phase that occupied roughly one-fifth of the session, and in the sessions where that phase was compressed the evidence largely disappeared. Two readings are possible. On the first, recall is the phase in which self-awareness is expressed but not the phase in which it is produced, so compression costs the teacher evidence without costing the child development. On the second, articulation is itself part of the developmental process, and compression costs both. The present data cannot separate these readings, but the second is more consistent with the observation that the four children who distinguished the character's feelings from their own did so only after several sessions of recall questioning and never during enactment. Research on metacommunication in social pretend play supports the second reading, treating the capacity to step outside a fiction and comment on it as an achievement that is exercised into existence rather than merely displayed (Whitebread & O'Sullivan, 2012).

A limitation of the mediation analysis should be stated plainly. The frequencies in Table 1 record what the teacher did, not what she would have done in the absence of an observer, and the decline in direct resolution across the observation period coincides with the period of the researcher's presence. Two considerations reduce, without removing, this concern. The shift was gradual rather than immediate, which is not the pattern that observer reactivity typically produces; and in the closing interview the teacher volunteered a functional rationale for the change—that returning disputes to the children resolved them faster—rather than describing it as a response to being watched. The ninth-session episode, in which she reverted to direct instruction under time pressure while the researcher was present, further suggests that the observed behaviour was not uniformly performed for the observer. The finding should nonetheless be treated as describing what this teacher did during this period rather than as establishing a stable disposition.

Taken together with the scenario and recall findings, the mediation results suggest that role play is better understood as a structure that creates opportunities than as an intervention that produces outcomes. The fiction generates situations in which empathy, negotiation, and

self-restraint become relevant; whether those capacities develop depends on what the adult does when the situation arises and on whether the session includes a phase in which the experience is put into words. This framing accounts for the variability in the existing literature, in which studies of nominally the same intervention report outcomes ranging from substantial to negligible, and it identifies the variables that future comparative work should hold constant or manipulate deliberately (Harianja et al., 2023; Musthofiyyah et al., 2025; Smits-van der Nat et al., 2026).

The position of the quieter children requires more direct comment than it has so far received, because it bears on whether role play narrows or widens existing differences. Four children were identified at the outset as withdrawing from group activity, and two of them remained peripheral through the twelfth session despite the rotation list guaranteeing them a role. Guaranteed allocation ensured that they received a role; it did not ensure that the role required them to speak. A child assigned the part of a patient may lie still while others act around them, and a child assigned the part of a customer may hand over a token without uttering a word. The rotation list therefore solved a distributional problem while leaving a participatory one intact. The remedy suggested by these observations is to identify, for each scenario, the roles that carry an obligatory verbal function—the shopkeeper who must state a price, the doctor who must ask where it hurts—and to allocate those roles deliberately rather than by rotation alone. Since role play is itself a means of developing expressive language (Yuniati & Rohmadheny, 2020), the children who would benefit most from speaking are precisely those least likely to be given a reason to.

Two features of the institutional setting shaped what was possible and should be made explicit for readers considering transfer. The first is scheduling. Role play moved from an occasional enrichment activity to a fixed weekly slot during the observation period, and the head of the institution attributed the change to the presence of the study rather than to a prior decision. Whether the slot survives the researcher's departure is unknown, and the finding that recall was compressed in four sessions because enactment overran suggests that the allocation was tight even with the study in progress. The second is assessment. The head of the institution identified the difficulty of recording social-emotional attainment in a reporting format organised around observable academic products, and this constraint has a predictable consequence: activities whose outcomes cannot be entered in the report book tend to lose their place in the timetable when it is contested. Research that documents social-emotional gains without addressing how those gains are to be recorded leaves the practice it recommends institutionally unsupported (Amalia et al., 2023; Al Umaili, 2025).

The study has clear limitations. It examined a single institution with fifteen children over eight weeks, so the findings describe this case and are transferable only to the extent that a reader judges another setting sufficiently similar. Observation was conducted by a single researcher, and although member checking corrected two interpretations, systematic observer bias cannot be excluded. No standardised measure of social-emotional competence was administered, so the study cannot state how much competence changed, only which behaviours became visible and

under what conditions. The eight-week period is short relative to the developmental timescale of self-regulation, and the absence of follow-up leaves the durability of the observed changes unknown.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how role play functions as a learning strategy for enhancing the social-emotional competence of children aged four to five years at RA Darul Muqomah Purwoasri, Gumukmas, Jember. On the first objective, role play was implemented in three consistent stages—preparation, enactment, and recall—across four scenarios, with role assignment governed from the fifth session onward by a visible rotation list that reduced disputes from eight occurrences in four sessions to two in eight. Teacher mediation during enactment took four forms, of which in-role prompting and emotion labelling together accounted for two-thirds of all interventions, while direct resolution declined over the observation period.

On the second objective, all five dimensions of social-emotional competence became visible, but with markedly different frequency. Social skill was observed in every session and empathy in eleven of twelve, including episodes in which children stepped outside the fiction to attend to a genuinely distressed peer. Self-motivation appeared in ten sessions and self-awareness in nine, the latter almost entirely during the recall stage. Self-regulation was least frequent, appearing in seven sessions, and remained dependent on teacher mediation throughout; the decisive factor was whether the teacher named the child's feeling before proposing a course of action.

The study concludes that role play enhances social-emotional competence when three conditions are met: scenarios are selected according to the dimension the teacher intends to develop rather than by familiarity alone; role allocation is governed by a predictable, visible procedure; and adult mediation is graduated, beginning with emotion labelling and handing negotiation back to the children rather than resolving disputes directly. The recall stage emerges as more than a closing routine, since it was during recall that children articulated the distinction between the character's feelings and their own—the clearest indication that the role was functioning as a perspective rather than as a costume.

Further research is needed in three directions. A study combining observation with a validated social-emotional measure administered before and after would allow the magnitude of change to be estimated alongside its texture. A design that follows children for a semester or longer would establish whether the behaviours documented here consolidate or dissipate once the intervention ends. And a comparative study of scenario types, holding mediation constant, would test the inference drawn here that different scenarios elicit different dimensions. Work along the second and third of these lines is currently under way.

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