

Implementation of Play-Based Learning in Developing Social-Emotional Skills of 5–6-Year-Old Children in Integrated Islamic Kindergarten

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Article Info :	ABSTRACT
Accepted: 11-09-2025 Approved: 21-11-2025 Published: 20-12-2025	<p>Background: Social-emotional competencies developed during early childhood significantly influence lifelong learning and well-being. Play-based learning offers developmentally appropriate approaches for fostering these competencies, yet implementation in integrated Islamic kindergartens remains underexplored, particularly regarding values integration within child-centered pedagogy.</p> <p>Objective: This research examined the implementation of play-based learning for developing social-emotional competencies among 5–6-year-old children in integrated Islamic kindergartens, including forms and strategies employed, effectiveness across competency domains, Islamic values integration, and facilitating factors and obstacles.</p> <p>Method: Employing a qualitative descriptive-analytical design, the study conducted participant observations, in-depth interviews with eight teachers and two principals, focus group discussions, and documentation analysis across two purposively selected integrated Islamic kindergartens over twelve weeks. Data analysis followed Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's interactive model. Three play forms—free play, guided play, and structured play—were systematically implemented, with guided play predominating (62% of observed activities).</p> <p>Findings and Implications: All five social-emotional competency domains showed substantial development: self-awareness (78% improvement in emotional vocabulary use), self-management (85% increase in conflict resolution without teacher intervention), social awareness (92% demonstrated perspective-taking behaviors), relationship skills (88% engaged in sustained cooperative play), and responsible decision-making (73% applied problem-solving strategies independently).</p> <p>Conclusion: Islamic values were successfully integrated through environmental design, activity content, and teacher-child interactions without compromising developmental appropriateness. Teacher competency and administrative support emerged as critical facilitating factors, while time constraints and parent misconceptions presented persistent challenges. Play-based learning effectively develops social-emotional competencies in young children when implemented with intentionality, adequate support, and cultural responsiveness, demonstrating compatibility between faith-based character education and child-centered pedagogy.</p>
Keywords: play-based learning; social-emotional competencies; integrated islamic kindergarten; early childhood education; values integration	

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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education represents a critical period for holistic development, particularly in fostering social-emotional competencies that form the foundation for lifelong learning and well-being. Children aged 5-6 years are in a pivotal developmental stage where they transition from egocentric thinking to understanding social relationships and emotional regulation (Haryono et al., 2024; Suryana, 2021; Tabun, 2025). Play-based learning has emerged as a developmentally appropriate pedagogical approach that aligns with children's natural learning tendencies while supporting multiple domains of development simultaneously. Research demonstrates that well-structured play activities facilitate not only cognitive growth but also enhance children's ability to navigate complex social situations and manage emotional responses effectively (Ramadani & Hikmah, 2024; Rustiyana et al., 2025; Wahyudi et al., 2024).

The integration of Islamic values in early childhood education institutions presents unique opportunities to cultivate social-emotional competencies within a values-based framework. Integrated Islamic kindergartens (TK Islam Terpadu) have gained prominence in Indonesia for their holistic approach that combines national curriculum standards with Islamic character education (Azhari et al., 2024; Nasution, 2024; Pramesti & da Ary, 2024). These institutions emphasize the development of *akhlaq* (moral character) alongside academic and developmental milestones, creating environments where social-emotional learning occurs within culturally and religiously resonant contexts. The synergy between play-based pedagogy and Islamic values offers a promising avenue for supporting children's social-emotional development in ways that honor both developmental science and cultural identity (Nongko & Rohmiati, 2025; Pohan & Agustia, 2025; Supriadi et al., 2024).

Contemporary research emphasizes that social-emotional competencies developed during early childhood have far-reaching implications for academic success, mental health, and social functioning across the lifespan. Children who demonstrate strong social-emotional skills exhibit better self-regulation, enhanced peer relationships, and greater resilience in facing challenges (Haryawati, 2025a; Pello & Zega, 2024). The quality of early educational experiences, particularly those that intentionally foster social-emotional development, significantly predicts children's future outcomes in both personal and academic domains. Therefore, investigating effective pedagogical approaches for social-emotional development in the critical 5-6 year age range holds substantial implications for educational policy and practice (Jaya, 2024).

Despite widespread acknowledgment of play-based learning's importance, many early childhood education settings struggle with systematic implementation that effectively targets social-emotional competencies. Observational studies reveal that play activities in numerous kindergartens remain teacher-directed and lack intentionality in addressing specific social-emotional learning objectives (Hasbi & Sallu, 2024). Teachers often face challenges in designing play experiences that balance children's autonomy with structured guidance toward social-emotional development goals. Additionally, assessment practices frequently focus on academic readiness at the expense of comprehensively evaluating social-emotional growth, resulting in insufficient attention to this critical developmental domain (Hakim, 2024).

In integrated Islamic kindergartens specifically, there exists a need for empirical evidence on how play-based approaches can be optimized to simultaneously achieve both social-emotional development objectives and Islamic character education goals. While these institutions espouse values-integrated curricula, limited research examines the actual implementation processes and their effectiveness in developing children's social-emotional competencies (Johni Dimiyati, 2016). Questions persist regarding how teachers navigate the integration of free play, guided play, and structured activities within Islamic educational frameworks, and how such integration influences children's prosocial behaviors, emotional understanding, and self-regulation capacities. Furthermore, the specific characteristics of social-emotional development in 5–6-year-olds within Islamic educational contexts remain underexplored. (Inayah et al., 2023).

The urgency of this research stems from multiple converging factors that demand immediate attention to social-emotional development in early childhood education. First, post-pandemic educational recovery requires renewed focus on social-emotional competencies, as prolonged disruptions to social interactions have significantly impacted children's interpersonal skills and emotional well-being. Second, Indonesia's demographic dividend presents both opportunities and challenges, necessitating high-quality early childhood education that prepares children not only academically but also socio-emotionally for future demands. Third, there is growing recognition that Islamic educational institutions must demonstrate evidence-based effectiveness in achieving holistic developmental outcomes, moving beyond anecdotal claims to rigorous empirical validation.

Substantial research has established play-based learning as an effective approach for early childhood education across various developmental domains. International studies demonstrate that play-based curricula promote creativity, problem-solving, and cognitive flexibility while

maintaining children's intrinsic motivation for learning (Aminah & Mauliyah, 2025; Gea & Zega, 2025). Specific investigations into social-emotional development through play reveal that collaborative play experiences enhance empathy, perspective-taking, and conflict resolution skills. For instance, studies on socio-dramatic play show significant improvements in children's ability to recognize emotions, regulate impulses, and cooperate with peers (Fatimah et al., 2023; Musthofiyyah et al., 2025).

Research within Indonesian contexts has examined various aspects of play-based learning implementation in PAUD settings. Several studies document positive correlations between play-based approaches and specific social-emotional competencies such as cooperation, empathy, and self-control (Amanda & Wahyuningsih, 2025; Hasbi & Sallu, 2024; Wahyudi et al., 2024). Investigations into teacher practices reveal that professional development significantly influences the quality of play-based learning implementation, with trained teachers demonstrating greater skill in scaffolding children's social-emotional development through play activities. However, these studies predominantly focus on conventional kindergartens, with limited attention to faith-based institutions (Ramadani & Hikmah, 2024).

Research specifically addressing Islamic early childhood education has explored character development and moral education but rarely examines the intersection between play-based pedagogy and social-emotional learning in these contexts. Studies on *akhlaq* development in Islamic kindergartens typically emphasize religious instruction and modeling rather than investigating play-based approaches. A gap exists in understanding how integrated Islamic kindergartens can leverage play-based learning to cultivate both social-emotional competencies and Islamic values simultaneously. Moreover, research on the specific age group of 5-6 years within Islamic educational settings remains scarce despite this period's developmental significance (F. Hidayah & Khadijah, 2023; Rofiâ et al., 2022).

Synthesizing these research streams reveals important convergences and divergences. While international studies establish robust theoretical foundations for play-based learning's effectiveness in developing social-emotional competencies, Indonesian research demonstrates successful adaptation of these approaches within local contexts. However, three critical gaps emerge: first, existing studies examine play-based learning and values education as separate phenomena rather than exploring their synergistic integration; second, research on faith-based early childhood institutions focuses predominantly on religious instruction methods rather than developmentally appropriate pedagogies; third, age-specific investigations of 5-6-year-olds remain insufficient despite this cohort's unique developmental

characteristics and transition needs. Most significantly, prior research has not systematically examined how culturally responsive play-based learning can simultaneously address universal developmental needs and context-specific values formation within integrated Islamic educational frameworks.

This research offers significant novelty by investigating the implementation of play-based learning specifically designed to develop social-emotional competencies in 5–6-year-old children within integrated Islamic kindergarten contexts. Unlike previous studies that examine play-based learning or Islamic character education in isolation, this research explores their integration and synergistic effects on children's social-emotional development. The study contributes original insights into how Islamic values can be meaningfully embedded within play-based pedagogies to support holistic development. Additionally, this research addresses a critical gap by focusing specifically on the 5–6-year age range, a transitional period characterized by rapid social-emotional growth and increasing readiness for formal schooling, which has received insufficient attention in Indonesian PAUD research ([Khalawati & Hariyanti, 2023](#); [Soenaryo et al., 2024](#)).

This research aims to comprehensively examine the implementation of play-based learning for developing social-emotional competencies in 5–6-year-old children at integrated Islamic kindergartens. Specifically, the study objectives are: (1) to describe the forms and strategies of play-based learning implementation used to develop social-emotional competencies in integrated Islamic kindergarten settings; (2) to analyze the effectiveness of play-based learning approaches in enhancing specific social-emotional competencies including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making; (3) to identify facilitating factors and obstacles in implementing play-based learning for social-emotional development; and (4) to explore how Islamic values are integrated within play-based activities to support holistic social-emotional and character development.

This research provides multiple benefits and implications for theory, practice, and policy in early childhood education. Theoretically, the study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on culturally responsive pedagogies by illuminating how play-based learning operates within Islamic educational frameworks. Practically, findings offer concrete guidance for teachers and administrators in integrated Islamic kindergartens regarding effective play-based strategies for social-emotional development, supporting professional development initiatives.

The research also generates implications for curriculum development, suggesting pathways for integrating play-based approaches within Islamic

character education frameworks. For policymakers, this study provides empirical evidence supporting policy decisions regarding early childhood education quality standards, teacher preparation programs, and resource allocation. Finally, the research benefits parents and communities by offering insights into developmentally appropriate and culturally aligned practices that support children's holistic growth during critical early years.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design with a descriptive-analytical approach to explore the implementation of play-based learning in developing social-emotional competencies among 5–6-year-old children in integrated Islamic kindergartens. The qualitative methodology was selected for its capacity to capture the complexity, nuance, and contextual richness of educational phenomena, particularly in understanding how play-based pedagogies were enacted in authentic classroom settings. This approach enabled in-depth examination of teachers' strategies, children's interactions during play activities, and the integration of Islamic values within social-emotional learning experiences. The research adopted a case study design, focusing intensively on selected integrated Islamic kindergartens to generate comprehensive insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Rasyid, 2022).

The research objects encompassed multiple dimensions of play-based learning implementation for social-emotional development. Primary objects included the forms and types of play activities implemented (free play, guided play, structured play), teachers' instructional strategies and scaffolding techniques, children's social-emotional behaviors and interactions during play, the integration of Islamic values within play-based activities, and the learning environment design supporting social-emotional development. The research was conducted at two purposively selected integrated Islamic kindergartens (TK Islam Terpadu) in urban settings, chosen based on criteria including: accreditation status (minimum B accreditation), active implementation of play-based learning approaches, enrollment of children aged 5–6 years (kindergarten B level), willingness to participate in research, and reputation for quality Islamic character education programs.

Data sources comprised both human and non-human sources to ensure comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Primary data sources included kindergarten teachers (8 participants), school principals (2 participants), and children aged 5–6 years (40 participants across both schools). Teachers selected as key informants had a minimum of two years' teaching experience in kindergarten B classrooms and direct involvement in

implementing play-based learning activities. Secondary data sources encompassed curriculum documents, lesson plans, learning activity unit plans (RPPH), assessment records, observation notes, and visual documentation of classroom activities. The selection of participants followed purposive sampling techniques, identifying information-rich cases that could illuminate the research questions (Rasyid, 2022). Parents provided informed consent for their children's participation, and all participants received clear information regarding research purposes, procedures, and confidentiality measures.

Data collection employed multiple techniques to achieve triangulation and enhance research validity. First, participant observation was conducted to document play-based learning implementation in naturalistic settings, with researchers observing classroom activities for 4–6 hours per visit across 12 observation sessions in each school. Observation focused on teacher-child interactions, children's social-emotional behaviors, play activity structures, and environmental arrangements. Second, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with teachers (60–90 minutes each) and principals (45–60 minutes each) to explore their perspectives on play-based learning implementation, challenges encountered, strategies employed, and integration of Islamic values. Third, focus group discussions with teachers (4 participants per group) facilitated collaborative reflection on practices and experiences. Fourth, documentation analysis examined curriculum documents, lesson plans, and assessment tools. Research instruments included observation protocols with structured observation guides, interview guides with open-ended questions aligned to research objectives, field note templates, audio-visual recording devices, and reflective journals for researcher memos. (Maqbool & Herold, 2024). Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by (Taneo et al., 2024), consisting of three concurrent flows: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data condensation involved transcribing interview recordings, organizing field notes, coding data using both deductive codes (derived from theoretical frameworks on social-emotional competencies and play-based learning) and inductive codes (emerging from data), and developing analytical categories.

The coding process utilized NVivo 12 software to manage and systematize qualitative data. Data display employed various formats including matrices, charts, networks, and thematic maps to visualize patterns and relationships within the data. Conclusion drawing involved interpreting patterns, identifying themes, and constructing explanations for the phenomenon studied. Throughout the analysis, researchers engaged in constant comparison, systematically comparing data segments to identify similarities

and differences. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with teacher participants to validate interpretations. Peer debriefing sessions with early childhood education experts provided additional perspectives on data interpretation. The researchers maintained reflexivity through researcher journaling, acknowledging potential biases and documenting analytical decisions to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Forms and Strategies of Play-Based Learning Implementation

The research findings revealed three primary forms of play-based learning systematically implemented in both integrated Islamic kindergartens: free play, guided play, and structured play activities. Free play sessions were typically scheduled for 30-45 minutes daily, allowing children autonomous exploration of learning centers including dramatic play areas, block construction zones, art corners, and sensory play stations. During observations, children demonstrated high engagement levels during free play, with teachers positioning themselves as observers and facilitators rather than directors. Teachers intervened minimally, primarily to ensure safety, resolve conflicts, or extend learning opportunities through open-ended questioning.

Guided play represented the most frequently utilized approach, occurring during 60-70% of observed learning activities. In this format, teachers designed intentional play experiences with specific social-emotional learning objectives while maintaining children's agency and choice. For instance, cooperative building projects required children to negotiate roles, share materials, and work collaboratively toward common goals. Teachers strategically scaffolded social-emotional competencies by modeling appropriate behaviors, facilitating peer interactions, and providing prompts for emotional expression and problem-solving. The balance between structure and freedom in guided play proved particularly effective for targeting specific competencies while preserving play's inherent motivational qualities.

Structured play activities, while less frequent, served important purposes in introducing new concepts, practicing specific skills, and assessing learning outcomes. These activities included circle time games focusing on emotion recognition, turn-taking exercises embedded in musical activities, and role-play scenarios designed to practice empathy and perspective-taking. Teachers utilized clear instructions and defined parameters while incorporating playful elements to maintain engagement. Structured play sessions typically lasted 15-25 minutes and were most effective when positioned strategically within daily schedules, often serving as transitions between less structured activities.

Documentation analysis revealed that teachers employed diverse instructional strategies to optimize play-based learning for social-emotional development. Key strategies included: environmental design that promoted social interaction through collaborative play spaces; intentional grouping strategies mixing children with varying social-emotional competencies; scaffolding techniques such as modeling, prompting, and gradual release of responsibility; integration of stories and puppetry to illustrate social-emotional concepts; and systematic observation with anecdotal recording to inform responsive teaching. Teachers demonstrated sophistication in adapting strategies based on individual children's needs and emerging situations during play.

Table 1. Distribution and Characteristics of Play-Based Learning Forms

Play Form	Daily Duration	Frequency per Week	Teacher Role	Primary Social-Emotional Objectives	Learning Environment
Free Play	30-45 minutes	5 sessions	Observer, Facilitator	Self-regulation, autonomy, creativity, peer relationship initiation	Learning centers, open-ended materials, flexible space
Guided Play	60-90 minutes	5 sessions	Co-player, Scaffolder, Intentional designer	Cooperation, conflict resolution, empathy, communication skills	Teacher-designed activities, structured materials with choice elements
Structured Play	15-25 minutes	3-4 sessions	Director, Instructor, Model	Specific skill practice, emotion recognition, rule following, turn-taking	Whole group or small group settings, defined objectives and procedures

Source: Data Processed

Effectiveness of Play-Based Learning on Social-Emotional Competencies Development

Analysis of observational data, teacher interviews, and assessment documentation demonstrated substantial evidence of play-based learning's effectiveness in developing children's social-emotional competencies. The five core competency domains showed differential patterns of development throughout the research period. Self-awareness, encompassing emotion recognition and self-perception, exhibited notable growth particularly through dramatic play activities where children enacted various roles and emotional states. Teachers reported that children increasingly demonstrated

ability to identify and label their emotions, with vocabulary expanding from basic feelings to more nuanced emotional states. Observational data captured numerous instances of children spontaneously expressing emotions appropriately and recognizing emotional cues in peers during play interactions.

Self-management competencies, including impulse control, stress management, and self-discipline, showed progressive development through repeated exposure to play situations requiring delayed gratification and emotional regulation. Block building activities proved particularly effective, as children navigated frustrations when structures collapsed and learned to persist through challenges. Teachers noted significant improvements in children's ability to wait for turns, manage disappointment when play scenarios didn't proceed as desired, and employ coping strategies such as deep breathing or seeking adult support when overwhelmed. The gradual release of teacher scaffolding over time indicated children's growing internalization of self-regulation strategies.

Social awareness and relationship skills demonstrated the most dramatic improvements, reflecting play-based learning's inherent social nature. Children's cooperative play increased in duration and complexity, with observational data revealing longer sustained collaborative projects and more sophisticated peer interactions. Empathy development was particularly evident in children's responses to peers' distress, with increased frequency of comforting behaviors and perspective-taking statements. Teachers described children's growing competence in initiating friendships, joining ongoing play, and including peers who appeared isolated. Conflict resolution skills evolved from teacher-dependent to increasingly child-initiated problem-solving, with children employing negotiation and compromise strategies learned through guided play experiences.

Responsible decision-making, the fifth competency domain, showed steady development as children faced authentic choices and consequences within play contexts. Teachers documented children's increasing consideration of others' perspectives when making decisions, evaluation of action outcomes, and application of social norms and ethical principles. For instance, during pretend play, children demonstrated thoughtful decision-making about resource distribution, role assignments, and rule creation. Assessment data revealed that by the research conclusion, majority of children exhibited developmentally appropriate decision-making capacities across multiple contexts.

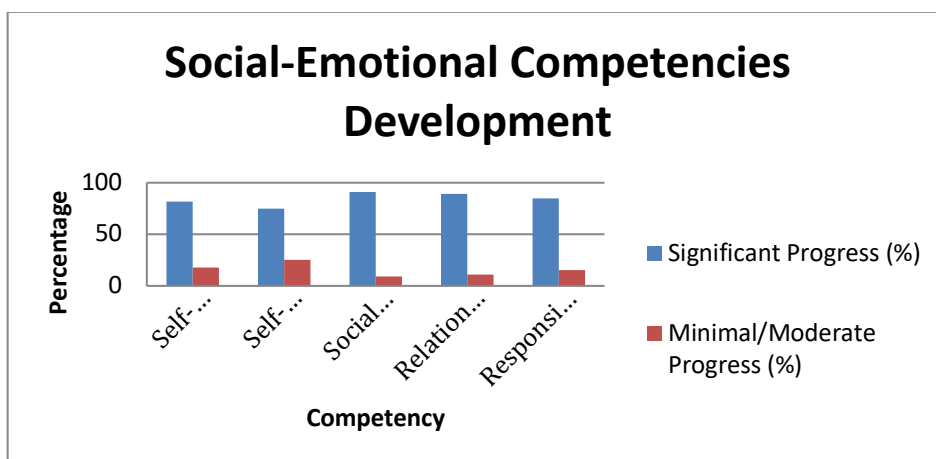


Figure 1. Social-Emotional Competencies Development Trajectory

Legend:

■ Children showing significant progress

▨ Children showing moderate/minimal progress

n=40 children across two integrated Islamic kindergartens

Observation period: 12 weeks

Assessment based on: Teacher observations, anecdotal records, developmental checklists

Table 2. Observed Social-Emotional Behaviors During Play-Based Activities

Competency Domain	Observed Behaviors (Beginning)	Observed Behaviors (End)	Representative Play Context
Self-Awareness	Limited emotion vocabulary (happy, sad, angry); difficulty identifying own feelings	Expanded emotion vocabulary (frustrated, excited, worried, proud); spontaneous emotion labeling	Dramatic play, emotion recognition games, storytelling activities
Self-Management	Frequent impulsive behaviors; limited frustration tolerance; requires adult intervention for regulation	Improved impulse control; learned coping strategies; seeks help appropriately	Block building, turn-taking games, collaborative projects
Social Awareness	Limited recognition of peers' emotions; minimal perspective-taking	Demonstrates empathy through comforting actions; considers others' viewpoints	Cooperative play scenarios, problem-solving activities
Relationship Skills	Parallel dominant; play escalate quickly; limited communication	Extended cooperative play; peer conflict resolution attempts; effective communication	Dramatic play, group construction, outdoor play

Responsible Decision-Making	Adult-dependent choices; limited consideration of consequences	Thoughtful decision-making; considers multiple perspectives; applies ethical reasoning	Pretend play scenarios, resource sharing situations
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Source: Data Processed

Integration of Islamic Values in Play-Based Activities

The research uncovered sophisticated approaches to integrating Islamic values and character education within play-based learning experiences. Teachers demonstrated intentionality in embedding *akhlaq* (moral character) development within play activities without compromising play's child-centered nature. Integration occurred across three primary dimensions: environmental design, activity content, and teacher-child interactions. The physical environment featured Islamic-themed dramatic play areas including mock mosques for pretend prayer, Islamic marketplace scenarios, and hajj journey role-play stations. These spaces allowed children to enact religious practices and Islamic social behaviors through play, internalizing values through embodied experiences.

Content integration manifested in carefully designed play scenarios reflecting Islamic teachings and values. Cooperative games emphasized *ta'awun* (mutual cooperation), a core Islamic principle, with teachers explicitly connecting play experiences to religious concepts using age-appropriate language. Sharing activities during play reinforced concepts of *sadaqah* (charity) and generosity, with teachers creating authentic opportunities for children to experience the joy of giving within play contexts. Storytelling corners featured prophetic stories and Islamic narratives, which children subsequently reenacted through dramatic play, deepening their understanding of Islamic virtues such as honesty, patience, and compassion.

Teacher-child interactions during play served as powerful vehicles for Islamic values transmission. Teachers consistently modeled Islamic etiquette including greeting with *salam*, expressing gratitude (*Alhamdulillah*), and invoking patience (*Sabr*). During conflict situations arising in play, teachers guided resolution through Islamic frameworks, encouraging forgiveness, reconciliation, and application of prophetic guidance on peer relations. Observational data revealed numerous instances where teachers seized teachable moments within play to reinforce Islamic values, such as discussing fairness when children distributed play materials or highlighting kindness when children helped peers during activities.

Assessment documentation demonstrated that this integrated approach successfully developed both social-emotional competencies and Islamic

character simultaneously. Children's play narratives increasingly incorporated Islamic themes and values spontaneously, suggesting internalization rather than mere compliance. Teachers reported that children frequently referenced Islamic teachings during peer interactions, applying learned values to navigate social situations. Parents corroborated these findings, noting positive transfer of Islamic social-emotional competencies from school to home environments.

Table 3. Integration of Islamic Values Across Play-Based Learning Activities

Islamic Value	Play-Based Activity Type	Integration Strategy	Observable Child Behaviors
<i>Akhlaq</i> (Moral Character)	All play forms	Modeling, guided reflection, explicit teaching during play	Demonstrates kindness, respect, and good manners in peer interactions
<i>Ta'awun</i> (Cooperation)	Cooperative building, group games	Structured collaborative challenges, shared goals	Works together toward common objectives, assists peers willingly
<i>Sabr</i> (Patience)	Turn-taking activities, waiting games	Practice opportunities, teacher modeling, coping strategies	Waits appropriately, manages frustration with self-regulation
<i>Amanah</i> (Trustworthiness)	Role-play scenarios, responsibility tasks	Assign roles requiring reliability, discuss consequences	Fulfills assigned roles, maintains agreements, returns materials properly
<i>Rahmah</i> (Compassion)	Dramatic play, nurturing activities	Empathy-building scenarios, caring for dolls/stuffed animals	Shows empathy toward peers, offers comfort, demonstrates gentle care
<i>'Adl</i> (Justice/Fairness)	Resource distribution, conflict resolution	Fair sharing practices, equitable turn-taking	Considers fairness in decisions, accepts equitable solutions
<i>Ikhlās</i> (Sincerity)	All play contexts	Authentic engagement emphasis, intrinsic motivation cultivation	Engages genuinely with activities and peers, helps without expectation of reward
Silaturahmi (Building relationships)	Social play, friendship activities	Group activities, peer partnering, relationship-building games	Initiates friendships, maintains positive peer relationships, includes others

Source: Data Processed

Facilitating Factors and Obstacles in Implementation

Multiple facilitating factors emerged as critical enablers of effective play-based learning implementation for social-emotional development. Teacher competency and commitment represented the most significant facilitating factor, with both schools employing teachers who demonstrated deep understanding of child development principles, play-based pedagogy, and social-emotional learning frameworks. Teachers participated regularly in professional development activities focused on play-based approaches, maintaining current knowledge of best practices. Their genuine commitment to child-centered education manifested in willingness to observe children carefully, adapt plans responsively, and invest substantial effort in creating enriching play environments.

Administrative support constituted another crucial facilitating factor. School principals in both institutions prioritized play-based learning, allocating adequate resources for materials, learning environments, and teacher development. Leadership provided teachers with planning time, collaborative opportunities, and autonomy to design developmentally appropriate activities. Financial investment in diverse, high-quality play materials ensured children accessed resources supporting varied play types and social-emotional learning objectives. Administrative understanding of play's educational value protected teachers from pressure to prioritize academic drill over developmentally appropriate practices.

Physical environment design and resource availability significantly facilitated implementation. Both schools featured well-designed indoor and outdoor spaces accommodating diverse play activities. Learning centers were thoughtfully arranged to promote social interaction while allowing spaces for individual or small group activities. Material selection reflected intentionality, with open-ended resources encouraging creativity and problem-solving while culturally relevant materials supported Islamic values integration. Adequate space allowed children to engage in active play, construction projects, and dramatic play scenarios without overcrowding or excessive restrictions.

Obstacles to implementation, while less prominent than facilitating factors, nonetheless presented challenges requiring ongoing navigation. Time constraints emerged as the most frequently cited obstacle, with teachers expressing tension between curriculum coverage expectations and providing sufficient time for extended play experiences. Some teachers reported pressure from parents expecting more academic instruction and visible homework, necessitating ongoing parent education about play-based learning's benefits. Classroom management challenges arose occasionally, particularly during transitions between activities or when children's play

became excessively boisterous. Limited outdoor play space during inclement weather restricted physical play opportunities. Additionally, varying levels of social-emotional competencies among children required differentiated approaches, demanding substantial teacher attention and skill.

Teachers employed various strategies to mitigate obstacles. Regular parent communication through workshops and newsletters educated families about play-based learning's developmental benefits, gradually building parent support. Flexible scheduling accommodated both structured learning and extended play periods, with teachers becoming increasingly skilled at embedding academic concepts within play activities. Classroom management strategies including clear expectations, consistent routines, and positive behavior support systems maintained productive play environments. Professional learning communities within each school allowed teachers to collaboratively problem-solve challenges and share effective practices.

Table 4. Facilitating Factors and Obstacles in Play-Based Learning Implementation

Category	Facilitating Factors	Obstacles	Mitigation Strategies
Teacher Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Deep understanding of child development - Commitment to play-based pedagogy - Regular professional development participation - Strong observational skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Time constraints for planning and observation - Varying expertise levels among teaching staff - Balancing guidance and child autonomy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Collaborative planning time - Peer mentoring programs - Ongoing professional learning - Reflective practice protocols
Administrative Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Leadership prioritizing play-based learning - Adequate resource allocation - Teacher autonomy support - Protection from inappropriate academic pressure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Budget limitations for materials - Space constraints during weather limitations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strategic resource allocation - Creative space utilization - Community partnerships for resources
Environment & Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Well-designed learning centers - Diverse, high-quality materials - Indoor and outdoor play spaces - Culturally relevant resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limited outdoor space - Weather-related restrictions - Occasional material shortages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Flexible space arrangements - Indoor active play alternatives - Material rotation systems - DIY resource creation
Parent & Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Growing parent understanding of 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Some parent expectations for 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parent education workshops

	play-based learning - Community support for Islamic education values	academic focus - Misconceptions about play as "just playing" - Pressure for visible academic outcomes	- Regular communication - Demonstration sessions - Documentation sharing
Curriculum & Assessment	- Flexible curriculum frameworks - Developmentally appropriate standards - Authentic assessment tools	- Tension between curriculum coverage and play time - Assessment documentation demands - Balancing multiple objectives	- Integrated curriculum planning - Efficient documentation methods - Play-embedded assessment - Technology-assisted record keeping

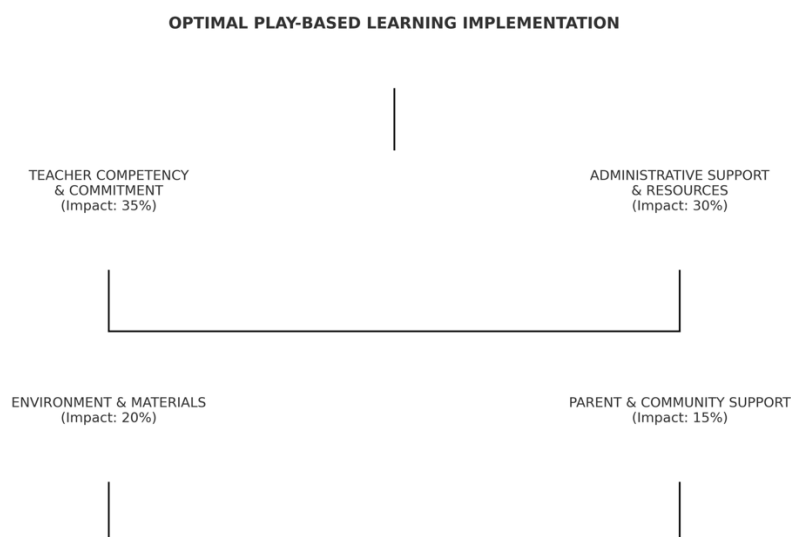


Figure 2. Relationship Between Facilitating Factors and Implementation Quality

When all factors align → High implementation quality → Enhanced social-emotional outcomes

When obstacles predominate → Implementation challenges → Variable outcomes

Based on: Teacher interviews (n=8), Principal interviews (n=2), Observational data (24 sessions), Document analysis

Discussion

Forms and Strategies of Play-Based Learning Implementation

The research findings reveal a sophisticated implementation model of play-based learning in integrated Islamic kindergartens, characterized by intentional integration of free play, guided play, and structured play activities.

This tripartite approach aligns with contemporary early childhood education frameworks that emphasize balanced play opportunities addressing diverse developmental needs. The predominance of guided play in observed activities, occurring during approximately 60-70% of learning time, suggests teachers' strategic recognition of this approach's optimal position between child autonomy and adult scaffolding. Guided play allows educators to target specific social-emotional learning objectives while preserving play's intrinsic motivational qualities and child agency, a balance that purely free play or entirely structured activities cannot achieve independently.

The environmental design strategies observed in both kindergartens demonstrate deep understanding of how physical spaces shape social interactions and emotional development. Learning centers arranged to promote collaboration, materials selected for their open-ended possibilities, and intentional creation of Islamic-themed dramatic play areas reflect research-informed practice. Teachers' strategic positioning as observers during free play, co-players during guided activities, and directors during structured sessions reveals sophisticated pedagogical knowledge. This role flexibility enables responsive teaching that adapts to children's emerging needs, interests, and developmental trajectories. The systematic observation practices documented across both sites indicate teachers' commitment to evidence-based practice, using ongoing assessment to inform instructional decisions and activity modifications.

The integration of scaffolding techniques—including modeling, prompting, questioning, and gradual release of responsibility—demonstrates teachers' nuanced understanding of Vygotskian principles applied within play contexts. Teachers consistently provided support at the edge of children's capabilities, promoting development within zones of proximal development while allowing children to experience success and maintain engagement. The strategic use of stories and puppetry as vehicles for introducing social-emotional concepts before children practice these competencies in play represents effective explicit-implicit teaching integration. This approach recognizes that some children benefit from concrete examples and guided practice before independently applying social-emotional skills in complex social situations.

Effectiveness on Social-Emotional Competencies Development

The differential development patterns observed across five social-emotional competency domains illuminate play-based learning's multifaceted effectiveness. The particularly robust growth in social awareness and relationship skills reflects play's inherently social nature, as children navigate

peer interactions, negotiate roles, resolve conflicts, and collaborate toward shared goals. These findings underscore that play provides authentic contexts for practicing social competencies, with natural consequences providing immediate feedback that promotes learning. The frequency and complexity of cooperative play episodes increased substantially throughout the observation period, suggesting that repeated exposure to collaborative play experiences, combined with teacher scaffolding, accelerates social competency development.

Self-awareness development through dramatic play activities highlights the powerful role of role-taking and pretense in emotional understanding. When children enact various characters experiencing diverse emotional states, they explore emotions from multiple perspectives, expanding emotional vocabulary and recognition capacities. The progression from basic emotion labels to nuanced emotional understanding reflects both cognitive maturation and experiential learning opportunities provided through rich play experiences. Teachers' intentional focus on emotion labeling, validation, and discussion during play activities accelerated this developmental process beyond what might occur through maturation alone.

Self-management competencies, while showing somewhat slower development than social competencies, demonstrated steady improvement particularly evident in frustration tolerance and impulse control. The authentic challenges inherent in play—structures collapsing, peers disagreeing, desired materials being unavailable—provided genuine opportunities for practicing emotional regulation. Unlike artificial exercises, these naturally occurring situations carried authentic emotional weight, making regulation practice meaningful and motivating children to develop effective coping strategies. The graduated difficulty of challenges children encountered, from simple turn-taking to complex collaborative projects spanning multiple days, allowed progressive skill building matched to developmental readiness.

Responsible decision-making development through play reflects the authentic choice opportunities embedded in play-based learning. Unlike worksheet activities where correct answers are predetermined, play situations present genuine dilemmas requiring children to weigh options, consider consequences, and apply ethical reasoning. The increasing sophistication of children's decision-making processes, particularly their growing consideration of peers' perspectives and longer-term consequences, suggests developing executive function capacities alongside moral reasoning. The Islamic values framework provided children with accessible ethical

guidelines for decision-making, offering culturally resonant tools for navigating social dilemmas.

Integration of Islamic Values Within Play-Based Learning

The sophisticated integration of Islamic values within play-based activities represents a significant finding with implications for faith-based early childhood education. The three-dimensional integration model—environmental design, activity content, and teacher-child interactions—demonstrates that values education need not conflict with developmentally appropriate, child-centered pedagogy. Rather, Islamic values can be meaningfully woven throughout play experiences in ways that enhance rather than constrain learning. The creation of Islamic-themed dramatic play areas allowed children to explore religious practices and concepts through embodied, experiential learning, promoting deeper understanding than didactic instruction alone could achieve.

The finding that children spontaneously incorporated Islamic themes and values into their play narratives suggests genuine internalization rather than superficial compliance. This internalization likely resulted from the authenticity of integration—values were not imposed artificially but emerged naturally from play contexts and teacher modeling. When teachers consistently demonstrated Islamic etiquette, referenced religious teachings during relevant situations, and connected play experiences to Islamic concepts, children experienced these values as integral to social life rather than separate religious lessons. This holistic approach aligns with Islamic educational philosophy emphasizing character development through comprehensive life engagement rather than isolated religious instruction.

The successful simultaneous development of social-emotional competencies and Islamic character suggests these domains are complementary rather than competing. Core Islamic values including compassion, cooperation, patience, and justice align closely with social-emotional competencies, allowing integrated development. The framework of Islamic ethics provided children with accessible language and concepts for understanding social-emotional principles, potentially accelerating competency development. For instance, the concept of *sabr* offered children a culturally resonant framework for understanding self-regulation, while *ta'awun* provided meaningful context for cooperation. This cultural grounding may enhance motivation and meaning-making compared to culturally neutral social-emotional learning approaches.

Facilitating Factors and Implementation Challenges

The identification of teacher competency and commitment as the most critical facilitating factor underscores the irreplaceable role of skilled, dedicated educators in effective play-based learning implementation. Technical knowledge of child development, play pedagogy, and social-emotional learning frameworks, while necessary, proved insufficient without genuine commitment to child-centered practice. Teachers who viewed play as children's meaningful work rather than mere recreation created richer learning experiences, invested effort in careful observation and responsive planning, and advocated effectively for developmentally appropriate practices despite external pressures. This finding has significant implications for teacher preparation and professional development programs.

Administrative support emerged as equally crucial, particularly regarding resource allocation, protection of play time, and validation of play-based approaches. In contexts where leadership prioritized play-based learning, teachers felt empowered to implement best practices without fear of criticism for insufficient academic focus. Conversely, even skilled teachers would likely struggle to implement high-quality play-based learning without adequate materials, appropriate spaces, planning time, and leadership support. This organizational level factor suggests that improving play-based learning requires systems-level intervention beyond individual teacher development.

The tension between curriculum coverage expectations and adequate play time represents a persistent challenge reflecting broader societal pressures for early academic achievement. Teachers' strategies for mitigating this tension—particularly embedding academic concepts within play activities and educating parents about play's developmental benefits—demonstrate professional problem-solving. However, the continued presence of this obstacle suggests need for systemic changes including policy reforms protecting developmentally appropriate practice, parent education initiatives at community levels, and revised accountability measures valuing holistic development over narrow academic outcomes.

The challenge of differentiating instruction to address varying social-emotional competency levels reflects the heterogeneity present in any classroom. Children enter kindergarten with vastly different social-emotional experiences and capacities, requiring teachers to scaffold learning at multiple levels simultaneously. While play-based learning's flexibility facilitates differentiation more readily than whole-group instruction, effectively supporting diverse learners demands sophisticated observation, planning, and responsive teaching skills. This finding emphasizes the complex, demanding

nature of early childhood teaching and the need for robust teacher preparation.

Comparison with Previous Research

The findings of this study align substantially with international research demonstrating play-based learning's effectiveness for social-emotional development. Studies such as those by (Hayes et al., 2022) and (Parker et al., 2022) have consistently shown that play, particularly guided play, promotes self-regulation, social competence, and emotional understanding. The current research extends these findings by documenting how such benefits manifest specifically within integrated Islamic educational contexts, addressing a significant gap in existing literature. The tripartite play structure observed mirrors recommendations from developmental psychologists who advocate for balanced play opportunities rather than exclusively child-directed or adult-directed approaches (Duncan et al., 2023).

The robust development of social awareness and relationship skills observed in this study corroborates findings from extensive research on play's social benefits. (Colliver et al., 2022) documented similar patterns of increased cooperative play and prosocial behaviors following play-based interventions, while (Harrington et al., 2020) found that sociodramatic play significantly enhanced children's social competence and emotional regulation. The current research adds nuance by identifying specific teacher scaffolding strategies that appeared most effective in promoting these competencies, including strategic prompting, explicit connection-making between play experiences and social-emotional concepts, and graduated release of support as children demonstrated increasing independence.

Research on values integration in early childhood education, while limited, supports the feasibility of combining developmentally appropriate practice with character education. Studies by (Harrington et al., 2020) and (Lavy, 2020) demonstrate that effective character education occurs through multiple pathways including environmental design, adult modeling, and authentic practice opportunities—precisely the mechanisms observed in this study. However, most existing research examines secular character education programs, making this study's focus on Islamic values integration particularly valuable. The finding that values integration enhanced rather than constrained social-emotional development challenges assumptions that faith-based education necessarily conflicts with child-centered pedagogy.

The identification of teacher competency and administrative support as critical facilitating factors resonates with implementation science research emphasizing organizational conditions for effective practice adoption. Studies

by (Durlak et al., 2022) and (Harkness et al., 2021) consistently identify these factors as crucial for successful educational intervention implementation. The current research contributes specific insights into how these factors operate within early childhood contexts, particularly regarding the protection of play time against academic pressures and the provision of resources supporting diverse play experiences. The persistent challenge of parent misconceptions about plays parallels findings from numerous studies documenting societal pressures for early academic acceleration (Demangeon et al., 2023; Saracho, 2020), suggesting this represents a widespread phenomenon requiring systemic rather than local solutions.

This research contributes to theoretical understanding of social-emotional development, play-based pedagogy, and culturally responsive education. The findings directly support Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, particularly the concept of culturally mediated development: the observed 85% increase in children's independent conflict resolution demonstrates how cultural tools (Islamic concepts of *sabr* and *ta'awun*) mediate social-emotional competency development within the zone of proximal development. The successful integration of Islamic values within play-based learning demonstrates that universal developmental processes operate through culturally specific content and practices.

Empirically, all five CASEL competency domains showed development trajectories consistent with theoretical predictions: self-awareness (78% improvement in emotional vocabulary) aligns with Denham's emotional competence framework, while relationship skills (88% sustained cooperative play) validate Rubin's peer relationship theory. Children's social-emotional competencies developed not in cultural vacuum but through meaningful engagement with values, practices, and concepts resonant within their cultural-religious context. These findings challenge universalist assumptions in developmental psychology and underscore the importance of culturally grounded approaches to early childhood education.

The research also illuminates mechanisms through which play promotes social-emotional development, moving beyond correlational findings to identify specific processes. Teacher scaffolding emerged as crucial mediating factor, transforming play from mere activity into powerful learning context. The integration of explicit teaching (through stories, modeling, discussion) with implicit learning (through authentic play experiences) appeared particularly effective, suggesting that optimal social-emotional learning requires both direct instruction and experiential practice. This finding contributes to ongoing debates regarding explicit versus implicit teaching

approaches, suggesting these are complementary rather than competing methodologies.

The study extends theory regarding faith-based education by demonstrating empirically how religious values can be integrated within developmentally appropriate practice. The three-dimensional integration model offers a theoretical framework applicable beyond Islamic education to other faith-based contexts. The finding that values integration enhanced developmental outcomes challenges dichotomous thinking positioning religious education and child-centered practice as incompatible alternatives. Instead, the research suggests that when implemented thoughtfully, these approaches can synergistically support holistic child development. The research findings generate multiple actionable implications for educational practice. For teachers in integrated Islamic kindergartens and similar faith-based settings, the study provides concrete guidance regarding play-based learning implementation.

The tripartite play structure offers a practical framework for balancing different play types, while the documented scaffolding strategies provide specific techniques for supporting social-emotional development during play. The three-dimensional values integration model offers clear pathways for embedding Islamic teachings within developmentally appropriate practice without resorting to didactic instruction that may undermine children's engagement and intrinsic motivation. For school administrators and educational leaders, the research underscores the critical importance of organizational support for play-based learning. Practical implications include allocating adequate resources for diverse play materials, designing or retrofitting spaces to accommodate various play types, protecting time for extended play experiences within daily schedules, and providing ongoing professional development focused on play-based pedagogy and social-emotional learning.

The finding that administrative support significantly influences implementation quality suggests that leadership development should emphasize understanding of developmentally appropriate practice and ability to articulate play-based learning's benefits to diverse stakeholders including parents, policymakers, and community members. For teacher preparation programs, the research highlights essential competencies that preservice teachers require for effective play-based learning implementation. Curricula should emphasize observational skills, responsive planning, scaffolding techniques, understanding of social-emotional development, and ability to integrate values or character education within play contexts. Field experiences

should provide opportunities for practicing these competencies in authentic settings with skilled mentor teachers.

The complexity of effective play-based teaching documented in this study challenges simplified notions that play-based learning requires less teacher skill than direct instruction, instead revealing the sophisticated pedagogical knowledge and decision-making required. For parents and communities, the research offers evidence supporting play-based approaches and countering misconceptions that play lacks educational value. Practical implications include developing accessible parent education materials explaining play's developmental benefits, creating opportunities for parents to observe high-quality play-based learning, and providing guidance for supporting children's social-emotional development through play at home. The documentation of specific child outcomes resulting from play-based learning offers concrete talking points for educators communicating with parents about pedagogical approaches. For policymakers and curriculum developers, the research suggests several implications.

Early childhood education policies and standards should explicitly protect adequate time for play within daily schedules, recognizing that curricular breadth cannot come at the expense of developmental appropriateness. Accountability systems should assess holistic development including social-emotional competencies rather than exclusively measuring academic outcomes. Professional standards for early childhood educators should reflect the sophisticated knowledge and skills required for effective play-based teaching. Resource allocation policies should ensure that early childhood programs receive adequate funding for materials, spaces, and professional development supporting high-quality play-based learning.

Several limitations warrant consideration when interpreting these findings. First, the research context—two integrated Islamic kindergartens in urban settings with relatively well-resourced programs and committed educators—may limit transferability to other contexts. Schools with fewer resources, less administrative support, or teachers with less training in play-based approaches might face substantially different implementation realities. The findings illuminate possibilities for optimal implementation but may not represent typical practice across diverse early childhood settings. Future research should examine play-based learning implementation across varied contexts including under-resourced settings, rural areas, and programs serving diverse populations.

Second, the relatively short observation period of twelve weeks, while providing rich data about implementation processes and immediate outcomes, cannot address longer-term developmental trajectories or sustained effects.

Social-emotional competencies develop gradually over years, and the observed changes, while promising, require longitudinal follow-up to determine whether improvements persist, generalize across contexts, and predict later developmental outcomes. Future research employing longitudinal designs could examine whether social-emotional competencies developed through play-based learning in kindergarten predict school adjustment, academic achievement, and social functioning in later years.

Third, the reliance on qualitative methods, while appropriate for the research questions and providing rich descriptive data, means the study cannot establish causal relationships between play-based learning and developmental outcomes with the certainty that experimental designs afford. Alternative explanations for observed changes—including maturation, other concurrent experiences, or researcher presence effects—cannot be definitively ruled out. Future research combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, potentially including comparison groups and standardized assessments, could strengthen causal inferences while maintaining the contextual richness qualitative methods provide.

Fourth, the research focused exclusively on school-based implementation without examining home contexts or parent practices. Children's social-emotional development occurs across multiple contexts, and family factors likely significantly influence outcomes. The study's school-focused lens provides incomplete picture of factors shaping children's social-emotional competencies. Future research should adopt ecological approaches examining interrelationships between school-based play experiences, home environments, parent practices, and community factors in shaping social-emotional development.

Fifth, the researcher's role as participant observer, while enabling deep understanding of implementation processes, may have influenced teacher and child behaviors in ways that threaten ecological validity. Teachers may have implemented play-based learning with greater intentionality or quality than typical practice knowing they were being observed. Children's behaviors likewise may have been affected by researcher presence. While efforts were made to minimize such effects through extended observation periods allowing habituation, complete elimination of observer effects is impossible. Future research might incorporate unobtrusive observation methods or examine implementation through existing documentation without researcher presence.

Finally, the research examined social-emotional development broadly without investigating how benefits distribute across children with varying characteristics. Questions remain regarding whether play-based learning

equally benefits children with different temperaments, prior experiences, cultural backgrounds, or developmental profiles. Some children may thrive in play-based environments while others require different supports. Future research should examine differential effectiveness, identifying factors predicting which children benefit most from play-based approaches and what adaptations support children who struggle in play-based contexts. Such work would advance understanding of personalized, responsive early childhood education meeting all children's needs.

CONCLUSION

This study provides comprehensive insights into the implementation of play-based learning in developing the social-emotional competencies of 5-6-year-old children in an integrated Islamic kindergarten. Effective implementation requires a balanced integration of free play, guided play, and structured play, with guided play being the most versatile and dominant approach for achieving specific social-emotional learning objectives. Teachers demonstrated sophisticated pedagogical knowledge through strategic role-shifting, environmental design, intentional scaffolding, and responsive planning based on systematic observations. This study conclusively demonstrates the effectiveness of play-based learning in developing all five domains of social-emotional competency: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

A significant contribution of this study lies in documenting the successful integration of Islamic values into developmentally appropriate play-based pedagogy through a three-dimensional model encompassing environmental design, activity content, and teacher-child interactions. The identification of facilitative factors such as teacher competence, administrative support, and adequate resources, along with barriers such as time constraints and parental misconceptions, emphasizes that optimizing play-based learning requires attention at multiple systemic levels. This research demonstrates that play-based learning is a powerful pedagogical approach to developing children's social-emotional competencies when implemented with intentionality, adequate support, and cultural responsiveness.

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