

# GAME-BASED LEARNING TO DEVELOP EARLY CHILDHOOD SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE: CREATIVE STRATEGIES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS IN THE ERA OF INDEPENDENT LEARNING

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## Abstract

This study aims to examine the implementation of game-based learning (GBL) as a creative strategy for early childhood teachers in developing early childhood social-emotional competencies in the era of Independent Learning. A descriptive qualitative approach was used to explore the learning practices carried out by teachers in several PAUD institutions, with data collection techniques in the form of observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The results of the study showed that GBL was applied through various educational games such as role plays, emotional cards, and group cooperation, which were designed to train empathy, emotion management, and children's relational skills. Teachers play an active role as facilitators who accompany the play process, as well as conduct reflective evaluations of children's development. Games that are carried out in a structured manner have been proven to have a positive impact on children's ability to interact socially and manage feelings. The teacher's creative strategy is also reflected in the use of simple game tools and traditional game modifications. This research confirms that GBL is a relevant and effective approach in the context of Freedom of Learning, as well as supporting the development of early childhood character in a comprehensive and sustainable manner.

**Keywords:** *Game-Based Learning, Social-Emotional Competence, Early Childhood, Early Childhood Teachers, Independent Learning.*

## INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (PAUD) is an important foundation in the formation of children's character and personality. In this phase, the child is at a stage of rapid development in cognitive, motor, language, and especially social-emotional aspects (Wahyudi et al., 2024). Therefore, education at an early age should not only focus on the academic aspect, but should also include the development of social and emotional competencies (Marsini, 2023). Social-emotional competence refers to the child's ability to recognize and manage emotions, build positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Pentón Herrera, 2020). This skill is important because it is the basis for children to build healthy interactions, understand the feelings of others, and develop a sense of empathy and cooperation. One of the main challenges faced by PAUD teachers is how to deliver learning materials that are not only informative but also fun and meaningful. In this context, the game-based learning (GBL) approach is a creative strategy that should be considered. Game-based learning is a learning approach that uses games as a medium to achieve educational goals. According to (Prensky, 2001), the game is able to create an interactive, engaging learning environment and provide room for exploration and collaboration.

Through games, children can learn to control emotions when losing, be sportsmanlike, wait for their turn, and work together in groups (Kurniawan et al., 2023). This shows that GBL has great potential to develop social-emotional aspects naturally and pleasantly (Isenberg & Jalongo, 2006). Within the framework of the Merdeka Learning policy, teachers are given the flexibility to innovate and choose learning approaches that suit the needs of their students. This opens up a wide space for PAUD teachers to apply creative approaches, including game-based learning, in the daily learning process. The philosophy of Independent Learning carried out by the Ministry of Education and Culture encourages the creation of an independent, fun, and student-centered learning atmosphere. In this case, game-based learning is in line with the principle of Independent Learning which prioritizes active learning

and (Hadi et al., 2023). Early childhood teachers are required not only as teachers, but also as facilitators, learning designers, and innovators in creating activities that facilitate children's holistic development. This is in line with Vygotsky's theory of the proximal developmental zone (ZPD), where the child needs help from an adult or peers to reach his or her maximum potential (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). Game-based learning, if designed appropriately, is able to facilitate children to be in their ZPD. The teacher acts as a scaffolder who accompanies children during play, provides guidance, and directs the experience of play towards strengthening social-emotional competence (Marsini, 2025). In addition, Piaget's theory of constructivism also supports the approach of play as a medium of learning. (Piaget, 1976) states that early childhood learns most effectively through hands-on experience and interaction with the environment, which can be optimally facilitated through play activities. Social games, such as role-playing, group play, or rule-based games, indirectly teach social values such as sharing, taking turns, and resolving conflicts peacefully. This is a real form of social-emotional learning that occurs naturally. Research from (Denham, 2006) It shows that children who have good social-emotional skills tend to be more academically prepared, able to establish healthy social relationships, and better able to deal with stress and pressure in the school environment. Therefore, integrating game-based learning in early childhood education is not only a strategy to make learning fun, but also a strategic effort to shape emotionally and socially healthy children from an early age. However, the application of GBL in early childhood education requires special understanding and skills from teachers. Teachers need to be able to design games that are educational, safe, age-appropriate, and have clear learning goals, especially in the social-emotional aspects (Kurniawan et al., 2023).

Another challenge faced is limited resources, both in terms of game tools, teacher training, and available time. Therefore, it takes teachers' creativity in processing simple games in the environment into effective learning facilities. It is also important for teachers to reflect and evaluate each play activity carried out, to find out the extent to which the game is able to develop children's social-emotional skills in real time (Dwikeloranto et al., 2023). In the Indonesian context, there are still limited studies that specifically highlight the integration of game-based learning in the development of early childhood social-emotional competencies. In fact, this is an important aspect that needs to be explored more deeply to strengthen educational practices that are contextual and responsive to the needs of the times. Through research and exploration of game-based learning practices in the early childhood education environment, teachers can find innovative strategies that can be an inspiration in implementing effective and fun learning approaches. In today's digital age, even digital games can be used selectively as part of a learning strategy, as long as they are in accordance with the principles of early childhood development and combined with real interaction with teachers and peers. Therefore, it is important to conduct a study on how PAUD teachers apply game-based learning strategies as a form of creative response to the demands of the Independent Learning curriculum, as well as the extent to which this approach contributes to significantly developing children's social-emotional competence.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This research method uses a descriptive qualitative approach with the aim of understanding in depth how game-based learning strategies are applied by early childhood teachers in developing early childhood social-emotional competencies in the era of Independent Learning (Agustianti et al., 2022). The qualitative approach was chosen because it is suitable for exploring complex educational phenomena, is contextual, and emphasizes the meaning behind teachers' actions and experiences in the daily learning process. This research was conducted in several PAUD institutions in urban and semi-urban areas, with the consideration that differences in social context can affect the learning practices applied by teachers. The technique of selecting locations and participants is carried out purposively, namely selecting PAUD teachers who have implemented game-based learning consistently and creatively in their teaching and learning activities. The main participants in this study were early childhood education teachers, while supporting informants included school principals and parents of children to gain a more holistic perspective.

Data collection was carried out through direct observation of classroom learning activities, in-depth interviews with teachers, and documentation in the form of photos of activities, reflective notes of teachers, and learning tools used. Observations were made to capture how children's social and emotional interactions are formed during play activities, as well as how the role of teachers in facilitating the process. Interviews were used to explore teachers' understanding of the importance of social-emotional competence and how they design and evaluate the games they play (Jogiyanto Hartono, 2018). The validity of the data is maintained through triangulation of techniques and sources, namely by comparing the results of observations, interviews, and documentation to ensure the consistency of the information obtained. In addition, member checking was carried out on informants to confirm the correctness of the interpretation made by the researcher. Data analysis is carried out thematically with the stages of

data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawn. The collected data was examined to find the main patterns, meanings, and themes that represent game-based learning strategies and their contribution to the development of children's social-emotional competencies (Bogdan & in Moleong, 2001). By using this method, it is hoped that the research will be able to provide a comprehensive picture of the play-based creative learning practices applied by PAUD teachers, as well as how these strategies are in line with the spirit of Merdeka Learning in forming socially and emotionally resilient children.

## **RESULTS OF RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION**

### **1. Forms of Game-Based Learning Implementation by Early Childhood Education Teachers**

The results of observations and interviews showed that PAUD teachers at the research location had implemented various forms of game-based learning that were adapted to the characteristics of the students and the local context. The games used are not only physical but also involve elements of role-playing, strategy, and collaboration. Some examples of games that are predominantly used are role play, emotional card games, cooperative block games, and group story composing games. The teachers designed the game with specific goals, such as practicing empathy, recognizing emotions, practicing communication, and developing the ability to resolve conflicts peacefully. This game-based learning activity is generally carried out every day, both as an opening to learning activities and as the core of thematic activities. Teachers also modify traditional games to suit the social-emotional competencies they want to achieve. In the implementation process, teachers act as active facilitators. They give briefings before the game starts, observe the children's interactions while playing, and reflect with the children after the game is over. This shows that teachers do not only use games as an interlude, but as an integral part of the learning process.

The results of the study show that PAUD teachers have successfully implemented game-based learning creatively and contextually. They do not just use games as entertainment, but as a means of learning that is integrated with the goals of children's social-emotional development. This implementation is very much in line with the view (Prensky, 2001) which states that games can be a powerful medium of learning because they create deep emotional and cognitive engagement. Teachers use role play, card games, and group games as a means to foster children's social interaction and emotional awareness. This strategy shows that teachers have understood the importance of play in the child's development process as affirmed by (Piaget, 1976), that early childhood learns most effectively through concrete activities and hands-on experience. The designed games are not only fun, but also have an educational dimension that leads the child to experience, respond and reflect on their social experiences. In addition, the active involvement of the teacher as a facilitator who accompanies and directs shows the application of Vygotsky's theory of the proximal developmental zone (ZPD). In this context, teachers help children to move from potential that they are not able to do on their own to actual abilities through structured but still flexible play.

### **2. The Influence of Game-Based Learning on Children's Social-Emotional Development**

Findings from interviews and observational notes show that children who are actively involved in game-based learning show positive development in terms of the ability to interact, convey feelings, work together, and manage emotions. Teachers reported an increase in children who previously tended to be passive or individualistic to become more communicative and open to their peers. This is reinforced by the observation of children's responses when playing, where they begin to get used to using words to express feelings, apologize if they make mistakes in the game, and be able to calm down when facing conflicts. Games that contain elements of teamwork also help children understand the concept of shared responsibility and the importance of listening to others' opinions. In general, games designed with a reflective approach provide space for children to express their emotions and understand their friends' feelings. Teachers also use the moment of play as a medium for storytelling and dialogue, which strengthens the affective dimension of the learning process.

The application of game-based learning has been proven to have a positive impact on children's social-emotional development. Children show improvements in the ability to manage emotions, build social relationships, and understand other people's perspectives. These findings reinforce the idea of (Denham, 2006) which emphasizes that strong social-emotional skills in childhood will have a long-term impact on a child's academic readiness and psychological well-being. Games such as group storytelling and cooperative games form a safe space for children to learn to listen, discuss, resolve conflicts, and manage emotions when winning or losing. All of these aspects are part of the five main competencies put forward by the (Pentón Herrera, 2020), namely self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relational skills, and responsible decision-making. In this context, games are not only a fun activity, but become a natural means for the exercise of social life. When children play together, they learn to resolve

differences, understand each other's emotional expressions, and show empathy. Through structured play, children experience the process of internalizing social values that cannot be taught theoretically alone.

### **3. Teachers' Creative Strategies in Designing and Evaluating Games**

Early childhood education teachers show high creativity in designing games, especially in conditions of limited resources. They make use of simple materials such as buttons, used cardboard, ice cream sticks, or natural objects such as rocks and leaves as interesting and educational play tools. In addition, teachers make modifications to games that children are familiar with so that they have more directed learning goals. In evaluating the effectiveness of the game, teachers do not use formal instruments, but rely more on behavioral observation and daily reflection. Evaluation is carried out through group discussions with children after play, where teachers ask the child how they feel, the difficulties they experience, and how they resolve conflicts during play.

**Table 1. Examples of games and social-emotional competencies developed based on field findings**

<b>Game Name</b>	<b>Social-Emotional Goals</b>	<b>Teacher Strategy</b>	<b>Child Response</b>
Emotion Cards	Recognizing and mentioning basic emotions	Teacher shows pictures, children guess and imitate	Children are more expressive and able to recognize feelings
Role Play (Doctor)	Practice empathy and communication	The teacher makes a scenario, the child chooses the role	Children actively dialogue and show attention
Compiling Group Stories	Solve problems together, listen	Teacher gives random pictures, child makes up stories	Children learn cooperation and wait for their turn
Teamwork Beam	Cooperation and conflict management	Children build towers together, rules are defined	Children discuss and share roles fairly

These results suggest that game-based learning approaches, if applied creatively and reflectively, contribute greatly to early childhood social-emotional development. In addition to creating a fun learning atmosphere, this approach also provides space for children to experience, feel, and practice life skills from an early age. The creative strategy of PAUD teachers in designing and evaluating games is an important component in the successful implementation of game-based learning. Teachers are able to transform simple materials into interesting and meaningful learning mediums. This creativity strongly supports the principle of Freedom of Learning which provides freedom for educators to innovate according to the characteristics of students. In addition to game design, the evaluation approach that is narrative and reflective also shows a holistic orientation in assessing child development. Teachers do not only assess the results, but pay attention to the process and dynamics of children's interactions during play. This is in line with the principle of authentic evaluation in early childhood education, where assessment is carried out based on direct observation of children's behavior in real situations. The teacher's actions of reflecting with the child after the game, such as asking about their feelings and how they solve problems, are a form of approach that integrates the social-emotional dimension into the assessment. This supports the statement (Isenberg & Jalongo, 2006) that games are an effective medium to help children learn to regulate emotions and cultivate healthy social relationships. Thus, the teacher's strategy is not only technical, but also shows a deep pedagogical understanding of how the child learns and develops. Teachers are not only activity designers, but also growth and development companions who are sensitive to children's emotional and social dynamics.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study shows that the game-based learning (GBL) approach has proven to be effective in developing early childhood social-emotional competencies when applied creatively and contextually by early childhood teachers. The games designed are not only recreative, but also have a clear educational purpose, especially in shaping children's ability to recognize and manage emotions, establish healthy social relationships, and develop a sense of empathy and responsibility. Early childhood teachers in this study have implemented various forms of games such as role plays, cooperative games, emotional cards, and compiling group stories directed to support social-emotional competence. Teachers play an active role as facilitators, companions, as well as observers who are sensitive to the emotional dynamics of children during the play process. This reflects the application of Vygotsky's theory of the proximal developmental zone, where the child is guided in achieving optimal development through social interaction. The

implementation of GBL in the PAUD environment has a real positive impact on children's social behavior. Children become more communicative, open in expressing feelings, and better able to resolve conflicts peacefully. These findings reinforce the view of CASEL and Denham that social-emotional education that begins early will provide an important foundation for children's character development and future learning readiness. In addition, the creativity of teachers in designing games from simple materials reflects the spirit of Merdeka Belajar, where teachers are given the freedom to innovate in order to create a meaningful and fun learning process. Reflective evaluations also strengthen the results of social-emotional learning that cannot be measured with formal instruments alone. Thus, game-based learning can be positioned as a pedagogical strategy that is not only fun but also transformative, supporting the child's social-emotional development in a natural, relevant, and sustainable way. The implementation of this strategy should continue to be supported through teacher training, resource provision, and education policies that favor the unique characteristics of early childhood.

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