

The Implementation of the Role-Playing Model to Enhance Students' Empathy in Understanding Social Conflicts in Social Studies Learning.

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Abstrak

Permasalahan konflik sosial yang kerap muncul dalam kehidupan masyarakat menuntut adanya pendekatan pembelajaran yang tidak hanya menekankan aspek kognitif, tetapi juga pengembangan sikap empati siswa. Dalam konteks pembelajaran Ilmu Pengetahuan Sosial (IPS), pemahaman terhadap konflik sosial menjadi krusial agar siswa mampu menyikapi perbedaan secara bijak. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji efektivitas penerapan model pembelajaran *role playing* dalam meningkatkan pemahaman dan empati siswa terhadap materi konflik sosial. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan jenis Penelitian Tindakan Kelas (PTK), penelitian ini dilaksanakan dalam dua siklus di kelas VIII SMPK Sta. Maria Assumpta. Setiap siklus terdiri atas tahapan perencanaan, pelaksanaan tindakan, observasi, dan refleksi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan adanya peningkatan signifikan baik dari aspek kognitif maupun afektif siswa. Nilai rata-rata pemahaman siswa meningkat dari 66,3 (pra tindakan) menjadi 84,7 pada akhir siklus II, sementara skor empati meningkat dari 60% menjadi 85%. Pembelajaran dengan model *role playing* terbukti efektif dalam mendorong siswa berpikir kritis, memahami berbagai sudut pandang dalam konflik, serta mengembangkan kepekaan dan empati sosial. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa pendekatan pembelajaran berbasis pengalaman langsung seperti *role playing* sangat relevan untuk diterapkan dalam pembelajaran IPS guna membentuk karakter siswa yang reflektif dan humanis.

Kata Kunci: Konflik Sosial, Role Playing, Pembelajaran IPS, Empati

Abstract

Social conflicts that frequently arise in society demand a learning approach that not only emphasizes cognitive aspects but also fosters the development of students' empathy. In the context of Social Studies (IPS) education, understanding social conflict is crucial for enabling students to respond to differences wisely. This study aims to examine the effectiveness of implementing the role-playing learning model in enhancing students' understanding and empathy toward the topic of social conflict. Using a descriptive qualitative approach with Classroom Action Research (CAR) design, the study was conducted in two cycles in Grade VIII at SMPK Sta. Maria Assumpta. Each cycle consisted of planning, action implementation, observation, and reflection stages. The results showed a significant improvement in both cognitive and affective aspects. The average student comprehension score increased from 66.3 (pre-action) to 84.7 at the end of the second cycle, while empathy scores rose from 60% to 85%. Learning through the role-playing model proved effective in encouraging critical thinking, understanding multiple perspectives in conflict, and developing students' social sensitivity and empathy. These findings suggest that experiential learning approaches, such as role playing, are highly relevant for Social Studies education in shaping reflective and humanistic student character.

Keywords: Social Conflict, Role Playing, Social Studies Learning, Empathy

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INTRODUCTION

Social Studies education is a subject that plays a crucial role in shaping students' understanding of social realities, history, economics, and geography. At the junior high school level, Social Studies serves not only as a medium for knowledge transfer but also as a platform for character building, promoting values of tolerance, and developing students' social skills. One of the more challenging topics in Social Studies is social conflict, as it involves the complex and often sensitive dynamics of intergroup relations within society (Rabiatul Rahmi &, 2018). Banks, as cited in (Ginanjar, 2016); (Ercan & Hakkoymaz, 2022) emphasizes that Social Studies education is an essential part of the school curriculum designed to help students grow into intelligent, ethical, and participatory citizens at the local, national, and global levels.

Social conflict is a topic covered in Social Studies education, particularly at the junior high school level. Conflict is understood as a social process between individuals or groups with opposing goals or values (Soerjono Soekanto, 2020). It arises from the pluralistic nature of social structures and is regarded as a phenomenon that frequently occurs throughout human life (Pratiwi et al., 2022). In the learning process, social conflict should not only be introduced as a concept, but also as a contextual reality that students need to understand. Therefore, learning approaches that involve direct experiences or simulations are highly necessary. In practice, however, the teaching of social conflict in classrooms often remains theoretical and lacks real-world grounding. Teachers typically rely on lectures or limited discussions, making it difficult for students to grasp the real meaning and impact of social conflict in society. This results in students' limited ability to relate the lesson content to everyday life, as well as weak empathy and social awareness regarding the diversity around them. In practice, the teaching of social conflict in the classroom is often still theoretical and lacks real-world relevance. Teachers generally use lecture or limited discussion methods, which makes it difficult for students to understand the meaning and real-life impacts of social conflicts occurring in society. This results in students' limited ability to connect the lesson material to their daily lives, as well as weak empathy and social awareness towards the differences around them.

For example, in a case that occurred in Pontianak City in 2019, a conflict between students was triggered by social media provocation and differences in ethnic backgrounds. What began as a minor dispute escalated into a physical altercation involving students from two different schools, drawing attention from both law enforcement and the local community. Similar incidents have occurred in other regions, where social conflicts among adolescents are not only rooted in differences but also in a lack of understanding of how to deal with those differences peacefully. This situation highlights that students need more than just theoretical knowledge about social conflict; they must also be equipped with social skills, empathy, and the ability to adopt others' perspectives. This is where the importance of innovation in learning approaches comes into play. One approach considered effective in delivering sensitive topics, such as social conflict, is the role-playing learning model (Negeri et al., 2016).

The role-playing model is a learning approach that emphasizes active student engagement through the simulation of specific situations by enacting various social roles. According to (Arends, R.I., 2012; Abbott et al, 2021) this model can enhance students' emotional involvement and expand their understanding of social values and others' perspectives. Additionally, Slavin (2021) emphasizes that learning through role play fosters critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and empathy. Recent research by (Pérez et al, 2022) shows that role play significantly improves students' cognitive and affective empathy while also reinforcing ethical values in education. Similarly, (Wayan et al., 2024) found that the implementation of the role-playing learning model has a positive impact on the learning process as it actively involves students. Role playing also encourages students to think critically and solve problems, as they are often faced with situations that require specific decisions or solutions (Hutami & Hastuti, 2019; Satria & Herumurti, 2021).

Empathy is the ability to understand and feel what others are experiencing. In the context of education, empathy is considered one of the key factors in the development of social life skills. (Goleman, 2000). According to Santi et al., 2022; Afifah et al., 2024) The development of empathy in students has been shown to contribute to the formation of a tolerant and humanistic character. The role-playing learning model is specifically regarded as effective in honing this ability because students are required to place themselves in others' perspectives during the learning process. Therefore, this study aims to explore the application of the role-playing learning model in teaching social conflict in Social Studies education and its impact on students' conceptual understanding and social attitudes.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with the type of Classroom Action Research (CAR). This approach is chosen to provide a comprehensive and in-depth depiction of the process and outcomes of applying the role-playing learning model in enhancing students' understanding and empathy towards social conflict material in Social Studies (IPS) learning. CAR is a research method aimed at improving teaching practices directly through cycles of action and systematic reflection. In the context of this study, CAR is highly relevant because the issues addressed stem from real classroom experiences, namely, students' low understanding of social conflict material and their lack of empathy towards social issues. Therefore, a pedagogical intervention is needed that is not only theoretical but also practical and reflective. CAR allows teachers, who also act as researchers, to design, implement, observe, and reflect on teaching actions gradually to achieve continuous improvement.

The CAR model used refers to the spiral action design by Kemmis and McTaggart (Hengky Wiyaya, 2023), which consists of four main stages: planning, action implementation, observation, and reflection. The research was conducted in two interrelated cycles. The study was carried out at SMPK Sta. Maria Assumpta in Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), with a research subject of 30 eighth-grade students. The selection of subjects was purposive, based on initial observations and discussions with the Social Studies education teacher. The observation results indicated that the class faced difficulties in understanding social conflict concepts and showed a low level of empathy towards social events occurring around them.

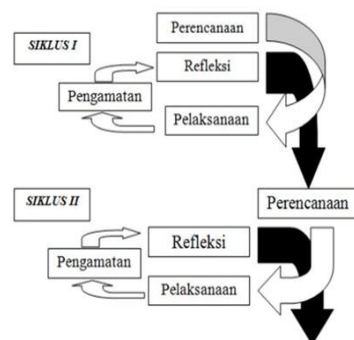


Figure 1: Kemmis and McTaggart's CAR Model

The data collection techniques are as follows: 1) Observation, to observe student involvement during the learning process, and interviews, to explore the opinions and experiences of both students and teachers. 2) A comprehension test, to measure the improvement in students' cognitive knowledge of social conflict material. The test consists of multiple-choice questions and short-answer items developed by the researcher based on the basic competence indicators in the Social Studies (IPS) curriculum for grade VIII. This test is designed to assess students' conceptual understanding of the causes, dynamics, and impacts of social conflict, as well as their ability to identify conflict resolutions from a social perspective. To ensure content validity, the test was

validated through expert judgment by one lecturer in Social Studies education and one experienced Social Studies teacher. The experts were asked to evaluate the alignment of the questions with the learning indicators, the level of difficulty, and the clarity of the language. Suggestions and feedback from the experts were used to revise and refine the questions before they were used in the study. 3) An empathy questionnaire is used to measure the affective dimension of students' social concern and their ability to understand the feelings and conditions of others involved in conflicts. This instrument was also independently developed by the researcher, referencing empathy indicators from social psychology theory and previous studies (Hoffman, 2000).

The collected data were analyzed using the model by (Matthew B. Miles & A. Michael Huberman, 2014), which consists of three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion. Meanwhile, the quantitative data from the tests and questionnaires were analyzed descriptively by calculating the average scores and percentage increases to evaluate the changes from Cycle I to Cycle II. The indicators of success in this study are the improvement in students' comprehension scores on social conflict, a significant increase in students' empathy questionnaire scores, and the enhancement of students' active, reflective, and cooperative involvement in the learning process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

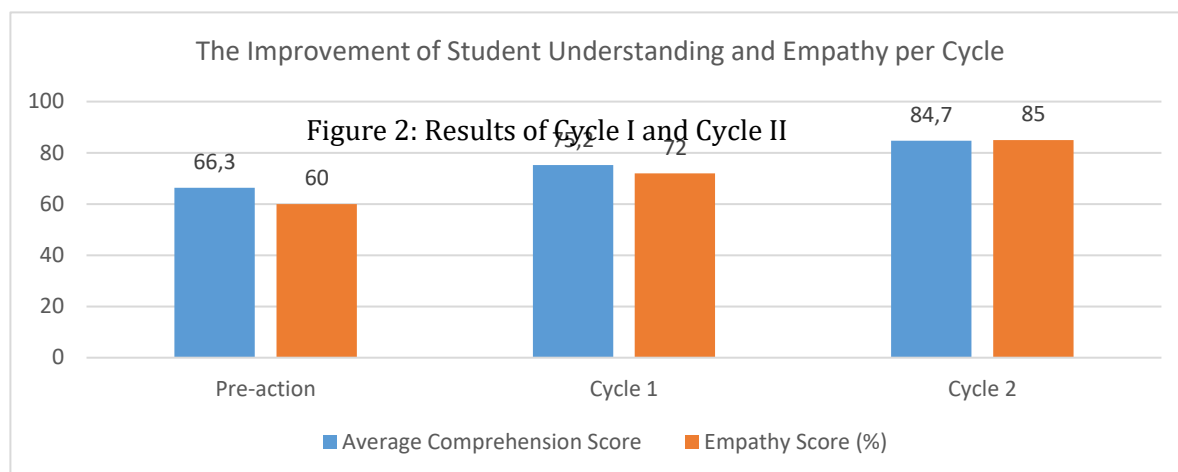
This classroom action research was conducted in two cycles. The aim was to improve students' understanding and empathy regarding social conflict through the implementation of the role-playing learning model. Each cycle consists of four stages: planning, implementation, observation, and reflection. The results of each cycle show significant development in both cognitive aspects (understanding of the material) and affective aspects (social empathy).

1. Cycle I Results

In cycle I, students were divided into five groups. Each group played a social conflict scenario, such as conflicts between residents due to economic disparity, intergenerational conflicts, and ethnic-based conflicts. During the role-playing, some students appeared awkward and did not fully understand the roles they were playing. However, there was an increase in student activity during discussions and a greater willingness to express opinions. The post-test results after cycle I showed an average score increase from 66.3 (pre-action) to 75.2. However, not all students achieved the Minimum Mastery Criteria (KKM) set at 75. Based on the empathy questionnaire, there was an increase in the average score from 60% to 72%, reflecting early development in the affective dimension of students, particularly in understanding the feelings and perspectives of others involved in conflicts. Reflections from cycle I showed that some students still needed guidance in understanding the roles and the context of the conflict. The teacher also realized the need for more explicit guidance and the selection of scenarios that were more relevant to the students' everyday experiences.

2. Results of Cycle II

In cycle II, improvements were made by clarifying the sequence of scenarios, enriching the context of the conflicts (e.g., conflicts on social media or environmental conflicts), and increasing the post-role reflection time. As a result, student engagement in the role-playing process significantly increased. They became more expressive, able to present arguments from their respective role perspectives, and more critical of the causes and solutions to the conflicts. The average test score of students in cycle II increased to 84.7, with 93% of students reaching the Minimum Mastery Criteria (KKM). Meanwhile, the empathy questionnaire score showed an increase to 85%, reflecting the strengthening of students' empathetic attitudes towards the social conditions portrayed. Observationally, students began to show the ability to listen and respond empathetically to their peers' arguments, and were more active in proposing fair and constructive conflict resolutions. The results of cycle 1 and cycle 2 are depicted in the diagram below.



From the diagram above, it is evident that there was a consistent increase in both measured aspects. The average student understanding score rose from 66.3 in the pre-action stage to 75.2 in Cycle I and increased to 84.7 in Cycle II. This improvement reflects that students' active involvement in role-playing encouraged better conceptual understanding of social conflict material, as they were able to concretely and contextually observe the dynamics of conflict from various perspectives. Meanwhile, students' empathy scores also showed a significant increase, from 60% in the pre-action stage to 72% in Cycle I, and reaching 85% by the end of Cycle II. This indicates that the experience of portraying parties involved in conflict helped develop students' emotional sensitivity, enabling them to understand the feelings, thoughts, and social backgrounds of the characters they represented.

This data visualization reinforces the success of implementing the role-playing learning model in fostering students' cognitive and affective abilities in a balanced manner. This achievement is closely linked to the teacher's strategic improvements in each cycle, including the selection of relevant scenarios, extended reflection time, and more intensive guidance in understanding roles and social contexts. Therefore, this learning model is worth considering as an effective alternative active learning strategy in Social Studies education, particularly for complex social themes such as social conflict.

The increase in empathy is also closely linked to the role of group discussions and post-role-play reflection sessions. These two elements serve as forms of social interaction scaffolding, as explained by Vygotsky (Judijanto, 2025). According to Vygotsky, as cited in Suardipa (2020), social interaction is a primary vehicle for the development of understanding and social-emotional growth. Through group discussions, students not only share their experiences but also support one another in understanding the context of the conflict. This process reinforces the internalization of social values embedded in Social Studies content. The reflection phase after the role play further strengthens this scaffolding process, as the teacher helps students reinterpret their role-play experiences, linking them to values such as empathy, justice, and constructive conflict resolution. Thus, this learning model enhances not only cognitive aspects but also helps shape students' emotional intelligence in responding to social conflict more critically and humanely.

Although the research results show a significant improvement in students' understanding and empathy, the implementation of the role-playing method also encountered several limitations. One of the main challenges was the variation in students' comprehension of the conflict scenarios. Some students were able to quickly internalize their roles and demonstrate contextual understanding, while others appeared confused and required more guidance from the teacher. Another issue was the resistance from certain students toward the role-playing method. Some of them felt insecure about performing in front of the class or were reluctant to

express emotions openly as required by their roles. This resulted in lower engagement levels and a less effective reflection process after the role play. These limitations indicate that the success of role playing is highly dependent on individual student readiness, both cognitively and affectively. Therefore, a more personalized approach and differentiated support are needed, such as repeated small-group role-playing practice or the use of concrete examples and character visualizations to help students better understand their roles. These challenges provide important reflection points for teachers in designing more inclusive and adaptive learning activities in future cycles.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the implementation of the role-playing learning model in teaching social conflict in social studies education classes has a significantly positive impact on improving students' cognitive understanding and empathy. Based on these findings, it is recommended that social studies teachers consider using the role-playing method as a teaching strategy that holistically integrates both cognitive and affective aspects. Teachers should be supported through training or workshops on scenario design, discussion facilitation techniques, and simulation-based classroom management to ensure more effective implementation of role-playing. For future researchers, it is suggested to further explore the use of role-playing in other social content areas such as diversity, national integration, or human rights, as well as to examine its long-term impact on character development. Future studies could also be expanded with stronger quantitative approaches or longitudinal research to observe the sustained effects. Meanwhile, for education policymakers, these findings highlight the importance of promoting a more applicable, participatory, and contextual curriculum. Support for experiential and socially interactive learning approaches, such as role-playing, should be reinforced as part of the implementation of the *Independent curriculum*, especially in social studies education aimed at shaping students into critical, empathetic, and responsible citizens.

This study also makes a specific contribution to the development of Social Studies (IPS) learning, particularly in approaches that emphasize the integration of students' knowledge, attitudes, and social skills. By using the role-playing model, this research demonstrates that Social Studies learning is not limited to mastering content but can also serve as a medium for fostering students' empathy, social awareness, and critical thinking through participatory and contextual learning experiences.

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