

## Early Childhood Teachers' Use of Role-Play to Enhance Social-Emotional Learning: A Qualitative Study

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### Abstract

This qualitative study explores early childhood teachers' lived experiences in intentionally integrating role-play to support Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) among EY1 children aged three to four years at Kindergarten XYZ Jakarta. The study was conducted within a multicultural and Christian-based early childhood setting involving three EY1 teachers, one school psychologist, and one parent participant. Using a descriptive phenomenological approach, data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation review, then analysed using thematic analysis based on Giorgi's phenomenological framework. The findings reveal that teachers perceived structured role-play as a meaningful pedagogical strategy that supports children's emotional expression, empathy, communication, cooperation, and self-regulation through intentional scaffolding and contextualised play experiences. The study further highlights the significance of teachers' pedagogical sensitivity, flexible facilitation roles, and culturally responsive practices in supporting SEL. The novelty of this study lies in its phenomenological exploration of role-play implementation within an Indonesian faith-informed early childhood context, contributing practical and conceptual insights into sustainable and culturally responsive SEL practices.

## INTRODUCTION

Early childhood is recognised as a critical developmental period characterised by rapid growth across cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and moral domains. During this stage, children construct understanding through interaction, play, imitation, and emotional experiences, making early learning environments highly influential for later academic adjustment, behaviour, and well-being. Consequently, early childhood education is increasingly expected to support not only cognitive readiness but also children's social-emotional competence through developmentally appropriate and meaningful learning experiences (Alwaely et al., 2021; Kouicem, 2020).

In recent years, Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) has become a major focus in early childhood education because of its role in helping children regulate emotions, develop empathy, build positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. Research consistently shows that strong social-emotional competence contributes to improved classroom behaviour, peer interaction, and school readiness, while weak SEL skills may increase the risk of behavioural difficulties and social conflict (Alzahrani et al., 2019; Gimbert et al., 2023). The urgency of strengthening SEL became more visible following the COVID-19 pandemic, when limited peer interaction and increased family stress contributed to emotional dysregulation and delayed social development among young children. In classroom practice, early childhood teachers increasingly encounter children who struggle with sharing,

waiting for turns, managing frustration, expressing emotions appropriately, and resolving peer conflict during group interaction. Some children also demonstrate withdrawal, difficulty cooperating, or emotional outbursts during play activities. These classroom realities indicate the need for intentional and developmentally appropriate pedagogical strategies that support children's social-emotional development through meaningful daily interaction.

Within the Indonesian context, attention to SEL has increased through educational reforms such as Merdeka Belajar, which emphasises holistic child development. However, SEL implementation in early childhood education often remains implicit and inconsistently facilitated, particularly in relation to structured classroom practice (Alwaely et al., 2021; Nihazram et al., 2020). Existing studies in Indonesia largely discuss SEL conceptually or within broader educational frameworks, while empirical investigations examining how teachers intentionally facilitate SEL through classroom interaction remain limited. This limitation becomes more significant within multicultural and faith-based early childhood settings, where children's diverse cultural backgrounds, communication styles, and emotional expressions require contextually responsive pedagogical approaches (Ogundele, 2018; Wijayanti & Fauzi, 2024).

Christian-based early childhood institutions aim to integrate values such as empathy, kindness, patience, forgiveness, and responsibility into children's daily learning experiences. Within SEL practice, these values are closely related to emotional regulation, perspective-taking, compassion, and prosocial behaviour. However, previous studies rarely explain how faith-informed values are translated into concrete pedagogical interaction within classroom activities. In many cases, character education is discussed conceptually without examining how teachers operationalise these values through daily social experiences and guided interaction. This creates a need to explore how role-play may function not only as a play activity, but also as a pedagogical medium for integrating SEL and character formation within faith-based early childhood settings (Aisyah et al., 2023; Alharbi & Alzahrani, 2020).

One pedagogical approach considered developmentally appropriate for supporting SEL is role-play. Role-play allows children to explore emotions, practise perspective-taking, negotiate social roles, and rehearse social interaction within meaningful and emotionally safe situations. Children aged three to four years, who are in the preoperational stage of development, demonstrate increasing symbolic thinking abilities that support imaginative and social play. Previous studies have shown that role-play may support empathy, communication, and social competence (Lahiya et al., 2022; Nihazram et al., 2020). However, most previous studies primarily examine the outcomes of play-based learning in general terms and provide limited explanation regarding how teachers intentionally design, scaffold, and sustain role-play as a structured SEL strategy. Existing studies also tend to focus on children's developmental outcomes rather than examining teachers' lived pedagogical experiences and instructional decision-making processes. As a result, the relational and contextual mechanisms underlying successful role-play implementation remain insufficiently understood (Glaubman & Glaubman, 2024; Sumbogo et al., 2019).

Therefore, a clear research gap exists. Previous research has not sufficiently examined how early childhood teachers intentionally plan, facilitate, and reflect upon role-play as a structured pedagogical strategy for fostering SEL in multicultural and Christian-based educational settings, particularly within the Indonesian context. In addition, limited research has explored the relational and contextual processes underlying teachers' experiences in implementing role-play for SEL development. This gap limits understanding of how role-play functions not only as a play activity, but also as a sustainable pedagogical practice that integrates emotional learning, social interaction, and character formation.

Based on this gap, the novelty of this study lies in its phenomenological examination of role-play as an intentionally designed and pedagogically mediated SEL strategy rather than spontaneous free play. Unlike previous studies that primarily focus on developmental outcomes, this study explores teachers' lived experiences, instructional decision-making, relational sensitivity, and contextual considerations in facilitating role-play (Adella et al., 2024; Giorgi, 2012; Malterud, 2012). The study also contributes a context-specific perspective by examining role-play implementation within a multicultural and Christian-based early childhood environment, thereby extending current discussions

on culturally and spiritually responsive SEL practices.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research question: How do early childhood teachers at Kindergarten XYZ Jakarta intentionally integrate role-play to foster Social–Emotional Learning among EY1 children aged three to four years? To answer this question, the study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach using classroom observations and semi-structured interviews to explore teachers' lived experiences in planning and facilitating role-play activities.

This study contributes to the field of early childhood education in three ways. Theoretically, it extends sociocultural and play-based learning literature by highlighting intentional teacher facilitation and pedagogical sensitivity as central mechanisms supporting SEL development (Gimbert et al., 2023; Wentzel, 2019). Practically, it provides insights for educators regarding how role-play may be structured, scaffolded, and integrated into daily classroom routines to support children's social–emotional growth. Conceptually, the study offers a framework for understanding role-play as a multidimensional pedagogical strategy that integrates emotional learning, social interaction, and faith-informed character education within culturally responsive early childhood settings.

## METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive phenomenological approach to explore early childhood teachers' lived experiences in integrating role-play to support Social–Emotional Learning (SEL). A phenomenological design was selected because the purpose of the research was to understand how teachers interpreted, experienced, and facilitated role-play within their everyday classroom practices rather than to measure variables quantitatively. The study followed Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological framework, which focuses on identifying the essential meanings and structures of participants' lived experiences through systematic thematic analysis (Giorgi, 2012; Malterud, 2012). This approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to capture the pedagogical meanings, relational experiences, and contextual realities underlying role-play implementation in early childhood classrooms.

The research was conducted at Kindergarten XYZ Jakarta, a Cambridge-accredited early years institution that integrates Social–Emotional Learning within a play-based and Christian value framework. The site was selected purposively because the school has consistently implemented SEL practices for more than five years and collaborates with the Playhouse Child Development Center (PCDC), which provides developmental monitoring and intervention support. The study involved five participants consisting of three EY1 classroom teachers, one school psychologist, and one parent. The inclusion of multiple informants was intended not to shift the study into a general multi-perspective design, but to enrich the understanding of teachers' lived experiences through supporting perspectives related to classroom practice and children's social–emotional development. Participants were selected purposively based on their direct involvement in role-play activities and SEL implementation within the EY1 programme (Gimbert et al., 2023; Vogt et al., 2018).

In qualitative research, the researcher functioned as the primary research instrument. The researcher conducted classroom observations, facilitated interviews, documented field notes, interpreted participant experiences, and analysed the data. To strengthen reflexivity and minimise subjective bias, the researcher maintained reflective journals throughout the study to document assumptions, interpretations, emotional responses, and positionality during data collection and analysis. As the researcher had prior academic interest in play-based learning and SEL, reflective memos were continuously used to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' experiences rather than personal expectations. This reflexive process supported confirmability and strengthened methodological credibility within the phenomenological inquiry (Giorgi, 2012; Malterud, 2012).

Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation review to ensure methodological triangulation. Classroom observations were conducted over approximately eight weeks during the 2024–2025 academic year, involving twelve observation sessions within EY1 classrooms. Each observation session lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and focused on role-play implementation, teacher facilitation strategies, children's emotional responses, peer interaction, and classroom dynamics. The researcher used non-participant observation during most

sessions while occasionally engaging in limited participant observation to better understand the flow of classroom interaction.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with all five participants. Teacher interviews explored planning processes, instructional strategies, perceptions of children's social-emotional development, classroom challenges, and reflections on role-play implementation. Interviews with the psychologist focused on developmental observations and SEL monitoring, while the parent interview explored behavioural transfer from school to home. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes, was audio-recorded with participant consent, and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Documentation review included lesson plans, SEL planning documents, classroom reflection notes, and PCDC developmental reports to support and verify observational and interview findings.

The research procedure was conducted in several sequential stages. The preparation stage involved obtaining institutional approval, securing informed consent from participants, developing observation and interview protocols, and conducting preliminary familiarisation within the classroom setting. The data collection stage involved repeated classroom observations, interviews, and documentation gathering. Following data collection, all interview recordings were transcribed, field notes were organised, and observational records were compiled systematically to prepare the dataset for analysis.

Data were analysed using Malterud's (2012) Systematic Text Condensation, a phenomenological analytic approach inspired by Giorgi's descriptive phenomenology. First, the researcher repeatedly read all transcripts and field notes to gain a holistic understanding of participants' experiences. Second, meaning units relevant to role-play and SEL implementation were identified through open coding. These meaning units included statements related to teacher planning, facilitation, emotional interaction, classroom challenges, and children's responses. Third, the meaning units were categorised and transformed into psychologically sensitive expressions while preserving the participants' original meanings. Fourth, related categories were synthesised into broader thematic structures representing the essence of teachers' lived experiences. Through this process, several major themes emerged, including intentional pedagogical planning, flexible teacher roles, contextualised role-play scenarios, constructive handling of challenges, multicultural responsiveness, and sustained SEL development. The final stage involved interpreting the relationships among themes to construct a coherent phenomenological description of role-play implementation within the research context (Giorgi, 2012; Malterud, 2012).

To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied several qualitative validation strategies. Credibility was strengthened through triangulation across observations, interviews, and documentation. Prolonged engagement in the field enabled the researcher to build familiarity with classroom routines and participant interactions. Dependability was maintained through systematic documentation of research procedures, coding processes, and analytical decisions. Confirmability was supported through reflective journaling and maintenance of an audit trail, while transferability was enhanced through thick description of the research context, participant characteristics, and classroom implementation processes. These procedures ensured that the findings remained grounded in participants' experiences and aligned with established standards of qualitative phenomenological research (Giorgi, 2012; Malterud, 2012).

The research procedure was conducted systematically in several interconnected stages. The study began with the identification of the research problem and review of relevant literature related to Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), role-play, and early childhood education to establish the research focus and identify existing gaps in previous studies. After determining the research objectives and phenomenological design, the researcher obtained institutional permission and ethical consent from participants before conducting the study. Participants were then selected purposively based on their direct involvement in role-play implementation and children's social-emotional development.

The data collection process involved classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation review conducted over multiple sessions during the 2024–2025 academic year. Observational data focused on teacher facilitation strategies, children's interactions, emotional responses, and role-play implementation within the classroom setting. Interviews were conducted with teachers, the school psychologist, and a parent to obtain in-depth perspectives regarding planning

processes, perceived impacts, and challenges related to role-play and SEL. Supporting documents such as lesson plans, SEL records, and PCDC reports were also collected to strengthen data triangulation.

Following data collection, all interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, field notes were organised, and documents were compiled systematically. The data analysis process followed Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method combined with Stepwise Translation of Meaning Units (STC), beginning with repeated reading of the data to obtain a holistic understanding. Meaning units were then identified, coded, categorised, and transformed into psychologically sensitive descriptions before being synthesised into major themes representing participants' lived experiences. Finally, the findings were interpreted and validated through triangulation, reflective journaling, and audit trail documentation to ensure credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the research findings.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

The findings of this study indicate that role-play at Kindergarten XYZ Jakarta functions as an intentionally structured pedagogical strategy to support Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) among EY1 children aged three to four years. Rather than being implemented as spontaneous free play, role-play was systematically planned, scaffolded, and reflected upon by teachers as part of the school's holistic and faith-informed curriculum. The analysis identified several interconnected themes, including intentional pedagogical planning, flexible teacher facilitation, contextual relevance of scenarios, holistic developmental impact, constructive management of challenges, and multicultural responsiveness. These findings suggest that role-play operates not only as a classroom activity but also as a relational and developmental process that supports children's emotional and social growth.

Teachers consistently described role-play as a deliberate instructional strategy designed to address children's emotional and behavioural needs. One teacher explained, "We don't just let them play randomly. We prepare situations that help them learn how to share, wait, and express feelings appropriately." This finding highlights the importance of intentional teacher facilitation as a central contribution of the study. Previous research has acknowledged the developmental value of play-based learning; however, many studies discuss play in broad terms without explaining how teachers intentionally structure and sustain role-play to support SEL (Lahiya et al., 2022; Smedley & Hoskins, 2020). The present study extends this literature by demonstrating that the effectiveness of role-play is strongly influenced by deliberate planning, repeated practice, and responsive scaffolding. From a constructivist perspective, these findings support the view that children develop social understanding through guided interaction and meaningful experience rather than through passive exposure alone.

Another important finding concerns the dynamic role of teachers during role-play sessions. Teachers shifted flexibly between facilitator, co-player, observer, and emotional guide depending on children's readiness and participation. One participant stated, "Sometimes I join the play to help children start interacting, but once they are comfortable, I step back and observe." This reflects Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective that learning occurs through scaffolded social interaction within the Zone of Proximal Development (Kouicem, 2020; Peng & Kievit, 2020). While previous studies emphasise teacher competence in SEL implementation (Gimbert et al., 2023; Khalisha & Gustiana, 2024), this study provides deeper insight into how pedagogical sensitivity operates in real classroom situations. The findings suggest that responsive facilitation functions as a mediating factor that shapes the quality of children's emotional and social engagement during play.

The study also found that realistic and familiar scenarios increased children's participation and emotional understanding. Role-play themes were intentionally connected to children's daily experiences, such as family routines, classroom conflicts, playground situations, and helping behaviours. According to one teacher, "When the story is close to their real life, they understand the emotions faster and respond more naturally." This finding supports constructivist theory, which proposes that children build new understanding based on prior knowledge and lived experience. Compared with previous research that often focuses on imaginative fantasy play, this study highlights the developmental value of socially grounded scenarios for younger children's SEL development (Davis, 2003; Lahiya et al., 2022). Familiar contexts appeared to support emotional recognition, empathy, and behavioural transfer beyond the classroom environment.

In addition to social–emotional growth, role-play contributed to broader developmental domains, including language, cognition, creativity, and emerging leadership. During observations, children negotiated roles, created narratives, solved problems collaboratively, and expressed ideas verbally during play interactions. Teachers also observed increasing confidence among children who initially showed hesitation in social participation. These findings reinforce holistic perspectives of early childhood development, which emphasise that learning domains are interconnected rather than isolated (Alwaely et al., 2021; Alzahrani et al., 2019). Conceptually, the study suggests that SEL-focused role-play naturally generates opportunities for communication and cognitive engagement, indicating that emotional development and language development occur simultaneously within meaningful social interaction.

An additional contribution of this study lies in the reinterpretation of classroom challenges as opportunities for SEL learning. Emotional outbursts, possessiveness, and peer disagreements were not treated solely as behavioural problems but as teachable moments. Teachers used emotional coaching, calm mediation, and reflective questioning to guide children through conflict situations. One teacher reflected, “The conflicts are actually the moments where the children learn the most about feelings and empathy.” This finding aligns with contemporary SEL perspectives that view conflict as part of children’s developmental learning process rather than simply as disruptive behaviour (Alwaely et al., 2021; Barrouillet, 2015). The study therefore contributes practical insight into how emotional regulation and empathy can be developed through everyday classroom interactions.

The multicultural and Christian-based context of the school also shaped the implementation of role-play. Teachers adapted communication styles and facilitation strategies to support children from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. At the same time, Christian values such as kindness, patience, forgiveness, and responsibility were embedded naturally within play narratives and teacher guidance. This finding extends previous research on faith-informed education by demonstrating how character education and SEL can be integrated through play-based pedagogy rather than taught abstractly. The study therefore positions role-play as a culturally and spiritually responsive pedagogical approach within early childhood education.

The findings of this study carry several implications. Theoretically, the study strengthens sociocultural and constructivist perspectives by highlighting intentional teacher facilitation as a central mechanism in supporting SEL development through role-play. Practically, the study provides guidance for educators on the importance of structured planning, responsive facilitation, and contextual relevance in implementing role-play activities. The findings also suggest that sustainable SEL implementation requires integration across daily routines, collaboration with families, and institutional support systems. Conceptually, this study contributes a framework for understanding role-play as a multidimensional pedagogical strategy that integrates emotional learning, social interaction, and character formation within culturally responsive contexts.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted in a single kindergarten setting, which limits transferability to other educational contexts. Second, the participant group was relatively small and focused specifically on EY1 children aged three to four years. Third, the phenomenological design prioritised depth of interpretation rather than broad generalisation and relied primarily on adult perspectives without directly capturing children’s voices. In addition, the faith-based context of the study may influence the applicability of findings in non-religious educational environments. These limitations indicate that the findings should be interpreted within their specific contextual boundaries (Batra, 2013; Giorgi, 2012; Ibarra, 2022; Malterud, 2012).

Future research may expand this study by involving multiple educational settings with diverse cultural and institutional backgrounds. Longitudinal research designs could also provide deeper understanding of the long-term influence of structured role-play on children’s social–emotional development. In addition, future studies may integrate children’s perspectives more directly and examine how teacher professional development influences pedagogical sensitivity during role-play facilitation.

## DISCUSSION

The discussion of this study highlights four main findings regarding the use of role-play to support Social–Emotional Learning (SEL) in early childhood classrooms. First, role-play was implemented as an intentionally planned pedagogical strategy rather than spontaneous free play. Second, teacher facilitation emerged as a central element influencing how children engaged emotionally and socially during play. Third, contextual and familiar scenarios appeared to support children’s ability to transfer social–emotional understanding into everyday interactions. Finally, the multicultural and faith-informed setting shaped how SEL and character values were embedded within classroom experiences.

One important contribution of this study is the finding that intentional teacher facilitation appears to play a significant role in shaping the quality of children’s role-play experiences. Previous studies have generally acknowledged that play supports SEL, but often describe play in broad terms without examining how teachers intentionally structure, scaffold, and sustain role-play interactions (Arda Tuncdemir, 2025; Baader, 2004; Lahiya et al., 2022). In this study, teachers consistently planned role-play scenarios based on children’s observed emotional and social needs and adjusted their level of involvement according to children’s readiness. This finding suggests that the developmental value of role-play may depend not only on the activity itself, but also on the pedagogical sensitivity of the teacher. As one teacher explained, *“Sometimes the children do not know how to express frustration, so we enter the play first and model the words they can use.”* This supports sociocultural perspectives that emphasise adult mediation and scaffolding within children’s learning processes (Aljarah, 2017; Kouicem, 2020). However, rather than suggesting that structured role-play is universally effective, the findings indicate that intentional facilitation may create more meaningful opportunities for emotional practice and social interaction.

Another key finding concerns the importance of contextual familiarity within role-play scenarios. The children appeared more engaged when scenarios reflected experiences that were close to their everyday lives, such as sharing toys, waiting for turns, family routines, or resolving peer conflicts. While previous research frequently highlights imaginative or fantasy play as beneficial for development, the present study suggests that realistic and socially grounded scenarios may be particularly meaningful for children aged three to four years. Familiar situations seemed to help children recognise emotions, predict social responses, and apply learned behaviours beyond the classroom context. Parent feedback also suggested that some children began using emotional vocabulary and conflict-resolution strategies at home. These findings may indicate that contextual relevance functions as a bridge between symbolic play and real social experience, although this interpretation remains limited to the specific context of the study.

The findings also suggest that role-play supported multiple developmental domains simultaneously, including emotional expression, communication, cooperation, and emerging leadership behaviours. This aligns with previous studies describing play as a holistic learning medium that integrates social, cognitive, and linguistic development (Alwaely et al., 2021; Alzahrani et al., 2019; Arda Tuncdemir, 2025). However, this study contributes a more process-oriented understanding by showing how social–emotional interaction itself appeared to stimulate communication and collaborative problem-solving. During observations, children frequently negotiated roles, solved disagreements, and constructed shared narratives together. One teacher noted, *“When they pretend together, they naturally begin talking more, listening to each other, and solving problems by themselves.”* Rather than viewing SEL as separate from other developmental domains, the findings suggest that social–emotional learning may occur simultaneously with language and cognitive growth through meaningful social participation.

A further contribution of this study lies in its exploration of role-play within a multicultural and Christian-based educational setting. The findings indicate that role-play functioned not only as a social learning activity, but also as a medium through which values such as kindness, patience, forgiveness, and responsibility were practised in concrete situations. Previous studies discussing faith-based education often focus on moral instruction conceptually rather than examining how values are operationalised in classroom interaction. In this study, character values were embedded within play narratives and teacher facilitation rather than delivered as abstract instruction. At the same time, the

multicultural classroom context required teachers to remain responsive to differences in communication style, emotional expression, and participation patterns. This suggests that role-play may provide a flexible context for integrating SEL with culturally and spiritually responsive practices, although the findings cannot be separated from the specific institutional culture in which the study was conducted.

The study also identified several implications. Theoretically, the findings support constructivist and sociocultural perspectives that emphasise guided interaction and meaningful experience in early childhood learning. Conceptually, the study contributes by positioning intentional teacher facilitation as a possible mediating factor between role-play experiences and SEL development. Practically, the findings suggest that educators may benefit from viewing role-play not simply as recreational activity, but as a pedagogically guided opportunity for emotional coaching, communication practice, and social reflection. However, these implications should be interpreted cautiously, as the findings reflect a specific qualitative context rather than universally generalisable outcomes.

Several limitations should also be acknowledged. The study was conducted within a single kindergarten setting with a relatively small participant group, which limits broader transferability. In addition, the findings were interpreted primarily through teacher, parent, and psychologist perspectives without directly incorporating children's voices. The phenomenological approach prioritised depth of interpretation rather than measurement of outcomes, meaning that the study cannot claim causal impact regarding SEL improvement (Giorgi, 2012; Malterud, 2012; Munafiah et al., 2023). Furthermore, the Christian-based and play-oriented culture of the institution may have strongly influenced the findings, and similar results may not emerge in different educational contexts.

Future research may build on this study by exploring role-play implementation across multiple institutions and cultural settings. Longitudinal studies may also provide deeper understanding of how structured role-play influences children's social-emotional development over time. In addition, future research could investigate children's own perspectives during role-play interactions and examine how teacher training influences pedagogical sensitivity in facilitating SEL through play (Gimbert et al., 2021).

## **CONCLUSION**

This study suggests that structured role-play at Kindergarten XYZ Jakarta may function as an intentional pedagogical strategy for supporting Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) among EY1 children aged three to four years. The findings indicate that role-play, when systematically planned, grounded in familiar contexts, and supported through responsive teacher facilitation, can provide meaningful opportunities for children to develop emotional expression, empathy, cooperation, communication, and early social responsibility. A central contribution of this study lies in highlighting teacher pedagogical sensitivity and contextualised scenario design as important elements shaping children's social-emotional experiences during play. The study also suggests that classroom challenges, such as conflict and emotional outbursts, may serve as opportunities for guided social-emotional learning rather than solely behavioural disruptions. Conceptually, this research contributes to the understanding of role-play as a structured and relational learning process embedded within daily classroom interaction, particularly within a multicultural and faith-informed early childhood context. However, the findings should be interpreted within the specific setting and qualitative scope of the study, as they reflect the lived experiences of participants in one institutional context rather than universally generalisable outcomes.

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## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

RS conceptualised the research, developed the research design, conducted data collection through observations and interviews, performed the phenomenological data analysis, and drafted the manuscript. SR provided academic supervision, methodological guidance, and critical review of the manuscript to strengthen the theoretical and analytical rigor of the study.

## AI DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors declare that ChatGPT was used during the preparation of this manuscript for language refinement and editorial support. After using the tool/service, the authors have reviewed, verified, and edited the entire content thoroughly as necessary, and are fully responsible for the accuracy, integrity, and substance of the content of this publication.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the research, authorship, and publication of this manuscript. The study was conducted independently without any financial, institutional, or personal relationships that could have influenced the research process or its outcomes.

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