

# Improving Kindergarten Students' Empathy Using Role-Play Technique at Raudlatul Athfal (RA) in Genuk, Semarang City

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**Abstract.** The study aims to explore whether the role-playing technique can improve Raudlatul Athfal (RA; kindergarten) students' empathy. The study employed a classroom action research design. The study involved 21 RA students from kindergarten in Genuk District, Semarang city. The students' average score of empathy before the implementation of the role-playing technique (pre-cycle) is 66.19 (low category), while their average score after the implementation of the role-playing technique (cycle I and cycle II) were respectively 76.09 (medium category) and 83.38 (high category). The subjects gained an increased score across three examination stages. This study reported that role-playing technique could increase Genuk Semarang Raudlatul Athfal (kindergarten) students' empathy.

**Keywords:** student's empathy; role-playing technique

## 1 Introduction

Humans tend to depend on and help each other in everyday life regardless of their individual independence. The attitude to prioritize the interests of others is called prosocial, which contains the aspects of, for example, sharing, cooperating, helping, acting honest, and giving charity based on empathy. Hullock [1] stated that empathy is the ability to put oneself in another person's psychological state and to see a situation from another person's point of view. Empathy is the ability to position oneself in the position of others without sacrificing one's own emotions or feelings.

Golleman [2] listed some characteristics of people who have empathy, including 1) being able to feel others' emotions and identify other people's feelings, 2) having self-awareness, 3) being sensitive to sign language (i.e., being able to read other people's feelings through their non-verbal languages, such as facial expressions, body language, and gestures), 4) taking a role or realizing real behavior, and 5) controlling emotions, i.e., realizing that s/he is being aware of others and is not involved in other people's problems. Howe (2015) added that empathy is important for students because it reduces aggressive behavior and prejudice, and it encourages positive social behaviors. In addition, forming empathy in children is important to help them recognize, understand and discuss the emotional states of oneself and others.

There are still many who tend to be indifferent to other people's conditions. A similar phenomenon also occurs in many schools and kindergartens in Semarang city, including those in the suburban area of Genuk district. During an observation in one of Ras in Genuk, Semarang, the researcher found some RA students mocked and insulted a student with limited physical and communication abilities. Moreover, no students were willing to sit together with the student. The researcher also found another example of lack of sensitivity when some students mocked a student who cried.

Students' low empathy may affect their social development. Howe [3] stated that a child's persistent lack of empathy may increase the risk of poor mental health and decreased well-being. Thus, increasing empathy in children is important to reduce their aggressive behavior and prejudice and to encourage positive social behaviors. By mastering the empathy content taught, individuals can meet their needs and overcome their problems. In this case, the technique used is the role-playing technique. Therefore, it is important to instill empathy in students to help them recognize, understand, and discuss the emotional states of themselves and others.

The above phenomenon and Howe's [3] thesis indicated that a creative technique should be used to increase students' empathy, for example using the role-playing technique. Djiwandono (2005) suggested that play greatly affects children's personal and social adjustment. By playing with their peers, children learn to form social relationships and to deal with and solve problems that arise in these relationships. Hamzah in Prihatin (2016) stated that students can increase their ability to recognize their own and others' emotions through role play. They acquire new problem-solving skills and behaviors through role-playing games. Thus, it can be said that students who can better understand their emotions and others' emotions through role-playing techniques will form the basis of their empathy.

Wulandari [4] investigated efforts to increase empathy in social interaction through group dynamics using an experiential learning approach. This approach focuses on giving students a chance to transform or share experiences in groups to stimulate group dynamics, learning processes, and increase empathy in students. Besides, children can interact well socially through group dynamics [5]. On the other hand, this research employed a role-playing technique in a group to train students' empathy. Children do not only improve their social interactions and relationships but also play a role that can explore human relationships by demonstration and discussion. In this case, all students can explore emotions, attitudes, and values, as well as share problem-solving strategies.

Based on the abovementioned description, the study is expected to understand the students' empathy before (pre-cycle) and after (cycles I and II) the implementation of the role-playing technique, and to understand the extent of role-playing technique in increasing students' empathy. This research is also expected to provide an alternative to develop students' empathy through the role-playing technique.

## **2 Methods**

The subjects of this study were Raudlatul Atfal (RA/Kindergarten) Miftakhul Huda students of group B1. The kindergarten is located in Genuk district, Semarang, Indonesia. The research employed a Classroom Action Research (CAR). First, the researcher presented the materials and then divided the class into five groups, consisting of four to five students per group.

Next, the groups took turns practicing a role-play in front of the class, while the other students observed. Afterward, each performance was evaluated by other students. Later, an assignment was given based on the theme such as, recognizing the types of emotions and being sensitive to sign language, being an empathetic listener, and developing a caring attitude towards others.

This research employed an observation technique to observe student empathy and to measure the students' empathic attitude. This empathy scale consists of 25 items using 5-scale Likert criteria (1 = very low to 5 = very high). The data were analyzed using a quantitative descriptive analysis by looking at the mean or average score obtained by using 5-scale Likert categories through a predetermined normal range.

### 3 Results

Table 1 shows the students' empathy before (pre-cycle), during (cycle I), and after (cycle II) using the role-playing technique.

**Table 1.** The average score of students' empathy using the role-playing technique in Pre-Cycle, Cycle I, and Cycle II.

	<b>Score</b>	<b>Categories</b>
Pre-Cycle	66,19	Low
Cycle I	76,09	Average
Cycle II	83,38	High

Table 1 shows that the students' average scores in the pre-cycle stage were in a low category. The subjects' average scores of empathy increased to the medium category in Cycle I and high category in Cycle II. It is relevant to the researchers' hypothesis, namely that "*role-playing approach may boost Raudlatul Athfal (RA) students' empathy.*" The score increase may suggest a considerable improvement in students' empathy before and after using the role-playing technique. In another word, adopting the role-playing teaching strategy may improve Raudlatul Athfal (RA) Miftakhul Huda, Genuk, Semarang, students' empathy.

## 4 Discussion

The students' empathy was analyzed using the role-playing approach in the Pre-Cycle, Cycle I, and Cycle II stages. Grade B1 RA students' empathy was reported as low. It is in agreement with Milgram in Howe [3] who suggested that empathy may be set aside when individuals adapt to, follow group expectations, and accept commands. Milgram claimed that under certain settings many people are inclined to follow authority, even when the command and behavior contradict theirs. The context of RA Miftakhul Huda is quite similar: there is a group of students who dominated the class. Members of the group obeyed the group norms and disregard do not sympathize with others.

Grade B1 students' score of empathy increased to average level after using the role-playing technique (Cycle I). Improvements in empathy could be seen in students' understanding of emotions and caring attitudes toward others. Some students have begun to believe in themselves and care more about others. However, few students still struggled with understanding some types of emotions such as when they were not able to explain the feelings portrayed in the questions. Furthermore, many students still felt uncomfortable or not confident to speak in front of the class. Students' lack of self-confidence may have a significant impact on their development and expression of empathy. Therefore, educators must design more innovative role-play media to increase children's knowledge, understanding, and interest in participating in in-class activities.

Lastly, the grade B1 students' score of empathy in cycle II was. It was evident from students' comprehension of their types of emotions and caring attitudes towards others. Our observation indicated that some students have performed confidently by asking questions, offering ideas or speaking in front of the class, and carrying out role-playing with excitement and confidence. Educators need to develop creative and interesting role-playing media to develop students' cognition and psychology.

The role-playing technique used in this study enhances grade B1 students' confidence at RA Miftakhul Huda, Semarang. It is in accordance with Yuliasari (2009) and Mahdiani (2012) studies. Yuliasari (2009) revealed that children's capacity to empathize is enhanced by the implementation of cooperative learning methods, partner-finding strategies, and class-role (role-play) approaches. Similarly, Mahdiani (2012) reported that children's empathy can be cultivated via numerous ways such as question and answer techniques, field excursion, and role play. Role-playing is a learning process; students may play a direct role using what they have observed and they can study the sentiments of other children without engaging them by carrying out role-play.

Our data analysis which revealed an increase of students' empathy scores in the pre-cycle, Cycle I and Cycle II, is in agreement with Erford [6] who wrote that empathy may be built or taught using role-play. Hamdayana [7] stated that students can study human interactions by exhibiting and discussing them using role-plays. Moreover, they can examine emotions, attitudes, values and share problem-solving solutions. Using a role-playing approach, students can practice directly how to detect their emotions as well as others. They can also learn to listen empathetically by delivering a caring response while listening. In accordance with this finding, Stotland (in Borba, 2008) reported that role-playing encourages youngsters to picture other people's experiences and to put themselves into someone else's position. In our case, students who did role-play activities can place themselves in other people's situations and can experience what other people feel in various scenarios.

Our finding showed that sensitivity to sign language parameters is an indication of student empathy with the lowest improvement. Our findings showed that students still find it difficult to detect other people's non-verbal language. It is indicated by some students that they find it difficult to identify other individuals who are unable to convey their sentiments. This is in line with Howe (2015) who found that it will be difficult when interacting with someone whose face is unable to convey. People who cannot articulate their sentiments may lose others' empathy [9].

In addition, Wulandari (2012) found that group dynamics may boost empathy by producing good social interactions to strengthen social ties in the classroom [10]. RA students were grouped during role-play activities. The grouping caused group dynamics which improve students' in-class social interactions. Similarly, Halpern in Ioannidou (2008) stated that empathy is a learning skill and life attitude, which may be utilized to communicate and understand other people's experiences or emotions [11]. Students who engage in role-play activities can learn how to connect and share their sentiments and empathy. Ways to communicate empathetically and effectively convey students' empathy to others are among the indications developed in this study.

Students' empathic attitude should become teachers' primary focus since teachers do not only deal with students' academic demands but also their non-academic and psychological elements, including students' empathy. The implementation of learning via role play technique was carried out to help students the capacity to empathize to enhance their relationship with others and facilitate social connections and interactions. In addition, students' growing empathy may boost their compliance with the rules, and improve their positive behaviors. Also, one's empathy also plays a significant part in his/her meaningful social competency. Thus, it is crucial to nurture one's empathy from an early age because it significantly influences one's capacity to empathize as an adult in the future.

## **5 Conclusion**

To sum up, the current study found that the use of role-play technique can improve RA Miftakhul Huda Semarang grade B1 students' empathy. The findings indicated a gradual increase of empathy across Pre-Cycle, Cycle I, and Cycle II results from low to high category. The study has positive implications for the linked parties, notably for teachers who should benefit from the use of role-playing techniques to develop students' empathy. Students' empathic attitude is a central issue for teachers since the process of nurturing empathy in students involves assisting students to notice, understand, and discuss their and others' emotional states. The subsequent research should explore techniques to understand other people's non-verbal language since both verbal and non-verbal languages are the foundation to understand other people's emotions.

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