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Exploring the Role of Hand Puppets in Developing the Social and Emotional Skills of Young Children

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Abstract

Social and emotional skills underpin children's school readiness, yet some young children withdraw from group activities, lack confidence, find it hard to wait for their turn, and struggle to express themselves politely. This classroom action research examined how hand puppets can be used to develop the social and emotional skills of children aged 5–6 years in Group B2 of TK Asoka Sudiang, Makassar, Indonesia. The study followed the Kemmis and McTaggart spiral model in two cycles of three sessions each, involving all 16 children in the group. Data were collected with a four-level observation checklist adapted from the national Standard of Child Development Achievement, performance assessment, and documentation, and were analysed with descriptive percentages and interactive qualitative analysis. Four indicators were observed: enjoyment in social activities, self-confidence, patience in waiting for a turn, and good communication. Based on the individual scores, the classical achievement rose from 40.23% before the action to 75.00% in Cycle I and 95.70% in Cycle II, exceeding the 81% success criterion, and all 16 children reached the Developing Very Well category in Cycle II. The improvement followed a gradual shift from teacher-led puppet stories in Cycle I to child-led puppet dialogues and peer interaction in Cycle II. The findings suggest that hand puppets, used as a child-centred and psychologically safe medium, can support young children's social and emotional development, although the results are limited to one class.

Keywords: social-emotional skills; early childhood; hand puppets; classroom action research.

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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood is widely regarded as a golden age in which brain development and neural plasticity are at their peak and children are highly sensitive to environmental stimulation. In Indonesia, Law Number 20 of 2003 on the National Education System defines education as a conscious effort to develop learners' potential, including spiritual strength, self-control, personality, and the social skills that society needs (Republic of Indonesia, 2003). In practice, however, early childhood learning often prioritises early literacy and numeracy, while social and emotional development receives less attention in the operational curriculum.

Social and emotional skills are central to children's school readiness and psychological resilience. Social skills include the ability to interact, cooperate, show empathy, and follow group norms, while emotional skills include recognising, understanding, expressing, and regulating emotions in ways that suit the child's stage of development (Masruroh & Putri, 2026). When these skills develop together, children can build positive relationships with peers and teachers, resolve conflicts peacefully, and become more confident. Piaget and Inhelder (1969) described young children as building understanding through direct interaction with objects and their social environment, while Vygotsky (1978) emphasised that higher mental functions develop through social interaction mediated by cultural tools. Insufficient social and emotional stimulation in early childhood may therefore affect children's later behaviour and learning.

Early childhood education currently faces additional challenges related to digital media. Studies with Indonesian preschool children have reported associations between gadget use or screen time and children's social interaction and social-emotional conditions (Afrillianti et al., 2026; Nugraheni et al., 2026). These studies describe associations rather than causes, but they highlight the need for learning activities that require direct, face-to-face interaction. In Group B2 of TK Asoka Sudiang, preliminary observations showed that many children lacked confidence, tended to withdraw from group activities, found it difficult to express their feelings in appropriate words, and had difficulty regulating their emotions. These difficulties appeared as tantrums, excessive crying when facing small obstacles, and reluctance to share or cooperate in group activities, which in turn affected the classroom climate.

Hand puppets are a concrete, interactive, and child-centred medium that may help address these difficulties. When a teacher or child moves a puppet, it becomes a character that can imitate movements, express emotions, and take part in dialogue. Puppets may also offer a psychologically safe space: shy or anxious children may find it easier to speak and respond when they speak through a puppet character rather than as themselves. Research on pretend play has shown that preschool children use gestures and actions with puppets to represent characters and situations (Goldstein et al., 2022). Through role-play, questions and answers, and storytelling with puppets, children can rehearse everyday social situations, such as waiting patiently for a turn, sharing toys, and showing empathy.

Many studies of hand puppets in early childhood have focused on language, such as speaking, storytelling, and polite speech (Marwah, 2022; Oktaviana & Katoningsih, 2023; Wati & Solihin, 2022). Other studies have reported that hand puppets can support children's social and emotional development (Aulia et al., 2021; Yuliati & Masturoh, 2021), emotional control (Insani, 2021; Mbayang et al., 2023),

expressive language and emotion (Khotimah et al., 2021), and emotional regulation through role-play (Sari & Mahabbati, 2026), while finger puppets have been used to build young children's confidence (Aini & Dheasari, 2022). A recent case study framed hand-puppet activities within the CASEL framework of social and emotional competence (Masruroh & Putri, 2026). However, fewer studies have documented, within classroom action research, how teachers can gradually shift puppet activities from teacher-led stories to child-led dialogues in order to develop several social and emotional indicators at the same time.

This study addresses that gap by applying hand puppets in a structured, gradual way across two cycles of classroom action research. In this design, children are not only an audience for the teacher's puppet show; they hold, move, and create dialogues with the puppets themselves. The activities target four indicators simultaneously: enjoyment in social activities, self-confidence, patience in waiting for a turn, and good communication. The study aimed to describe the role of hand puppets in developing the social and emotional skills of children aged 5–6 years in Group B2 of TK Asoka Sudiang and to examine changes in these skills across the cycles. Practically, it offers teachers an example of how a simple and inexpensive medium can be used to support social and emotional learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social and Emotional Skills in Early Childhood

Social and emotional skills refer to children's abilities to understand and manage their own emotions and to build positive relationships with others. Frameworks of social and emotional learning commonly describe these abilities in terms of recognising emotions, regulating responses, understanding others, building relationships, and making responsible social decisions (Masruroh & Putri, 2026). For children aged 5–6 years, these abilities are visible in everyday classroom behaviour: joining activities with enthusiasm, daring to speak or perform in front of others, waiting for a turn, sharing materials, and expressing wishes and feelings in appropriate words. The Indonesian Standard of Child Development Achievement places such behaviours within the social-emotional domain, which includes self-awareness, a sense of responsibility for oneself and others, and prosocial behaviour (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2014).

Emotional skills and social skills are closely related. Children who can recognise and regulate their emotions are better able to wait, cooperate, and resolve conflicts with peers, while positive social experiences in turn help children practise emotional regulation. Studies in Indonesian kindergartens have shown that difficulties in emotional control often appear as crying, refusing to come forward, or running away when children are asked to perform (Insani, 2021), and that targeted activities can help children manage these responses (Mbayang et al., 2023; Sari & Mahabbati, 2026).

Social and emotional competence is also an important part of school readiness. Denham (2006) described it as including the ability to express and regulate emotions, to understand the emotions of others, and to manage social interactions and relationships, and argued that these abilities support children's adjustment to school, their relationships with teachers and peers, and their later learning. Children who are able to wait, listen, and ask for help appropriately are better prepared for classroom routines, while children who withdraw or react impulsively may find it difficult to

benefit from group learning. For this reason, social and emotional skills should be developed intentionally in kindergarten, not left to develop on their own.

Hand Puppets as a Learning Medium

Hand puppets are figures, usually made of cloth, that are worn on the hand and moved with the fingers to represent a character. In early childhood education they are widely used to tell stories, ask questions, and model dialogue. Research has shown that puppets can attract children's attention and motivate them to tell stories (Marwah, 2022), support language development through question-and-answer activities (Oktaviana & Katoningsih, 2023), and encourage polite speech (Wati & Solihin, 2022). In pretend play, preschool children use gestures with puppets to represent characters and actions, which shows that puppets engage the body as well as language (Goldstein et al., 2022).

Beyond language, puppets have been used to support social and emotional development. Aulia et al. (2021) described hand puppets as a medium for developing social and emotional skills, and Yuliati and Masturoh (2021) used them to support children's social-emotional development during the new normal period. Storytelling with hand puppets has been associated with improvements in children's emotional development and expressive language (Insani, 2021; Khotimah et al., 2021), and puppet-based role-play has been used to improve emotional regulation (Sari & Mahabbati, 2026). Finger puppets have also been reported to strengthen the confidence of younger children (Aini & Dheasari, 2022). These studies suggest that the value of puppets lies not only in their visual appeal but also in the opportunities they create for children to speak, take roles, and rehearse social situations.

Several features of puppets may explain why they are suitable for social and emotional learning. First, a puppet creates a safe distance between the child and the situation being discussed. A shy child may find it easier to speak through a puppet or to a puppet than to speak directly in front of the class, and a child may express fear, anger, or sadness more openly when the feeling is attributed to a character. Second, puppets make social situations concrete and visible, so that children can see what happens when a character refuses to share, pushes in line, or says sorry. Third, puppets allow children to rehearse alternative responses without real consequences, which supports the gradual development of self-regulation. These features make puppets an appropriate medium for children who are still learning to put their feelings and needs into words.

Theoretical Basis

Piaget and Inhelder (1969) explained that children in the preoperational period learn through symbolic play and active exploration, in which objects can stand for people and situations. A puppet is such a symbol: it allows children to represent themselves and others and to try out different responses. Vygotsky (1978) emphasised that learning occurs through social interaction and is mediated by cultural tools, and that children can perform at a higher level with the support of adults or more capable peers within their zone of proximal development. In puppet activities, the teacher's modelling and the gradual transfer of control to the children correspond to this kind of mediated support. These perspectives provide the basis for using hand puppets, first with strong teacher guidance and then with increasing child independence, as a means of developing social and emotional skills.

Bandura's (1977) social learning theory adds that children learn many social behaviours by observing models and the consequences of their actions. A puppet character that waits patiently, speaks politely, or comforts a friend, and that is praised for doing so, provides a model that children can attend to, remember, and reproduce. When children later play the same character, they practise the modelled behaviour themselves, and the teacher's praise functions as reinforcement. In this way, puppet activities combine observation, imitation, and practice within one enjoyable activity.

METHOD

Research Design

This study used collaborative classroom action research following the Kemmis and McTaggart spiral model, in which each cycle consists of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Kemmis et al., 2014). This design allowed the researcher and the class teacher to identify problems, take action, and adjust the learning strategy directly in the classroom when children showed emotional resistance or difficulty adapting during puppet activities. The study was conducted in two cycles, and each cycle consisted of three sessions.

Setting and Participants

The study was carried out in Group B2 of TK Asoka Sudiang, Pai Subdistrict, Sudiang District, Makassar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia, from May to June 2026. The class was selected purposively because low social skills and emotional regulation were identified in the pre-action observation. The principal provided institutional permission, and the class teacher acted as a collaborator who observed the children, provided information about their daily behaviour, and helped to evaluate the actions. The participants were all 16 children in the group, six boys and ten girls aged 5–6 years, who are identified by initials-based codes in this article.

Action Procedures

In the planning stage, the researcher and the class teacher prepared daily teaching modules (*Modul Ajar Harian*) focusing on social and emotional learning, provided hand puppets representing animal and human characters, prepared the observation checklist, and arranged audio-visual documentation. In the acting stage, each session began with an apperception activity in the form of singing together, followed by two-way storytelling in which the children answered questions, responded to the puppet characters, and took turns using the puppets in front of the class.

Each session followed a consistent structure. In the opening, the children sat in a semicircle, prayed, and sang a song to introduce the theme of the day. In the core activity, the teacher used the puppets to present a short story about a familiar social situation, such as sharing toys, waiting in line, helping a friend, or apologising after a mistake, and asked the children how the characters felt and what they should do. The children then took turns using the puppets, first by imitating the teacher's dialogue and later by creating their own. In the closing, the teacher and the children recalled the story, named the feelings that had appeared in it, and praised the children who had waited, shared, or spoken politely during the session.

The observing stage took place during the action. The researcher and the class teacher recorded the children's behaviour using the observation checklist, focusing on laughter and enthusiasm (enjoyment), willingness to perform without hesitation

(confidence), the ability to wait in line during the activity (patience in waiting for a turn), and the accuracy of sentences used in dialogue (good communication). In the reflecting stage at the end of each cycle, the researcher and the teacher analysed the data to identify successes and remaining problems. The reflection on Cycle I became the basis for revising the strategy, varying the stories, and providing individual support in Cycle II.

The checklist was completed for every child at the end of each session, based on the behaviour shown during the whole activity rather than on a single moment. Brief field notes were used to record events that illustrated the indicators, such as a child who refused to come forward, a child who interrupted a friend's turn, or a child who comforted a friend who was shy. The scores from the final session of each cycle were used to describe the achievement of that cycle, while the notes from all sessions were used in the reflection.

Instrument and Data Collection

Data were collected through participant observation, performance assessment, and documentation. The main instrument was an observation checklist with four levels adapted from the Standard of Child Development Achievement in Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture Number 137 of 2014 (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2014). The four indicators and their focus are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Indicators of social and emotional skills observed in the study.

No.	*Indicator*	*Aspect*	*Focus of observation*
1	Shows enjoyment in social activities	Emotional	Laughter, enthusiasm, and willingness to join puppet activities without repeated prompting
2	Shows self-confidence	Emotional	Willingness to come forward and perform with the puppet without hesitation
3	Waits patiently for a turn	Social	Ability to restrain oneself and wait in line during puppet activities
4	Communicates well	Social	Accuracy and politeness of sentences used in dialogue with the teacher, peers, and puppet characters

Each indicator was scored 1 for Not Yet Developed (*Belum Berkembang*, BB), 2 for Starting to Develop (*Mulai Berkembang*, MB), 3 for Developing as Expected (*Berkembang Sesuai Harapan*, BSH), and 4 for Developing Very Well (*Berkembang Sangat Baik*, BSB). With four indicators, each child could obtain a maximum score of 16, and the maximum score for the whole class of 16 children was 256.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed descriptively using both qualitative and quantitative techniques. The qualitative analysis followed the interactive model of Miles et al. (2014), consisting of data condensation, data display in the form of score matrices, and conclusion drawing and verification. The quantitative analysis used the percentage formula $P = f / N \times 100\%$, where P is the percentage of achievement, f is the score obtained, and N is the maximum score. Individual percentages were calculated with N = 16 and the classical percentage with N = 256. Percentages were interpreted as BB (25.00–43.74%), MB (43.75–62.49%), BSH (62.50–81.24%), and BSB (81.25–100%). The action was considered successful when the classical achievement reached at least 81%, corresponding to the BSB category.

RESULTS

Pre-action Condition

Before the action, the researcher observed the children to obtain baseline data. Most children showed difficulties in socialising and regulating their emotions. They tended to withdraw from group activities, lacked the confidence to perform in front of the class, were impatient and fought over toys, and had difficulty forming polite two-way sentences with the teacher and peers. The individual scores are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Social and emotional skill scores of the children before the action.

Child	*Enjoyment*	*Confidence*	*Patience*	*Communication*	*Score*	*%*	*Category*
AD	BB (1)	BB (1)	MB (2)	BB (1)	5	31.25	BB
AB	BB (1)	BB (1)	MB (2)	BB (1)	5	31.25	BB
BN	MB (2)	BB (1)	BB (1)	MB (2)	6	37.50	BB
BM	BB (1)	BB (1)	MB (2)	BB (1)	5	31.25	BB
JE	MB (2)	MB (2)	MB (2)	BB (1)	7	43.75	MB
JS	MB (2)	BB (1)	BB (1)	BSH (3)	7	43.75	MB
KL	BB (1)	BB (1)	MB (2)	MB (2)	6	37.50	BB
MW	MB (2)	MB (2)	BB (1)	MB (2)	7	43.75	MB
NH	MB (2)	BB (1)	MB (2)	BB (1)	6	37.50	BB
QA	MB (2)	BB (1)	BB (1)	MB (2)	6	37.50	BB
RY	MB (2)	BB (1)	BB (1)	MB (2)	6	37.50	BB
SD	MB (2)	MB (2)	BB (1)	MB (2)	7	43.75	MB
SU	BB (1)	MB (2)	MB (2)	MB (2)	7	43.75	MB
VR	MB (2)	MB (2)	MB (2)	BSH (3)	9	56.25	MB
WL	MB (2)	MB (2)	BB (1)	MB (2)	7	43.75	MB
XP	BB (1)	BB (1)	MB (2)	BSH (3)	7	43.75	MB
Total					103	40.23	BB

Note. BB = Not Yet Developed; MB = Starting to Develop; BSH = Developing as Expected; BSB = Developing Very Well. Scores and totals were recalculated from the indicator scores.

Table 2 shows that individual totals ranged from 5 to 9 out of 16, so that no child was above the MB range. The total score of the class was 103 out of 256, which corresponds to a classical achievement of 40.23% (BB). The distribution of categories for each indicator is shown in Table 5. On enjoyment, six children (38%) were in the BB category and ten (62%) in MB. On confidence, ten children (62%) were in BB, and none had reached BSH or BSB. On patience in waiting for a turn, seven children (44%) were in BB and nine (56%) in MB. On good communication, only three children (19%) had reached BSH. These results showed the need for a structured action using hand puppets.

Cycle I

In Cycle I, the researcher and the class teacher integrated hand puppets into interactive stories. The action focused on introducing the puppet characters, imitating basic emotional expressions with guidance, and inviting the children to come forward in pairs to play with the puppets. The results at the end of Cycle I are presented in Table 3.

During the first sessions of Cycle I, most children watched the teacher's puppet stories with great interest, laughed at the characters, and answered the puppet's

questions together. When they were invited to come forward, however, several children declined or came forward only with a friend, and some children spoke very softly or simply moved the puppet without speaking. Children also tended to crowd around the puppet box and had to be reminded to wait for their turn. By the last session of the cycle, more children were willing to come forward in pairs, but the dialogues still relied heavily on the teacher's prompts.

Table 3. Social and emotional skill scores of the children at the end of Cycle I.

Child	*Enjoyment*	*Confidence*	*Patience*	*Communication*	*Score*	*%*	*Category*
AD	BSH (3)	MB (2)	BSH (3)	MB (2)	10	62.50	BSH
AB	BSH (3)	MB (2)	BSH (3)	MB (2)	10	62.50	BSH
BN	BSH (3)	BSH (3)	BSH (3)	BSH (3)	12	75.00	BSH
BM	BSH (3)	MB (2)	BSB (4)	BSH (3)	12	75.00	BSH
JE	BSB (4)	BSH (3)	MB (2)	BSH (3)	12	75.00	BSH
JS	BSH (3)	BSH (3)	BSH (3)	BSH (3)	12	75.00	BSH
KL	BSH (3)	BSH (3)	BSH (3)	BSB (4)	13	81.25	BSB
MW	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	MB (2)	BSH (3)	13	81.25	BSB
NH	BSH (3)	MB (2)	BSH (3)	BSB (4)	12	75.00	BSH
QA	BSH (3)	BSH (3)	BSH (3)	MB (2)	11	68.75	BSH
RY	BSB (4)	MB (2)	MB (2)	BSH (3)	11	68.75	BSH
SD	BSH (3)	BSH (3)	BSB (4)	BSH (3)	13	81.25	BSB
SU	BSB (4)	BSH (3)	BSH (3)	BSH (3)	13	81.25	BSB
VR	BSH (3)	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	BSH (3)	14	87.50	BSB
WL	BSH (3)	BSH (3)	MB (2)	BSH (3)	11	68.75	BSH
XP	BSH (3)	BSH (3)	BSH (3)	BSB (4)	13	81.25	BSB
Total					192	75.00	BSH

Note. Individual percentage = score / 16 × 100%; classical percentage = total / 256 × 100%.

Table 3 shows that the total score of the class increased to 192, giving a classical achievement of 75.00% (BSH). Individual achievement ranged from 62.50% to 87.50%, and six children (37.5%) reached the BSB category. On enjoyment, all children had moved out of the BB and MB categories, with 12 children (75%) in BSH and four (25%) in BSB, because they were very enthusiastic about the puppets used by the teacher. However, five children (31%) remained in the MB category on confidence, and three children (19%) remained in MB on communication, mainly because of shyness. Since the classical achievement had not yet reached the 81% criterion, the study continued to Cycle II, in which the children were given more opportunities to play the puppet roles independently with less direct guidance from the teacher.

Cycle II

In Cycle II, the action focused on peer-interaction modelling. The children were given room to create simple short stories and to interact in pairs using the hand puppets, while the teacher acted mainly as a facilitator. The results at the end of Cycle II are presented in Table 4.

In Cycle II, the reflection on Cycle I was translated into several changes. The stories were varied and linked more closely to events in the classroom, the children were paired so that more confident children could support shyer ones, and each pair was given a simple situation to act out with the puppets, such as asking to borrow a toy or inviting a friend to play. The teacher reduced her own talk, gave the children

time to plan their dialogue, and offered individual support to children who still hesitated. A fixed order for using the puppets was agreed at the beginning of each session, which made waiting for a turn more predictable.

Table 4. Social and emotional skill scores of the children at the end of Cycle II.

Child	*Enjoyment*	*Confidence*	*Patience*	*Communication*	*Score*	*%*	*Category*
AD	BSH (3)	BSH (3)	BSB (4)	BSH (3)	13	81.25	BSB
AB	BSH (3)	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	BSH (3)	14	87.50	BSB
BN	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	16	100.00	BSB
BM	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	16	100.00	BSB
JE	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	16	100.00	BSB
JS	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	16	100.00	BSB
KL	BSB (4)	BSH (3)	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	15	93.75	BSB
MW	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	BSH (3)	BSB (4)	15	93.75	BSB
NH	BSH (3)	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	15	93.75	BSB
QA	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	BSH (3)	15	93.75	BSB
RY	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	BSH (3)	BSB (4)	15	93.75	BSB
SD	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	16	100.00	BSB
SU	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	16	100.00	BSB
VR	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	16	100.00	BSB
WL	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	BSH (3)	BSB (4)	15	93.75	BSB
XP	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	BSB (4)	16	100.00	BSB
Total					245	95.70	BSB

Note. Individual percentage = score / 16 × 100%; classical percentage = total / 256 × 100%.

Table 4 shows that the total score of the class increased to 245, giving a classical achievement of 95.70% (BSB). All 16 children reached the BSB category, with individual achievements between 81.25% and 100%. On enjoyment and on patience in waiting for a turn, 13 children (81%) were in the BSB category; on confidence, 14 children (88%) were in BSB; and on communication, 13 children (81%) were in BSB. The children no longer showed visible hesitation in speaking in front of the class and could build dialogues independently through the puppets. Because the classical achievement exceeded the 81% criterion, the action was considered successful and the study ended after Cycle II.

Table 5. Number of children in each category for each indicator (N = 16).

Indicator	*Pre-action (BB / MB / BSH / BSB)*	*Cycle I (BB / MB / BSH / BSB)*	*Cycle II (BB / MB / BSH / BSB)*
Enjoyment	6 / 10 / 0 / 0	0 / 0 / 12 / 4	0 / 0 / 3 / 13
Confidence	10 / 6 / 0 / 0	0 / 5 / 9 / 2	0 / 0 / 2 / 14
Patience in waiting for a turn	7 / 9 / 0 / 0	0 / 4 / 9 / 3	0 / 0 / 3 / 13
Good communication	5 / 8 / 3 / 0	0 / 3 / 10 / 3	0 / 0 / 3 / 13

Note. Counts are derived from the individual scores in Tables 2–4.

Table 5 shows the shift in the distribution of categories for each indicator across the three stages. The proportion of children in the BB category fell to zero for all indicators from Cycle I onward, and by Cycle II most children were in the BSB category on every indicator. Table 6 summarises the classical results.

Comparison of the individual scores shows that every child improved between the pre-action stage and Cycle II, with gains of seven to eleven points out of 16. The

largest gain was made by BM, whose score increased from 5 (31.25%) before the action to the maximum score of 16 (100%) in Cycle II. Children who had the lowest scores before the action (AD, AB, and BM, each at 31.25%) reached between 81.25% and 100% in Cycle II. VR, who had the highest pre-action score (56.25%), made the smallest gain but also reached the maximum score. At the indicator level, confidence was the weakest aspect before the action (34.4% of the maximum score) and became the highest in Cycle II (96.9%), while enjoyment, patience in waiting for a turn, and communication each reached 95.3%.

Table 6. Summary of classical social and emotional skill achievement.

Stage	*Total score (max. 256)*	*Classical achievement (%)*	*Category*	*Children in BSB*
Pre-action	103	40.23	BB	0 (0.0%)
Cycle I	192	75.00	BSH	6 (37.5%)
Cycle II	245	95.70	BSB	16 (100.0%)

Note. Success criterion: classical achievement ≥ 81%.

As shown in Table 6, the classical achievement increased by 34.77 percentage points from the pre-action stage to Cycle I and by a further 20.70 points from Cycle I to Cycle II. The proportion of children in the BSB category increased from none before the action to 37.5% in Cycle I and 100% in Cycle II.

DISCUSSION

Changes in Social and Emotional Skills

The results show an observed improvement in the social and emotional skills of the children in Group B2 across the two cycles. Because the study used descriptive percentages within a classroom action research design, without a control group or statistical testing, the improvement should be understood as a substantial change in the observed behaviour of this class rather than as a generalisable effect. The gains were also produced by the whole learning package, including the teacher's gradual guidance and the shift to peer interaction, rather than by the puppets alone.

Enjoyment in classroom activities showed one of the clearest changes, from 38% of children in the BB category before the action to 81% in the BSB category in Cycle II. The puppets were colourful and funny, and the teacher used different voices for each character. More importantly, the children were not only spectators; they held and played the puppets in turn. This finding is consistent with Aulia et al. (2021), who reported that hand puppets can support the social and emotional development of young children, and with Yuliati and Masturoh (2021), who used hand puppets to develop social and emotional skills in a playgroup.

Confidence also improved markedly. Before the action, 62% of children were in the BB category because they were shy and afraid of making mistakes when speaking in front of others. In Cycle II, 88% of the children were in the BSB category and came forward to perform with the puppets without hesitation. A plausible explanation is that the puppet acts as a protective medium: when children speak through a puppet, the attention of the audience is directed to the puppet character rather than to the child. Similar gains in confidence have been reported when finger puppets were used in classroom action research with younger children (Aini & Dheasari, 2022).

Patience in waiting for a turn and good communication represent the social side of the skills observed. Waiting, listening to the teacher, and respecting a friend's turn require self-regulation, which is still developing at this age. Through consistent rules for taking turns with the puppets in every session, 81% of the children reached the BSB category on patience in Cycle II. These results are consistent with studies that have reported improvements in children's ability to control their emotions after puppet-based activities (Insani, 2021; Mbayang et al., 2023) and in emotional regulation through puppet role-play (Sari & Mahabbati, 2026). In communication, the children were increasingly able to express their wishes clearly, answer the puppet characters' questions, and retell the stories in polite sentences, in line with studies that used hand puppets to develop speaking and polite speech (Khotimah et al., 2021; Oktaviana & Katoningsih, 2023; Wati & Solihin, 2022).

The large change in confidence deserves particular attention. Before the action, confidence was the weakest indicator, and in Cycle I it remained the lowest of the four indicators even though the children enjoyed the puppets. The marked improvement occurred in Cycle II, when the children worked in pairs and created their own dialogues. This suggests that enjoyment of the medium is not sufficient to build confidence; children also need repeated opportunities to perform in a supportive setting, with a partner, and with a task that they can manage. The puppet allowed shy children to speak as a character rather than as themselves, which reduced the risk of embarrassment, and the pair structure meant that they did not have to stand in front of the class alone.

Factors Supporting the Action

Several factors appeared to support the improvement. First, the puppets represented varied and attractive characters related to children's daily lives, which helped to make abstract values such as empathy and sharing more concrete. Second, the teacher's role shifted from the main speaker to a facilitator and model of prosocial behaviour, and the teacher consistently gave verbal praise and responded warmly to the children's expressions. Third, the teacher used a gradual scaffolding approach: in Cycle I she modelled the dialogues and guided the puppet movements, while in Cycle II control was gradually handed over to the children through peer interaction. Fourth, the activities gave the children room to explore their emotions, cooperate in small groups, and solve simple conflicts with minimal guidance. These factors are consistent with descriptions of puppet activities that address several components of social and emotional competence at once (Masruroh & Putri, 2026).

The role of peers was also important. In Cycle II, the more confident children often helped their partners by suggesting what the puppet could say, demonstrating a movement, or encouraging them to try. This corresponds to Vygotsky's (1978) view that more capable peers can support learning within the zone of proximal development, and it shows that social and emotional skills are learned not only from the teacher but also through interaction among children. At the same time, the teacher needed to ensure that more confident children did not dominate the activity, for example by agreeing that each child in a pair should speak at least once.

Theoretical Perspectives and Islamic Values

From Piaget and Inhelder's (1969) perspective, active exploration with the puppets allowed the children to assimilate and accommodate new social schemes presented in the stories. From Vygotsky's (1978) perspective, the puppets functioned

as a cultural tool that mediated interaction within the children's zone of proximal development. Children who initially needed full help to manage their emotions and form sentences gradually became more independent with the support of the puppets, the teacher, and their peers. Goldstein et al. (2022) similarly showed that puppets invite children to embody characters through gesture during pretend play, which may make social rehearsal more concrete.

The findings are also relevant to the Islamic perspective that underpins Ihya Ulum. The prosocial interaction, polite speech (*qaulan ma'rufan*), and empathy shown by the children during puppet play reflect the message of Surah Al-Hujurat (49:13), which states that people were made into nations and tribes "that you may know one another" (Saheeh International translation). The command to know one another (*li ta'arafu*) can be applied at the level of the classroom, where children learn to open themselves to others, respect their presence, listen attentively, and build harmonious two-way communication. Integrating Islamic values into early childhood media and routines has also been found useful in supporting children's emotion regulation (Iman & Diana, 2026).

Implications for Practice

The findings suggest several practical steps for teachers who wish to use hand puppets for social and emotional learning. First, puppet stories should be based on situations that children experience every day in the classroom, such as sharing, waiting, and apologising, so that the lessons can be transferred to real interactions. Second, the teacher's role should shift gradually from storyteller to facilitator, beginning with modelling and moving towards child-led dialogues in pairs or small groups. Third, clear rules for taking turns with the puppets should be agreed at the beginning of each session. Fourth, shy children should be given small, manageable roles and partners who can support them, and every attempt should be acknowledged. Finally, teachers can use simple observation checklists, such as the one used in this study, to monitor children's progress and to plan individual support.

Hand puppets are inexpensive and can be made by teachers, parents, or children from cloth, socks, or paper, which makes them suitable for kindergartens with limited resources. Making puppets together with the children can itself become a social activity that involves sharing materials and cooperating. Teachers may also invite parents to use puppets at home to talk with children about feelings and daily events, so that the social and emotional skills practised at school are reinforced in the family.

Limitations

This study involved only one class of 16 children over two cycles, so the results cannot be generalised. The observations were made by the researcher and the class teacher, who were also involved in the action, and inter-observer agreement was not reported. Several elements of the learning design were changed together in Cycle II, so their separate contributions cannot be identified. Future research could involve more classes, use independent observers, and include follow-up observations to examine whether the changes are maintained.

CONCLUSION

The use of hand puppets in two cycles of classroom action research was accompanied by an improvement in the social and emotional skills of children aged

5–6 years in Group B2 of TK Asoka Sudiang. Based on the individual scores, the classical achievement increased from 40.23% before the action to 75.00% in Cycle I and 95.70% in Cycle II, exceeding the 81% criterion, and all 16 children reached the BSB category in Cycle II. The improvement was observed in all four indicators: enjoyment in social activities, self-confidence, patience in waiting for a turn, and good communication.

Teachers are encouraged to use hand puppets as a regular medium for social and emotional learning, starting with teacher-led stories and gradually giving children the opportunity to play the characters and create dialogues with peers. Future studies should involve more children and settings and use independent observers.

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