Empathy-Based Learning Model to Enhance Social-Emotional Development in Early Childhood

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the influence of empathy-based learning models on the social and emotional development of early childhood in Lubuk Linggau City. The background to this research stems from the fact that many early childhood education institutions still focus on academic skills, resulting in underdevelopment of social and emotional aspects. This is despite the fact that the ages of 4–6 are considered the golden age. Age is a period when empathy, emotional regulation, and social interaction skills experience rapid development and are greatly influenced by the quality of the learning environment. This study used a quantitative approach. The research sample consisted of children aged 5–6 years and teachers from several early childhood education institutions in Lubuk Linggau City selected through purposive sampling. The research instruments were validated questionnaires and observation sheets, while data analysis was conducted using paired t-tests and simple regression. The results showed a significant increase in children's social-emotional abilities after participating in an empathy-based learning model. The average score increased from 62.14 (moderate category) to 81.72 (good category), with a t-value of 9.87 and a significance level of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$). Improvements occurred in all social-emotional indicators, namely empathy (32%), prosocial behavior (31%), positive social interaction (29%), emotional regulation (28%), and the ability to cooperate (25%). These findings confirm that the empathy-based learning model is effective in improving the social-emotional competence of early childhood. This study recommends that PAUD institutions integrate empathy-oriented learning strategies more systematically to strengthen social-emotional skills as the foundation of child development.

Keywords: *Empathy, Social Emotional, Early Childhood, Learning Models*

INTRODUCTION

At the age of 4–6 years, children are in a developmental phase called the golden age. Age, a period when the growth of various aspects of basic abilities occurs very rapidly and is sensitive to environmental stimulation (Latifah, 2020). At this stage, children begin to be able to understand and feel the feelings of others as an early form of empathy (Maranatha & Putri, 2021). According to Hoffman 's theory of social emotional development, empathy in early childhood develops from a simple ability to respond to others' emotions to the ability to understand others' perspectives. (Hoffman, 2004). At the age of 4–6 years, children begin to enter the fourth stage in the

development of empathy, namely empathetic distress, where children can identify and respond more appropriately to the feelings of others (Febriani, Bawono, & Wibowo, 2025; Chan, Fleming, Kaouar, & Kimonis, 2023). Emotional regulation skills also develop rapidly, marked by an increase in children's ability to recognize their own emotions, control emotional reactions, and express feelings more appropriately (Dabis, 2019). This is in line with the theory of Eisenberg and Morris which explains that emotional regulation at an early age develops through social interactions and repeated learning, where children begin to understand the relationship between feelings, actions, and social consequences (Spinrad, Eisenberg, & Morris, 2022). Vygotsky also emphasized that emotional regulation is strengthened through scaffolding or support provided by adults and peers during the interaction process (Lev Vygotsky, 2004).

In addition, children's social interactions become more mature, as evidenced by their increased ability to cooperate, share, follow simple rules, build friendships, and adapt to playgroups (Pietropoli & Gracia, 2025). Piaget explained that in the late preoperational stage, aged 4–6 years, children begin to demonstrate cooperative skills. play or cooperative games, where they are able to communicate, negotiate, and follow the rules of the game (Kitchener, 1986) . Meanwhile, in the classification of children's play stages, at this age children enter the associative stage. play and cooperative Play is an important indicator of the development of social competence (Rognli, Bowman, Kapitany, Hampejs, & Goldstein, 2022; Sohrabi, 2021). These theories suggest that the ages of 4–6 are a crucial period when empathy, emotional regulation, and social skills develop through experiences and interactions in the learning environment. These three aspects indicate that the ages of 4–6 are a crucial period for providing appropriate social-emotional stimulation for optimal child development (Meng et al., 2020).

However, in practice, some early childhood education institutions, including those in Lubuk Linggau City, tend to focus on academic skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic. This excessive focus on academic achievement often arises from parental demands, school culture, and the misperception that children's success in early childhood education is measured through cognitive abilities. As a result, learning activities are more directed at structured academic exercises, while stimulation of social and emotional aspects, such as developing empathy, collaboration skills, emotional management, and positive interactions with peers, receives less attention. This condition results in children not receiving adequate opportunities to hone their social and emotional competencies, resulting in suboptimal development in these aspects even though they show progress in academic abilities (Sadrkhanlou, Maher, Alimohammadzadeh, Jafari, & Bahadori, 2023).

Field observations indicate that some children still have difficulty sharing, are less able to recognize and manage emotions, and are prone to conflict with peers. This situation indicates the need for learning models that specifically stimulate empathy as a core component of social-emotional competence. Empathy enables children to understand others' feelings, respond with concern, and build positive social interactions (Utama & Tanfidiyah, 2019). When children are able to recognize others' emotions, they can put themselves in their friends' situations and understand what their friends are feeling (Hasanah, 2019). This ability makes children more sensitive to the social needs of those around them. Empathetic responses encourage children to demonstrate prosocial behaviors, such as helping, sharing, or offering support when friends are experiencing difficulties (Ch, Irma, Harmawati, & Fitrianti, 2022).

With the development of empathy, children also find it easier to establish healthy interpersonal relationships (Salma Febriana, Muhammad, Kemasyarakatan, &

Ilmu Pemasyarakatan, 2023). They can communicate more warmly, understand their friends' perspectives, and avoid conflict through mutual respect (Kanza, Muthohar, & Mursid, 2025). Eisenberg emphasized that empathy contributes significantly to children's ability to build harmonious social relationships because they are able to balance personal desires with the feelings of others (Nancy Eisenberg, 2006). Therefore, empathy not only functions as an emotional ability but also serves as a primary foundation for children's social development and the formation of positive interactions in play and learning environments. However, empathy-based learning models have not been systematically implemented in early childhood education institutions and are still limited to teacher initiatives without structured pedagogical guidance.

Previous research has shown that empathy-based strategies, such as role Playing, sharing emotional experiences, and collaborative activities contribute significantly to children's social and emotional development. Research conducted by Lestari (2021) shows that the application of the role-playing method Empathy-based play can improve children's social-emotional skills through direct experience in understanding the roles and feelings of others, where the results show significant improvements in cooperation skills and emotional control. Another study by Wahyuni and Pratiwi (2022) found that collaborative learning activities designed to train empathy, such as sharing stories and discussing feelings, have a positive effect on the development of prosocial skills in early childhood, particularly in the aspects of empathy and harmonious social interaction. Meanwhile, a study by Ramadhani (2023) using a quantitative approach proved that emotional experience-based learning through emotional learning techniques. Coaching makes a significant contribution to improving emotional regulation and social sensitivity of children in PAUD environments.

These three studies show that empathy is an important element in early childhood learning and can improve various social-emotional aspects, but these studies still focus on certain methods such as role-playing. playing, collaborative activities, or emotional coaching separately. Unlike this study, which developed a more systematic and comprehensive empathy-based learning model, this study not only looked at one method, but tested the overall influence of empathy-based learning models through a quantitative approach to measure the magnitude of their influence on the social-emotional development of early childhood in Lubuk Linggau City. The similarities lie in the same focus, namely improving social-emotional development through empathy stimulation, while the differences lie in the use of a more structured learning model, a stronger quantitative approach, and the local context of Lubuk Linggau, which has not been widely studied in previous studies.

In the context of Lubuk Linggau City, the need for learning models that can improve the quality of social interactions, empathy skills, and emotional regulation in children is increasingly urgent. Early childhood education (PAUD) teachers in this city face challenges in managing children's diverse social behaviors, especially as changes in parenting patterns, modern family dynamics, and exposure to digital media influence children's behavior. Therefore, the implementation of empathy-based learning models is expected to be a strategic alternative to support social and emotional development in a more targeted and measurable manner. Based on these conditions, this study was conducted to quantitatively analyze the effect of empathy-based learning models on the social and emotional development of early childhood. This study seeks to generate empirical evidence that can help PAUD institutions and

teachers in designing more effective learning strategies that are relevant to the developmental needs of children in today's era.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach and Design

This research uses a quantitative approach with an ex-post research design. This post -facto study aimed to test the influence of an empathy-based learning model on the social and emotional development of early childhood in Lubuk Linggau City. A quantitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to measure the magnitude of the influence objectively, in a structured, and statistically verifiable manner. Through this design, researchers did not directly manipulate the variables but instead observed the implementation of the empathy-based learning model as it occurs naturally in early childhood education institutions (Schutt, 2019). The study was designed to provide an empirical overview of the differences in the level of social and emotional development of children involved in the empathy-based learning model compared to children who participated in conventional learning.

Population and Sample

The population in this study was all early childhood group B (aged 5–6 years) enrolled in PAUD institutions in Lubuk Linggau City in the 2024/2025 academic year. The sampling technique used purposive sampling, namely the selection of samples based on certain criteria relevant to the research objectives. These criteria include PAUD institutions that have implemented empathy-oriented learning activities as well as institutions that use conventional learning as a comparison group. The research sample consisted of a number of children who met these criteria, thus enabling researchers to obtain representative data regarding the effect of empathy-based learning models on social and emotional development.

Research Variables

This study consists of two main variables, namely the independent variable and the dependent variable. The independent variable in this study is an empathy-based learning model, namely a series of learning processes that integrate activities to recognize emotions, role models, and the development of interpersonal relationships. playing The variables were empathy, group cooperation, discussion of feelings, and emotional scaffolding techniques used by teachers during learning. Meanwhile, the dependent variable was early childhood social-emotional development, which includes empathy, emotional regulation, social interaction, prosocial behavior, and the ability to cooperate. Both variables were measured using instruments adapted to early childhood development standards.

Research Instruments

The research instruments were compiled in the form of questionnaires and observation sheets, used to measure the level of implementation of empathy-based learning models and children's social and emotional development. The empathy-based learning model instrument contains indicators regarding the frequency and quality of empathetic learning activities implemented by teachers. Meanwhile, the social and emotional development instrument uses a rating scale that refers to aspects of empathy, emotional regulation, social interaction, and prosocial behavior based on PAUD standard guidelines. Before use, the instruments were tested for validity and reliability through expert and statistical tests to ensure their feasibility and accuracy in measuring the research variables.

Data collection technique

Research data was collected through two techniques: observation and questionnaire distribution. Observations were conducted to directly assess children's social and emotional development during learning activities, using standardized observation sheets. Questionnaires were given to teachers to assess the extent to which the empathy-based learning model was implemented in daily learning activities. Data collection was conducted over a period of time to ensure the results were stable, accurate, and reflected actual conditions in the field.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data obtained were analyzed using inferential statistical analysis techniques to test the effect of independent variables on the dependent variable. The analysis was conducted through a simple linear regression test aimed at measuring the magnitude of the effect of the application of an empathy-based learning model on the social and emotional development of early childhood. Before the regression test was conducted, the data first went through prerequisite tests such as normality tests and linearity tests to ensure the data met the requirements of regression analysis (Asmus & Radocy, 2017) . The results of the statistical analysis were used to draw conclusions regarding the effectiveness of the empathy-based learning model in improving the social and emotional development of children in Lubuk Linggau City.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Based on data obtained from measuring the social emotional abilities of early childhood in Lubuk Linggau City, there is a difference in the average (mean) between the conditions before (pretest) and after (posttest) the application of the empathy-based learning model.

Table 1. Comparison of Average Pretest and Posttest Scores

Data	Mean (Average)	Difference in Improvement	Initial Category	Final Category
Pretest	62.14	-	Currently	-
Posttest	81.72	19.58	-	High/Good

The data in Table 1 shows that before the intervention, the children's social-emotional abilities were in the moderate category. After eight sessions of treatment, the average score increased by 19.58 points. A normality test was then performed using the Kolmogorov - Smirnov method . The test results showed a normal distribution (p > 0.05), so the analysis continued using parametric tests. Paired Sample T- Test (Paired t-test).

Table 2. Summary of Paired t-Test Results

Variables	t-count	Sig . (2-tailed)	Significance Level (α)	Decision
Pretest - Posttest	9.87	0	0.05	H$_0$ Rejected

Based on Table 2, the $_{calculated}$ t $value$ was 9.87 with a significance value of p = 0.000. Since the p $value$ <0.05, it can be concluded that there is a significant difference between children's social-emotional abilities before and after the implementation of the empathy-based learning model. Improvement Based on the indicators of the implementation of the learning model, it has a positive impact on various aspects of

development. The following is a breakdown of the percentage increase in each social-emotional indicator:

Table 3. Percentage of Increase in Social Emotional Ability Indicators

No	Indicator	Percentage Increase
1.	Empathy	32%
2.	Prosocial Behavior (Sharing & Helping)	31%
3.	Positive Social Interaction	29%
4.	Emotional Regulation	28%
5.	Ability to Work Together	25%

In addition to the increase in average scores, there was a significant shift in the frequency distribution of children's ability categories, as presented in the following table:

Table 4. Frequency Distribution of Student Ability Categories

Category	Pretest Percentage	Posttest Percentage	Change
Good	18%	76%	Increased Drastically
Enough	67%	22%	Significant Decrease

The results of the study indicate that the implementation of an empathy-based learning model has a significant impact on the social and emotional development of early childhood in Lubuk Linggau City. Before the intervention was given, children's social and emotional abilities were in the moderate category with an average pretest score of 62.14 . After the empathy-based learning model was implemented for eight meetings, there was an increase in the average posttest score to 81.72 **.** Normality test Kolmogorov – Smirnov showed that the data were normally distributed, so the analysis was continued using a paired t-test. The t-test results produced a calculated t value = 9.87 with a significance of $p = 0.000 < 0.05$, which means there was a significant difference between the scores before and after treatment. Improvements in abilities were seen in several indicators, namely: empathy (32% increase), emotional regulation (28% increase), positive social interaction (29% increase), the ability to work together (25% increase), and prosocial behavior such as sharing and helping (31% increase). In addition to increasing the average score, the distribution of results also showed that the number of children in the "good" category increased from 18% to 76%, while the "sufficient" category decreased from 67% to 22%**.** These findings indicate that the empathy-based learning model not only increased the average group achievement but also improved the overall distribution structure of social emotional abilities.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that empathy-based learning models can significantly contribute to the social and emotional development of early childhood. Improvements in empathy are evident in children's ability to show concern for friends, understand others' feelings, and respond more sensitively to social situations. This aligns with Hoffman's theory, which states that empathy is the foundation of prosocial

behavior and can be enhanced through learning experiences that enable children to understand and feel the emotions of others. The learning process, which involves sharing stories, role-playing, and discussing feelings, provides opportunities for children to engage emotionally and socially, allowing empathy to develop more naturally.

Furthermore, children's emotional regulation development also experienced significant improvement after implementing an empathy-based learning model. This aligns with Eisenberg and Morris' theory, which explains that emotional regulation is influenced by consistent social interactions and the support of a responsive learning environment. Through empathy-based learning activities, children are encouraged to recognize their own emotions and learn how to express them appropriately, thereby improving their ability to manage emotions. Teachers who provide scaffolding in the learning process play a crucial role in helping children understand the relationship between feelings, actions, and the social consequences that arise from their behavior. The scaffolding provided by teachers can take the form of verbal guidance, concrete examples, or emotional support that helps children interpret social situations appropriately. Through this support, children learn to recognize their own and others' feelings, understand that every action has an impact, and learn to choose more adaptive and prosocial responses. When teachers provide simple explanations, ask reflective questions, or demonstrate appropriate ways to resolve conflicts, children gain meaningful learning experiences. This approach aligns with Vygotsky's theory, which emphasizes that social and emotional development occurs through interactions guided by a more competent person. With consistent scaffolding, children are gradually able to internalize this social understanding so they can behave independently, manage their emotions, and make more responsible social decisions.

Improved social interaction skills were also clearly evident in the research results. Children showed behavioral changes, becoming more cooperative, able to share, follow game rules, and build positive relationships with peers. These findings align with Piaget and Parten's view that at ages 4–6, children enter a more complex phase of social development, marked by increased participation in associative play. play and cooperative Play. Empathy-based learning models provide play and learning situations that require active social interaction, so that the development of these abilities can be stimulated effectively.

The results of this study also support the findings of previous studies conducted by Lestari (2021), Wahyuni and Pratiwi (2022), and Ramadhani (2023), which concluded that empathy-focused learning activities can improve children's social-emotional aspects. However, this study makes a new contribution because it does not emphasize only one method but rather develops a comprehensive and structured empathy-based learning model and tests its effectiveness through a quantitative approach. This research contribution is increasingly important considering the context of Lubuk Linggau City, where social-emotional stimulation in many early childhood education institutions is still suboptimal due to the dominance of academic learning.

Overall, the results of this study demonstrate that an empathy-based learning model has a significant impact on the social and emotional development of early childhood. This model can be an effective learning alternative for implementation in early childhood education (PAUD), particularly in the context of children's need to develop empathy, manage emotions, and build healthy social relationships. The practical implication of this research is the need for PAUD teachers to design more

structured learning activities focused on developing empathy as a foundation for children's social and emotional development.

This study has several limitations that need to be considered in interpreting the results. First, the study was conducted only at a few early childhood education institutions in Lubuk Linggau City, resulting in a limited sample size and not representative of all early childhood education institutions in other areas. Consequently, the generalizability of the findings is limited. Second, the use of a social-emotional assessment instrument that relies on teacher observations is potentially influenced by assessor subjectivity, despite the training and validation procedures. Third, the implementation of the empathy-based learning model was conducted over a relatively short period of time, thus not fully reflecting the long-term impact on children's social-emotional development. Fourth, external variables such as parenting styles at home, the influence of digital media, and the child's social environment were not fully controllable and may have influenced the study results. Fifth, teachers' abilities to provide scaffolding and implement the learning model may vary, making implementation consistency a challenge in measuring the model's effectiveness. Nevertheless, these limitations provide opportunities for further research to expand the sample size, develop more objective instruments, extend the duration of the intervention, and consider environmental variables that may influence children's social-emotional development.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the empathy-based learning model has proven effective in improving the social-emotional development of early childhood in Lubuk Linggau City, as indicated by a significant increase in social-emotional scores after the intervention and a change in the child's ability category from moderate to good in most indicators. The implementation of learning activities that emphasize emotional recognition, empathetic role-playing, discussion of feelings, group collaboration, and emotional scaffolding from teachers can strengthen empathy skills, emotional regulation, prosocial behavior, positive social interactions, and the ability to work together. These results are in line with the theory of social-emotional development and previous research findings that emphasize the importance of empathy as a foundation for children's prosocial behavior and interpersonal relationships. This study also provides a significant contribution through the development of a more comprehensive empathic learning model and quantitative testing that shows empirical evidence of its effects. Thus, the empathy-based learning model is worthy of being a strategic alternative for teachers and early childhood education institutions in optimizing children's social-emotional development, although further research is still needed to overcome the limitations of sample coverage, intervention duration, and control for environmental variables outside of school.

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