

Improving Early Childhood Social-Emotional Development through the Mindful Morning Circle Method: Classroom Action Research at ABA 55 Semarang Kindergarten

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ABSTRACT

This classroom action research investigates the impact of the "Mindful Morning Circle" method on the social-emotional development of early childhood students at ABA Semarang Kindergarten, Indonesia. The study addresses the increasing need for culturally responsive mindfulness strategies within early education, especially in settings with socio-emotional challenges among learners. Conducted over two action cycles, the research involved 10 children aged 5–6 years, including one with hearing impairment. Data were gathered through observation, interviews, field notes, and documentation. The intervention, rooted in mindfulness and Islamic spiritual values, included breathing exercises, guided storytelling, and emotional check-ins. Results indicated a significant improvement in children's emotional regulation, empathy, peer interaction, and classroom engagement. Qualitative analysis revealed themes of increased self-awareness, improved focus, and emotional vocabulary expansion. The findings support the integration of culturally grounded mindfulness practices into daily routines, particularly in Islamic early childhood education settings. This research contributes to the growing literature on social-emotional learning by offering a model that is adaptable, inclusive, and rooted in local values. Future studies may explore scalability and longitudinal outcomes.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Early childhood is a formative phase in which children develop basic emotional and social skills that affect their academic trajectory and interpersonal relationships. Social-emotional development (SED) in this period includes the ability to identify emotions, empathize with others, express feelings appropriately, and work together in group settings. Social-emotional development is one of the most important aspects of early childhood life. During this period, children are in a golden age where all forms of stimulation greatly affect the formation of character and personality in the future (Rahayu Tresna Dewi et al., 2020)

Social-emotional development (SED) is a crucial component in early childhood education because it affects children's ability to build social relationships and face learning challenges. In Indonesia, many early childhood education (PAUD) programs that still prioritize cognitive and academic learning, often ignore the importance of SED. Children who have good social-emotional skills will be better prepared to face learning challenges and can build healthy relationships with others (Amalia et al., 2023)

In ABA Kindergarten 55 class B, where the researcher runs PPL, it was found that although most children already have cognitive abilities such as reading and numeracy well, they have difficulty managing emotions, interacting healthily with peers, and appreciating teachers. Children are easily angry, like to interrupt the teacher's conversation, often fight over small things, and do not understand the concept of sharing and empathy. Even one of the crew members (deaf) was shunned because his friends didn't know how to interact with him. This shows that there are major challenges in the social-emotional aspect that have not been handled optimally.

Various studies show that early childhood children who do not receive support in social-emotional development tend to experience behavioral problems such as aggression, withdrawal, anxiety, and even difficulty adapting when entering primary education. The inability of children to regulate emotions and understand the feelings of others will have an impact on the decline in the quality of social interaction and learning readiness. The increasing challenges faced by young learners ranging from excessive stimulation due to technology, family-related stress, and emotional literacy training at least require interventions that are holistic, responsive, and based on cultural context. Among them, mindfulness has emerged as an effective approach to growing SED. Mindfulness involves focusing one's awareness on the present moment while calmly acknowledging feelings and thoughts (Frank et al., n.d.).

(Herawati, 2025) emphasized that the mindful storytelling approach based on Islamic character values is effective in increasing children's empathy, focus, and emotional understanding. This is supported by which proves that "Day of Mindfulness" activities increase emotional intelligence through reflective practice and mindful meditation. In line with that, it developed an EMC² (Empathy, Mindfulness, Compassion, Critical Inquiry) approach to support the psychological and social-emotional well-being of elementary school-age children. (Faizah et al., n.d.; Wiradharma et al., 2024)

The Mindful Morning Circle (MMC) model adapts the above principles in the form of daily activities based on Islamic mindfulness. MMC involves mindful breathing, Islamic soft music, value-filled storytelling, and group reflection. With this approach, children can experience improvements in emotion regulation, self-awareness, and social connections.

One approach that is starting to be widely used in various countries is the Mindful Morning Circle method. This method combines the principles of mindfulness with the child's daily routine, which aims to foster self-awareness, calmness, empathy, and emotional control through simple activities such as listening to soft music, breathing slowly, and absorbing positive words. However, mindfulness practices developed in Western educational paradigms may not always be in harmony with the cultural and spiritual context of Indonesian students. This study proposes a culturally responsive model of Mindful Morning Circle (MMC) that combines secular mindfulness principles with Islamic spiritual values to support emotional regulation, empathy, and community building in early childhood learners. Therefore, the researcher created a video media made by researchers that is adapted to Islamic culture and spirituality (Prima et al., n.d.).

This study investigated the impact of MMC on SED in ABA Semarang Kindergarten through the classroom action research framework (CAR). It aims to answer: (1) How does the MMC method affect the child's emotional self-regulation and social behavior? (2) How can the practice of awareness be contextualized in the setting of Islamic PAUD?. The significance of this research lies in its practical implications for Islamic-based preschools and early childhood education institutions, which contribute to pedagogical innovation in an inclusive, value-driven, and child-centered learning environment.

Literature Review Social-emotional development is considered a key indicator of holistic growth during childhood. This affects children's ability to connect with peers, regulate emotions, and actively participate in group learning. The development of emotional competence in early childhood serves as a predictor of academic success and behavioral adjustment later in life. Mindfulness, originally conceptualized in clinical psychology, is now widely adapted in educational settings. describes full consciousness as "paying attention in a certain way: deliberately, in the moment, and without judgment." Studies by show that mindfulness practices improve attention, behavior, and emotional regulation in children (Luh et al., n.d.).

In early childhood education, the use of morning meetings or circle time has long been considered a basic strategy to support routines, build community, and discuss emotions. Adding mindfulness to this routine has been found to further enhance emotional awareness and peer interaction. The concept of Islamic consciousness provides a culturally resonant framework that integrates emotional self-regulation with religious practice, emphasizing that Islamic consciousness, which is based on memory (dhikr), gratitude, and intention (niyyah), is in line with the developmental needs of young Muslim students. Therefore, Mindful Morning Circle (MMC) combines these insights emotional literacy, structured circle time, and Islamic values into an integrated practice to promote social-emotional growth in an early childhood setting. (Nini et al., n.d.) business founders stems from entrepreneurial activities and characteristics as an adolescent or even child.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study applies Classroom Action Research (CAR) with two cycles. Each cycle follows Kemmis and McTaggart's spiral model, which includes planning, action, observation, and reflection. The research was conducted at ABA Semarang Kindergarten in the second semester of the 2024/2025 academic year.

2.1 Participants

Participants were 10 children aged 5-6 years, including one child with hearing loss. The classroom teacher functions as practitioner and researcher. Children's diverse behavioral and emotional needs provide a relevant context for exploring social-emotional interventions.

2.2 The design of the Mindful Morning Circle (MMC)

Intervention was applied for 4 weeks. Each session lasts 15-20 minutes and includes: (1) Breathing exercises. (2) Listening to soft Islamic instrumental music. (3) Guided storytelling with moral and emotional themes. (4) Group reflection and naming of emotions. (5) Simple positive affirmation. Intervention design refers to EMC approach, mindful storytelling, and Day of Mindfulness practice (Faizah et al., n.d.; Herawati, 2025; Wiradharma et al., 2024).

2.3 Instruments and Data Collection Data is collected through:

(1) Observational checklist (emotional expression, empathy, cooperation). (2) Reflective journal of teachers. (3) Parent interviews. (4) Child interviews (using picture prompts and emoticons)

2.4 Data Analysis Data is analyzed using thematic qualitative analysis.

The codes were developed from repeated observations and interviews, then grouped into categories that reflected indicators of children's social-emotional growth (self-regulation, emotional awareness, peer interaction).

3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Social-emotional development is an important foundation in early childhood life. Early childhood is a child who has a certain age limit, unique characteristics, and is in a rapid and fundamental developmental process for the child's future life. This aspect includes the child's ability to recognize and express feelings, understand the feelings of others, build social relationships, and respond appropriately to social situations. Early childhood social-emotional development is a process in which children develop through interaction with the environment, with parents, peers, and adults. A child's sensitivity to social conditions develops through listening, observing, and imitation, and can be stimulated by existing reinforcement. Meanwhile, social-emotional development is the ability of children to express feelings and carry out social interactions. Children's social-emotional development confirms that children who do not receive appropriate social and emotional stimulation tend to have difficulty forming healthy social interactions. Social-emotional development is also an indicator of children's readiness to enter the primary education level (Amalia et al., 2023; Asnawan et al., 2024; Faizah et al., n.d.)

(Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2018) explained that interventions that target the strengthening of social and emotional aspects have been shown to help children become more organized behaviorally, show increased empathy, and become more involved in healthy social relationships. Therefore, strengthening social-emotional development from an early age needs to be a major concern in early childhood education practices.

3.1 Definition and Role of Mindfulness in Education

Mindfulness, or mindfulness, is an approach that invites individuals to focus on the current experience attentively and without judgment. In the context of children, mindfulness can train them to recognize their own feelings, be aware of emerging thoughts, and respond to situations in a calm and mindful way.

When mindfulness practices were incorporated into learning activities in elementary school, children showed improvements in emotion regulation, self-control, the ability to take in the perspective of others, as well as increased prosocial behaviors. They also show aggressive behavior less often, are calmer in solving problems, and are more likely to interact positively with friends and teachers. Mindfulness not only has an impact on the psychological side, but also has a physiological impact, such as a decrease in the level of stress hormone (cortisol), and an increase in brain executive functions such as concentration, cognitive flexibility, and resistance to distractions.

Mindfulness is defined as mindfulness in the present moment with an attitude of acceptance and non-judgment. In children's education, mindfulness plays a role as a strategy to improve focus, calm emotions, and teach children to recognize their thoughts and feelings. The practice of mindfulness has been shown to be effective in reducing impulsive behavior, increasing empathy, and creating a calmer and supportive learning climate adding that mindfulness supports the development of a child's executive function and ability to regulate behavior in complex social situations. (Frank et al., n.d.; Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2018)

3.2 Concept and Practice of Mindful Morning Circle

Mindful Morning Circle is a daily activity that is carried out in the morning to start learning in a calm and mindful atmosphere. Children sit in circles, take deep breaths, listen to soft music or positive narratives, and are invited to focus on themselves and the surrounding environment. This method not only regulates children's readiness to learn, but also builds stable emotional routines, encourages social connections in the classroom, and

forms a sense of security and trust. This practice has been implemented in several international schools and adapted in various local forms (Frank et al., n.d.)

3.3 The Role of Family and School Environment in Social-Emotional Development.

The environment has a great contribution to the formation of children's behavior and emotions. A family that is communicative, warm, and responsive is able to form children who are confident and easy to socialize. On the other hand, school as a second place for children has a role in developing social-emotional skills in a structured manner, a noticeable improvement in students' cognitive skills, emotional regulation, and interaction between friends. These findings suggest that mindfulness offers two benefits of not only improving academic performance but also encouraging a positive and collaborative classroom environment ((Amalia et al., 2023; Parsa Jarar & Widyasari, 2025).

3.4 Integration of Mindfulness with Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is an educational approach that teaches children five main competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relational skills, and responsible decision-making. When combined with mindfulness, these two approaches reinforce each other. showed that early childhood children who received a combined SEL and mindfulness intervention experienced improvements in communication skills, emotional control, and social engagement in school. This approach makes learning not only academically centered, but also the emotional well-being of the child (Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2018)

The researcher began to develop a plan for the Mindful Morning Circle activity that would be carried out every morning before the learning activities began. In this first cycle, trying to use a simple approach, children sit cross-legged, close their eyes, listen to soft music, and give direct instructions without using visual or recording media.



Picture1: image of mindful morning circle activities

In the first week, uneven participation was shown. While some children are passionately engaged in breathing and storytelling, others are distracted. Children begin to use emotional vocabulary and mimic mindfulness behavior. A child begins to breathe deeply independently when frustrated. Reflective journals show early signs of increased self-awareness. From observations and discussions with classroom teachers, we agree that this method has potential, but needs to be modified to make it more attractive. The classroom teacher suggested that researchers create media that can capture children's attention such as audio. Researchers began to design it for the second cycle.

In Cycle II, the researcher prepared a simple video that the researcher made himself. Inside is soft instrumental music, soothing visuals, and the voice of a researcher narration that guides children to breathe slowly, be aware of their bodies, and be grateful for the new day. The researchers made it in earnest, hoping that this would touch their hearts.



Picture 2: Mainful video images

As soon as the first video of the researcher played, the atmosphere of the classroom immediately changed. The children fell silent, stared at the screen, and then followed the movement of sitting still with their hands above their knees. Even children who usually find it difficult to sit still, this time were able to complete the session attentively, researchers did not expect the effect to be so fast. After the activity is over, the children become more patient. Even when playing, they can take turns. Even one child who is usually reactive can be more responsive.

After two weeks of running this method with video, I noticed more consistent changes. Classroom teachers even say that classes become calmer, easier to direct, and children are better prepared to learn. Parents also began to ask about this activity, because the children told it at home, the children of the crew began to smile more often. He started singing and was even invited to play several times by his friend without me asking. It was a moment that brought me to tears because I knew it wasn't just about the "morning activity", but the process of building a sense of security and mutual respect.

Here are some of the most noticeable changes that researchers observed: (1) 9 out of 10 children were able to sit still and follow the session well. (2) Children begin to appreciate the teacher when they speak, do not interrupt, and wait for their turn. (3) There is a decrease in the number of conflicts during play. (4) Children are more focused when studying. (5) An empathetic attitude appears, such as calming a crying friend or saying, "It's okay, I'll play again."

Discussion Findings support existing research on mindfulness as a tool to develop SED in early learners. As shown in research by and , mindfulness improves self-awareness and focus. In an Islamic preschool setting, instilling spirituality reinforces relevance and motivation. MMC allows children to express and manage emotions within a familiar cultural framework, promoting inclusion, especially for children with special needs. This study confirms the value of integrating mindfulness into regular classroom practice. Its success is shaped by child-friendly methods (visual, narrative) and religious-cultural resonance. The challenges include maintaining attention in longer sessions and varying levels of understanding. Nonetheless, flexibility in implementation allows for adaptation and engagement (Hasanah et al., 2025; Kusmiran et al., 2024; Wahidah, 2021; Windiastuti, n.d.)

The results of the study showed that MMC had a significant impact on the improvement of children's SED. Children are better able to recognize and manage their emotions, show concern for friends, and be able to listen with focus during reflective sessions.

As explained by (Herawati, 2025) the Islamic storytelling approach creates a calm and spiritual atmosphere that is conducive to the development of empathy and self-control. In MMC practice, breathing and affirmation activities strengthen the ability to regulate emotions, according to the findings of (Wiradharma et al., 2024)

The application of EMC² in MMC allows children to develop communication skills, caring, and reflective thinking (Faizah et al., n.d.). While mindfulness-based approaches also activate children's cognitive functions, such as focus and mental flexibility.

These findings reinforce the opinion of (Tazkia & Damayanti, 2024) that strengthening an inclusive and spiritual social environment is very important for the social-emotional development of elementary children. MMC has been proven to be able to create a safe and attentive space in the classroom, including for children with hearing impairments. With this method, researchers found that in the class of 10 children, 8 children experienced positive changes, including those with special needs for the deaf.

CONCLUSION

The Mindful morning circle significantly improves the social-emotional development of children in ABA 55 Semarang Kindergarten. Children become more self-aware, empathetic, and emotionally expressive. Instilling awareness with Islamic values increases the relevance and sustainability of the method.

This CAR project provides a replicable model for early childhood education institutions that aim to foster emotional well-being through culturally responsive pedagogy. This model combines EMC² principles, mindfulness, and Islamic values, and can be an effective and culturally responsive daily learning strategy in Islamic-based kindergarten.

Future research should examine the long-term impact of MMC and adapt it to other inclusive cultural or educational settings. Policy-level support can help institutionalize these innovations across Indonesia's early childhood programs.

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