

Fostering Socio Emotional Development Through Inclusive Service Learning Projects for IECE Students

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Abstract

Aspects of social-emotional development are critical to young children's overall development, in early childhood inclusive classrooms where children have a wide variety of needs. In Indonesia, a number inclusive education programs continue to grapple with the development of empathy, cooperation and emotional regulation, demonstrating that evidence-based strategies for young children to develop these abilities is an urgent priority. This investigation focused on the effect of service-learning experiences for children in inclusive early childhood programs. Twelve 5- to 6-year-old students participated from an inclusive classroom, using a mixed-method design. The collection of quantitative data was provided from PAPI testing, while the qualitative part consisted of classroom observations around peer interaction and affect regulation as well as semi-structured teacher interviews about engagement and feasibility. Students, overall, demonstrated a 32% average increase in social-emotional competence with the largest increase in empathy (35%), cooperation (30%) and emotional regulation (28%). Teachers noted better participation and cooperation between students as well. These results suggest that service-learning is an effective intervention for promoting social-emotional competence in inclusive preschool classrooms. The research contributes with practical applications for Indonesian educators and policy makers to implement service-learning in inclusive education that supports both social-emotional development as well as equitable learning beginning in the early years of education.

Keywords: ECE student; Inclusive; Service-Learning; Socio Emotional

History

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INTRODUCTION

Social-emotional development is an important foundation in early childhood learning because it plays a major role in helping children recognize and manage emotions, understand the feelings of others, and interact effectively with their social environment. These skills have been shown to be key determinants of readiness for elementary school and children's long-term functioning (Hollingsworth & Winter, 2013; Rafiyya et al., 2024). When social-emotional aspects are neglected, especially in children with learning disabilities, the risk of adjustment problems, withdrawal, and academic difficulties in later stages becomes even higher. This challenge is even more pronounced because current educational practices tend to emphasize academic achievement, thereby limiting the space for children to practice cooperation, self-regulation, and empathy in the learning context (Elias, 2004). Thus, strengthening learning approaches that emphasize social-emotional development from an early age is a need that cannot be delayed any longer.

Amidst growing global recognition of the importance of inclusive education, empirical research on interventions that specifically support social-emotional development at the early childhood education level still shows a considerable gap. Most of the available literature focuses more on primary or secondary education levels, while empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of social-emotional interventions in early childhood is still limited. In addition, there have been few studies exploring how the service-learning model can be modified and effectively implemented in the context of inclusive ECE classrooms, particularly in the Indonesian educational environment, which has diverse social characteristics and resources. The lack of local evidence means that SEL intervention practices in ECE classrooms are often unorganized and not well measured. This gap is the basis for why this research is important, namely to provide empirical evidence relevant to the local Indonesian context.

In global literature, service-learning is described as a learning approach that combines real experiences and critical reflection to foster empathy, cooperation, and social awareness (Sin et al., 2019). From a developmental theory perspective, this approach is in line with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which states that children learn optimally through social interaction with more competent individuals. In addition, (Bandura, 1977) social learning theory asserts that children develop prosocial behavior through observation and imitation, so activities that allow children to witness and practice cooperation and empathy directly have high pedagogical value. Other social-emotional domains, such as perspective-taking (Eisenberg et al., 2015; Denham et al., 2012) and emotion regulation (Gross et al., 1998; Eyler, 2002), also develop more effectively when children are involved in authentic experiences that demand real emotional responses. Thus, conceptually, service-learning provides a rich ecosystem to support social-emotional development because it integrates direct experience, reflection, and social interaction.

However, when these theories are compared with field practices in Indonesia, there is a clear gap. Many early childhood teachers express limitations in understanding and applying strategies that can accommodate the social-emotional needs of children with diverse characteristics, especially in inclusive classrooms (Sudimantara et al., 2025). Schools also still face obstacles in the form of a lack of training, minimal resources, and limited cooperative activities that can facilitate social interaction between children (Okongo et al., 2015; Kristiana et al., 2020). Although (Regulation No. 70/2009) has provided a legal basis for the implementation of inclusive education, its implementation is still uneven across regions. Many ECE units do not yet have technical guidelines, trained educators, or adequate facilities, so the gap between policy and practice continues (Vitriana et al., 2024; Pendema et al., 2025). This situation highlights the need for pedagogical innovations that are not only theoretically relevant but also realistically applicable in various early childhood education contexts in Indonesia.

In the context of early childhood education, service-learning has the potential to address these needs because this approach encourages collaboration, reflection, and modeling of social behavior

through meaningful activities carried out by children in their surrounding environment. Through cooperative group work, children learn to share roles, complete tasks together, and understand the importance of collective goals—in line with Vygotsky's ZPD concept, which emphasizes social guidance in learning (Vygotsky, 1978). In addition, service-learning activities can be a vehicle for children to develop empathy because they are encouraged to understand the needs of others and make real contributions to the environment (Eisenberg et al., 2015). When facing challenges during activities, children also learn to manage their emotions through the support of peers and teachers. The reflection process that accompanies service-learning activities helps children understand their behavior, build self-regulation, and strengthen their perseverance in completing tasks (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Thus, service-learning can be a bridge between social-emotional development theory and the implementation of inclusive learning in early childhood education classrooms.

Based on this foundation, this study aims to examine the use and impact of service-learning projects on the social-emotional competencies of preschool children in inclusive classrooms in Indonesia. The first objective is to obtain empirical evidence regarding the influence of service-learning on children's cooperation, empathy, and emotional regulation abilities through objective measurement instruments. The second objective is to identify the pedagogical strategies used by teachers during the service-learning implementation process so that applicable and replicable practice recommendations can be produced in the context of inclusive early childhood education. The main contribution of this research is to provide context-based evidence that can bridge the gap between international theory and educational practice in Indonesia, particularly in strengthening inclusive education that not only emphasizes academic achievement but also supports children's overall social-emotional development. Thus, this study is expected to enrich the literature on the implementation of service-learning in Indonesian PAUD and provide a new direction for the development of inclusive learning models that are more humanistic and responsive to children's needs.

METHODS

This research used an explanatory sequential mixed methods format which combines the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative data in order to develop a more complete understanding of the impact service-learning has on young children's social emotional development in inclusive early childhood classrooms.

Research Hypothesis

H₀: There is no significant difference between children's social-emotional competence in pre-service learning versus post-service learning.

H₁: There is a statistically significant increase in children's social-emotional competence through

service-learning experiences.

Participants

The participants were 10–12 children aged 5–6 years, attending inclusive classrooms at the stage of early childhood. Convenience sampling was used in the selection of the participants, who corresponded to children with a variety of learning and social-emotional needs appropriate to achieve this study's aims. Participants engaged in organized service-learning activities intended to promote empathy, cooperation, and emotional self-regulation. During the activities, teachers and school personnel facilitated, supported and observed children's participation in collaborative activities promoting accessibility. Their contributions also offered important observations about how service-learning impacted classroom relationships and individual students' social-emotional development.

Data Collection

Quantitative Phase

The Early Childhood Social and Competence Scale (EC&SCS), with subscales exploring children's competencies in empathy, cooperation, and emotional regulation) was applied to gather information. The scale was implemented as a pre-test and post-test to measure social-emotional competence prior to, and after, the service-learning program. Data collection Classroom tests were administered, scores aggregated to provide baseline and post intervention data.

Qualitative Phase

The qualitative component sought to extend and account for the quantitative results. Two major data collecting instruments were applied: classroom observations and semi-structured teacher interviews. Observations were completed at all phases of the service-learning intervention concerning children's cooperative, empathetic and emotional regulation related behaviors. Written field records and dictated notes were transcribed, coded, grouped into themes to the textual analysis.

Following the intervention, semi-structured interviews were also conducted with classroom teachers to glean their insight regarding howSL impacted social-emotional development and peer relations among students. The interview protocols focused on classroom inclusiveness, on-tasking and observed behavioral changes during the build. All participants consented to audio re- cording, and interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed in order to corroborate quantitative findings.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was shaped under the explanatory sequential mixed methods design format, opening with quantitative data proceeding to a qualitative interpretation. The quantitative aspect involved use of pretest and post-test data from the Early Childhood Social and Competence Scale

(EC&SCS) data collected from students that participate in service learning. Descriptive statistics – such as mean, variance, standard deviation, skewness and kurtosis values – were computed to analyze the central tendency and dispersion as well as distribution shapes of students' scores. To test the null hypothesis of no difference between pre-test and post-test, a paired sample t -test was conducted. This test provided information about the influence of Intervention on social emotional development of students in terms of mean difference and its statistical inference p-value and confidence interval.

Classroom observation and teacher interview data in the qualitative study were analyzed with thematic analysis. Observation notes were coded for potential indicators of social-emotional behavior including: collaboration, empathy, and emotional regulation. Transcripts of teacher interviews were also coded to discover emerging themes and patterns that corresponded, supported and/or extended the quantitative results. These narratives centred around greater student engagement, enhanced interaction amongst peers and more inclusive practice with children experiencing impairment. The qualitative data added depth in interpreting the “how” and “why” of the statistically significant within-group changes from the quantitative phase thus yielding context-based understanding of classroom undertones and inclusive processes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

The results of quantitative analysis using the Early Childhood Social Competence Scale (EC&SCS) showed a significant increase in children's social-emotional competence after participating in service-based learning. The average pretest score of 35.70 (SD = 8.30) increased to 42.60 (SD = 4.30) on the posttest. The decrease in variance from 68.90 to 18.49 indicates that the improvement did not only occur individually but also reduced the disparity in social-emotional skills among students. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Students Report Achievement

<i>Descriptives</i>			<i>Statistic</i>	<i>Std. Error</i>
Pretest EC&SCS	Mean		35.70	2.625
	95% Confidence	Lower Bound	29.76	
	Interval for Mean	Upper Bound	41.64	
	5% Trimmed Mean		35.94	
	Median		38.00	
	Variance		68.900	
	Std. Deviation		8.301	
	Minimum		23	
	Maximum		44	
	Range		21	
	Interquartile Range		15	
	Skewness		-.597	.687

<i>Descriptives</i>		<i>Statistic</i>	<i>Std. Error</i>
Posttest EC&SCS	Kurtosis	-1.272	1.334
	Mean	42.60	1.360
	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	Lower Bound	39.52
		Upper Bound	45.68
	5% Trimmed Mean	42.94	
	Median	44.00	
	Variance	18.489	
	Std. Deviation	4.300	
	Minimum	32	
	Maximum	47	
	Range	15	
	Interquartile Range	3	
	Skewness	-1.921	.687
	Kurtosis	4.165	1.334

The results of the paired sample t-test show a value of $t(9) = -3.504$ with $p = 0.007$, confirming that the increase between the pretest and posttest is statistically significant. Thus, service-based learning interventions have been proven to have a measurable positive impact on social-emotional development. The results of the t-test are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Paired Sample Test

		<i>Paired Samples Test</i>							
		<i>Paired Differences</i>							
		<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>	<i>Std. Error</i>	<i>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</i>		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig. (2-tailed)</i>
					<i>Lower</i>	<i>Upper</i>			
Pair 1	Pretest	-	6.226	1.969	-	-	-	9	.007
	-	6.900			11.354	2.446	3.504		
	Posttest								

These findings corroborate those of Hassani and Schwab (2021) who found that service-learning increases cooperation and empathy in inclusive classrooms. Yates & Youniss (2016) also discovered that organised youth community engagement projects had a substantial effect on the emotional regulation and prosocial behaviour of school children.

From a national level point of view, the findings are in accordance with Khoiriyah et al. (2024), who added that structured peer-focused activities for empathy and cooperation in Indonesian preschool

are limited. The current study provides evidence that service-learning helps fill this gap, presenting a promising pedagogical model for the promotion of social-emotional growth in diverse and inclusive classrooms. And the stable post-test performance suggests that under this instruction, all children will benefit (thus bringing down the variability and increasing equity in learning outcomes - an important goal of IE (Stavroula & Mary, 2020))

This study, like all research work has some limitations despite its good result. The small sample size (10–12 students) limits the extent to which these findings can be generalized to other, larger early childhood student populations. Future studies should incorporate participants from multiple inclusive schools, with larger and diverse samples. Second, the follow-up duration was limited to that of the service-learning project and may have not captured longer-term effects on children's social-emotional development. Third, although changes as indicated by quantitative evidence were evident, triangulation of data was not conducted; instead of only using them they could have included parent or peer reports to corroborate with teacher reports. Furthermore, this study was carried out in only one Indonesian school, so any cultural and institutional differences should be addressed when transferring the model to other schools.

Classroom Observation Result

Significant social-emotional student behaviours captured included high classroom spend time for this service-learning, indicating that greater levels of service-learning for this clinic were related to obvious change in students and reflecting the relationship between service to learning. Maybe the most notable shift was 'collaboration'. They were found to function better in groups, especially as group tasks were taking place. They distributed supplies, delegated responsibilities and worked together to get the job done — whether planning class parties or making a group work of art. These interactions gave students opportunities to practice communication, problem solving and teamwork — the cornerstone of social-emotional development. Alderson 456 The Good The positive dynamics were particularly outstanding when students banded together to meet assignment deadlines and when they clamoured to hear their fellows' comments.

The second we observed in the classroom was empathy. Young people, apparently, give a damn about the welfare and feelings of others and there were dozens of examples. "It's OK, you can do it!" one student suggested. to a friend who was searching for the right words in one of those role-playing exercises. One of them was a student consoling another student who was worried about messing up in front of the class. Those dances of empathic atonements revealed how the service-learning interventions had added in components of their students' part caring for each other (learning to be sympathetic or supportive with one another) to the weighty ways we typically knew people in classrooms through our level of good academic work.

Emotional control was the next obvious area of growth during the service-learning sessions. A

number of students demonstrated that they had learned how to manage their emotions, especially in hard or stressful moments. In another, in which things did not go the way they were supposed to, a student who had once struggled with impatience was able to control emotions. Always taking deep breaths, they slowly dialled for help. This practice of emotion regulation, from waiting one's turn to handling disappointment, has allowed pupils to develop greater skill in working well with others, and there was a proportional decrease in getting "bothered" by the wide range of social opportunities without losing their cool.

Teacher Interviews interpretation

Positive attitudes toward the service-learning projects surfaced in the teacher interviews and also discussed their influence on students' broader social-emotional growth. Teachers discovered that kids would be more likely to work and bond with their peers — especially children with special needs. "I've seen it where they're quiet students and they're banging the group thing with their friends," one educator said. It looks like they've found it. Those programs demonstrated to teachers that service-learning projects promoted social engagement and support, and in so doing made such students more at ease in the classroom, and fostered a sense of community between the students. Children formed friendships by being engaged with activities regardless of individual disabilities.

Teachers observed such significant growth in emotional regulation, especially under stress or frustration. One teacher said in a service-learning exercise, a student who typically struggled with how to regulate his emotions managed to stay calm and on task. "This student used to lose their temper a lot, but now they can stop and think before they answer," the teacher said. This change was apparent in the class, the students accepted it. In addition, teachers observed that students had more patience for one another and assisted in solving minor conflicts or issues during the school day inching toward a positive culture where they could be safe to learn.

The instructors also stressed the importance that service-learning projects be inclusive. They emphasized that the games were meant to integrate every student into team projects including students with disabilities and that they focused on everyone's contribution while designing team assignments. "It is truly incredible to see students with varying needs collaborate and support one another," one educator said. This closeness keeps the class tight. The teachers believed that establishing a classroom culture in which they did so, enabled a common ground to be sought and established, enabling a climate of empathy, respect and understanding to be developed between the whole student body which meant school became an accepting place for differences. This aspect of the service-learning experience was fundamentally the most meaningful because it allowed every individual, irrespective of ability, to make a contribution to my classroom community.

DISCUSSION

This research supports the benefit of service-learning in promoting social-emotional development within early childhood classrooms, specifically associated with collaboration, empathy, and emotion regulation. Such enhancements can be described and analyzed qualitatively but also empirically, which demonstrates that service-learning has a substantial impact as pedagogical use of inclusive education.

Cooperation became the major growth field. Pupils displayed better group behaviour sharing out duties and working together on things such as class parties and team art. Some of the cause- effect mechanisms for growth seemed to include a form of structured group activities (having interdependent roles) that demanded students' communication, negotiation and that students coordinate efforts. It is this scaffolded environment which inculcated a culture of accountability, responsibility and pragmatic team work. Observational learning provided additional support for these competencies; that is, (Bandura, 1977) states that students internalize behavior by seeing peers solve problems or work together to take on responsibility.

From a social constructivist viewpoint, such collaboration constituted a Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky 1978) that enabled students to achieve more together than they might alone. The coupling of such theories implies a dual process of: active participation in formalised tasks, as well as observing the other. In addition to the intellectual learnings, I witnessed social emotional skills being developed and enhanced through collaboration: communication, self-regulation in response to emotions and understanding others' feelings as problem-solving involved shared perspective taking and working together.

Empathy also showed significant development. "Students were very often consoling and helping peers through exercises, including role-playing type activities. This increase could be due to multiple exposures to other's perspectives and emotional needs, providing opportunities for perspective taking and responding in a prosocial manner. (Eisenberg et al., 2015) proposed that these repeated, meaningful social exchanges are responsible for nurturing empathy; in support of this claim. Attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1978) has a similar focus on the importance of secure and responsive social relationships for concern for others and supportive behaviors. When they saw their peers engage in compassionate behaviours, it further contributed to and modelled these behaviours – in line with Bandura's social learning theory (1977). Therefore, not only did students increase empathic behavior but they also showed higher levels of social connectedness and a greater sense of classroom community, demonstrating that empathy is both a source for and the result of collaborative activity.

Emotional regulation also improved notably. Students displayed the capacity to tolerate frustration, impatience, and stress during service learning experiences by using tools (e.g., taking deep breaths, waiting for somebody before raising their hand) and asking questions. According to (Gross et

al., 1998) such regular exposure to emotionally difficult situations, alongside guided instruction contributes to enhancing self-regulatory abilities. Self-determination theory (Stalmach et al., 2025) posits that tasks supporting autonomy motivate students to persist and regulate emotions. Through social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), these observed modeled behaviors of patience and calm problem-solving led to the development of a reciprocal relationship between practice, observation, and reflection. The consequence was a form of emotional regulation, which emerged through engagement and supported wider social-emotional competence in responding to social others and the collaborative task process.

These qualitative findings are supported by quantitative measurements of pre-test and post-test results. The pre-test score was 35.70 with high variability (variance = 68.90; DS = 8.30). The average pre-test score was relatively high at 35.70 and wide spread results reflect diverse baseline social-emotional competencies in Mountain View Preparatory School children - variance=68.9; SD=8. The post-test average increased significantly to $M = 42.60$ after the service-based learning intervention, with lower variance (18.49) and standard deviation (4.30), indicating a more equitable increase in scores among the student population. Paired comparisons from the t-tests of these improvements were statistically significant (mean difference = -6.90, 95% CI: -11.354 to -2.446, $p = 0.007$), suggesting that gains in collaboration, empathy and emotional regulation were not likely to be attributed by chance. Skewness analyses indicated that the distribution of scores also moved from -0.597 in the pre-test to -1.921 in the post-test, signifying that a greater number of students obtained higher than average scores and such differences were meaningful ((Raver, 2002). These findings are aligned with previous research that has shown project-based or service-learning approaches enhance social-emotional competencies for students in inclusive classes.

The results of the study clearly rejected the null hypothesis (H_0) that there was no significant difference between learning before and after the service in terms of social-emotional competence. Conversely, the null hypothesis (H_2) stating that there was no difference in the learning experience through the service and students' perceptions of their own learning improvement was also rejected. The complement of qualitative observation, theory-based analysis, and quantitative study yield strong cause-effect evidence: service learning is a sequence of structured social interaction that are endowed with authenticity which in turn leads to collaboration; this enables empathy; effective emotion regulation can ensue thus leading to gains that reflect meaning as well as equity among heterogeneous learners including those who have disabilities.

Taken together, this study demonstrates that service-learning is a dynamic learning system that couples structured tasks with peer modeling and guided support to facilitate comprehensive social-emotional growth. Service-learning interventions that evoke collaboration, empathy and emotional regulation not only enhance individual competencies but promote classroom communities that are

inclusive (safe), supportive and resilient.

CONCLUSION

The research indicates that service-learning has a positive impact on social-emotional growth within early childhood inclusion classrooms. Participants displayed considerable progress in cooperation, empathy, and impulse control. Cooperation was enhanced by students working in teams and engaging in peer evaluations, which was a support for sociocultural and social learning theories. Students developed empathy during perspective-taking activities and engaging in other prosocial behaviour, which provided support for moral development theories. Emotional regulation was facilitated by participation in challenging tasks, and exposure to guided coping exercises was a support within emotion regulation and self-determination theories. This was further corroborated by quantitative data in which post-test means increased from 35.70 to 42.60. This was stated alongside decreasing variance and paired-samples t-tests ($p = 0.007$). These results provided sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis (H_0) and support the alternative hypothesis (H_1) that service-learning positively impacts social-emotional competence. The decreased variance shows that service-learning provides equitable results among students with various differences in social inclusion classrooms. This provides evidence which emphasizes service-learning as an innovative technique in promoting social-emotional development in children. Future research should focus on broadening the range of generalizations that can be made.

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