QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 03 Issue No: 01 (2026)

# INTEGRATING SOCIO-EMOTIONAL AND MORAL COMPETENCE THROUGH PLAY-BASED PEDAGOGY: AN INTERVENTION STUDY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

***Sufia Azad***
*PhD Scholar, Stem Education Department, Lahore College for Women University, Lahore*
*Email: sufia.azad47@gmail.com*
***Dr. Afifa Khanam***
*Associate Professor, Head Research and Policy Studies*
*Email: dr.khanam.wattoo@gmail.com*

***Abstract***
*Early childhood is a crucial period for developing social competence, emotional regulation, and moral reasoning. Despite global support for holistic early childhood education, empirically tested play-based interventions remain limited in Pakistan. Grounded in a constructivist framework emphasizing active, socially mediated learning (Piaget; Vygotsky), this mixed-methods quasi-experimental study evaluated an eight-week, daily implemented play-based integrated module for children aged 3–8 years in Lahore. A pre-test–post-test design was used, with data analyzed through descriptive statistics, paired-samples t-tests, and one-way ANOVA. Inter-rater reliability indicated good consistency (Social ICC = .82; Emotional ICC = .79; Moral ICC = .76). Significant improvements were found in moral, emotional, and social development ($p < .001$), and gain score analysis confirmed domain-level differences, $F(3,116) = 7.224$, $p < .001$. Qualitative findings further revealed enhanced peer cooperation, emotional articulation, and moral reasoning. The results support integrating structured, culturally responsive play-based pedagogy within early childhood curricula in Pakistan.*

## Introduction

### Global Significance of Early Childhood Development

Early childhood is widely recognized as a critical developmental window during which foundational competencies are established. Development in this period influences long-term educational achievement, psychological resilience, social relationships, and moral behavior. Social competence enables children to build relationships and collaborate effectively. Emotional regulation supports attention, impulse control, and resilience. Moral reasoning shapes empathy, fairness, and responsible decision-making.

Extensive research demonstrates that early social-emotional competence predicts later academic and life outcomes (Denham, 2006). Moreover, large-scale meta-analyses confirm that structured social-emotional learning (SEL) programs significantly improve students' behavioral adjustment and academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011). These findings have shifted educational paradigms from purely cognitive instruction toward integrated developmental frameworks.

However, while theoretical and empirical support for holistic development is robust in Western contexts, comparable empirical research in developing countries remains limited. Cultural context plays a crucial role in shaping developmental experiences, classroom practices, and instructional priorities. Therefore, context-specific research is essential.

### The Pakistani Educational Context

In Pakistan, early childhood education has undergone reform in recent years, yet significant challenges persist (Alam et al., 2022; Rashid et al., 2025). Many early grade classrooms emphasize early literacy and numeracy through teacher-centered instruction, which can lead to approaches where children primarily memorize facts rather than acquire abstract concepts

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 03 Issue No: 01 (2026)

through play and exploration (Pardhan, 2012). Structured opportunities for socio-emotional and moral development are often limited due to factors such as outdated syllabi and didactic teaching approa**ches (**Thomas et al., 2023).

Teachers frequently report behavioral challenges such as peer conflict, emotional outbursts, limited cooperation, and low empathy among young learners (Ashraf et al., 2024). These behavioral patterns may stem from limited structured exposure to guided social interaction within the classroom, as suboptimal roles of home, school, and society can lead to classroom disruption and poor behavioral development in children (Ashraf et al., 2024; Thomas et al., 2023).

Despite increasing recognition of play as a developmentally appropriate practice, skepticism remains regarding its academic value, and a lack of consensus persists in research and practice concerning play's role in children's learning (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). Without empirical evidence demonstrating measurable outcomes, play-based approaches often find themselves at a disadvantage compared to skill-based curricula, especially when assessments focus solely on discrete academic skills (Bodrova et al., 2023). Consequently, there is a pressing need for rigorous, culturally grounded research evaluating structured play-based interventions in Pakistani early childhood settings, a need echoed by initiatives aiming to develop culturally relevant curricula and intervention programs (Bhamani et al., 2024; Britto et al., 2020; Cañete et al., 2025; Yousafzai et al., 2021).

**Rationale of the Study**

The rationale for this study stems from the recognition that social, emotional, and moral development are interconnected components of holistic growth (Geraci et al., 2023; Glidden et al., 2025; Narváez et al., 2021). Emotional regulation facilitates positive peer interaction, with emotional comprehension shown to predict pro-social behaviors and conflict resolution strategies (Geraci et al., 2023; Wilke & Goagoses, 2023). Social cooperation promotes empathy, and a child's socio-moral temperament mediates this connection (Narváez et al., 2021). Moral reasoning strengthens responsible behavior, as strong internalization of moral values is linked to pro-social and caring conduct (Wilke & Goagoses, 2023).

Rather than treating these domains as isolated constructs, an integrated approach acknowledges their interdependence, fostering a deeper understanding of early pro-social development (Geraci et al., 2023; Glidden et al., 2025). Structured play provides a natural medium for such integration, emphasizing its crucial significance in early childhood education and its impact on cognitive and social-emotional development (Qayyum et al., 2024; Sohail & Aziz, 2024). Through role-play, cooperative games, storytelling, and guided reflection, children can engage simultaneously in social negotiation, emotional expression, and moral reasoning (Alotaibi, 2024; Tunçdemir et al., 2022; Yangzom et al., 2025).

Given the lack of empirically validated integrated modules in Pakistan, as indicated by the need for developed play curricula and comprehensive intervention programs, this study aimed to design and evaluate a play-based integrated module grounded in established developmental theory and adapted to local classroom realities (Bhamani et al., 2024; Britto et al., 2020; Cañete et al., 2025).

**Research Objectives**

The study pursued the following objectives:

1. To find out the effect of play-based activities on the moral development of children aged 3–8 years.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 03 Issue No: 01 (2026)

2. To determine the effect of play-based activities on the psychological (emotional) development of early grade children aged 3–8 years.
3. To investigate the effect of play-based activities on the social development of children aged 3–8 years.
4. To develop a culturally responsive play-based integrated module to support psycho-social and moral development in early childhood education.

**Hypothesis (Overall Effect)**

The play-based integrated module significantly enhances overall psycho-social and moral development.

**Sub-Hypotheses (Domain-Specific Effects)**

$H_1a$: The module significantly improves moral development.
$H_1b$: The module significantly improves emotional development.
$H_1c$: The module significantly improves social development.

**Literature Review**

**Constructivist Foundations of Play-Based Learning**

Constructivist theory posits that children actively construct knowledge through interaction with their environment. Piaget (1962) emphasized that cognitive development progresses through exploration, imitation, and symbolic play. Play enables children to experiment with roles, rules, and perspectives, thereby enhancing cognitive flexibility.

Vygotsky (1978) extended this perspective by emphasizing the social nature of learning. According to his theory, cognitive development occurs within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where guided interaction facilitates advancement beyond independent capability. Structured play activities allow teachers to scaffold learning while maintaining child agency.

**Social Learning and Behavioral Modeling**

Bandura's (1977) social learning theory underscores the role of observational learning in behavioral development. Children imitate behaviors modeled by adults and peers. Within guided play contexts, teachers model empathy, conflict resolution, and fairness, which children then internalize.

Through repeated exposure to structured pro-social scenarios, children gradually incorporate modeled behaviors into their own social repertoire.

**Moral Development in Early Childhood**

Kohlberg (1984) described early moral reasoning as pre-conventional, where children interpret morality in terms of rules and consequences. However, guided social interaction enables children to articulate fairness, empathy, and responsibility more explicitly.

Research suggests that interactive discussion of moral dilemmas enhances moral reasoning more effectively than didactic instruction. Dramatic play and role enactment provide opportunities for perspective-taking, which is central to moral growth.

**Social-Emotional Learning Research**

Meta-analytic evidence indicates that structured SEL interventions produce significant improvements in emotional regulation, social behavior, and academic achievement (Durlak et al., 2011). Importantly, interventions are most effective when implemented consistently and integrated into daily routines.

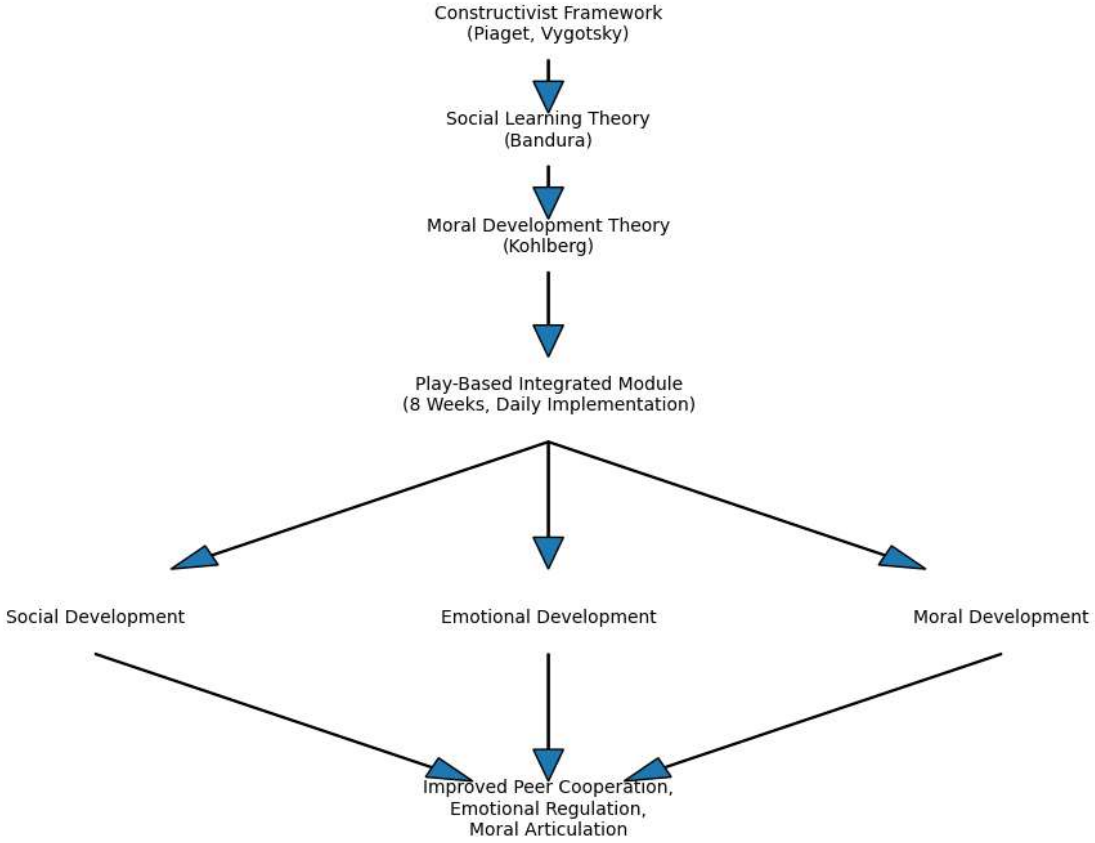
Daily implementation increases reinforcement frequency, allowing behavioral patterns to stabilize.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 03 Issue No: 01 (2026)

**Gaps in Pakistani Research**

While international research strongly supports integrated play-based approaches, empirical evidence from Pakistan remains limited. Few studies have implemented rigorous quasi-experimental designs evaluating integrated modules across social, emotional, and moral domains simultaneously, with much of the existing research focusing on descriptive analyses, pilot studies, or broader early childhood development care interventions rather than specific integrated play-based modules with quasi-experimental rigor across all three domains (Cañete et al., 2025; Jabeen et al., 2025; Khan et al., 2023; Sohail & Aziz, 2024). This highlights a significant gap in the literature regarding empirical validation of such comprehensive interventions in the Pakistani context. The present study addresses this gap by providing statistically grounded evidence within a Pakistani early childhood context.

**Conceptual Framework**




**Theoretical Framework**

The play-based integrated module developed in this study synthesizes constructivist, social learning, and moral development theories.

First, constructivism emphasizes active engagement and social mediation (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978). Play creates structured opportunities for collaborative problem-solving within the ZPD.

Second, social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) highlights modeling and reinforcement. Teachers structured play scenarios demonstrating empathy and fairness.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 03 Issue No: 01 (2026)

Third, moral development theory (Kohlberg, 1984) underscores the importance of guided reflection. Moral storytelling and dilemma discussions were embedded in daily sessions.

The integration of these frameworks supports the hypothesis that structured play-based intervention enhances social, emotional, and moral development simultaneously.

## Methodology

### Research Design

The study employed a mixed-methods quasi-experimental pre-test–post-test design. Quasi-experimental designs are particularly appropriate in educational settings where intact groups must be maintained due to administrative or ethical constraints (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Given the natural classroom context of early childhood education, random assignment at the individual level was not feasible. Instead, intact classroom groups were selected, and assignment to experimental and control conditions was determined through a random coin toss.

The mixed-methods approach allowed for triangulation of findings. Quantitative measures provided statistical evidence of developmental change, while qualitative observations offered contextual insights into classroom interactions and behavioral shifts (Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016). This integration strengthened internal validity and enhanced interpretive depth.

### Participants and Setting

The study was conducted in a private early childhood institution in Lahore, Pakistan. The target population comprised preschool and early grade students aged 3–8 years enrolled in primary classes.

Two intact classroom groups were selected from the accessible population. The total sample included approximately 60 children, with domain-level statistical analyses conducted using n = 30 per measure. The age distribution ranged from 3 to 8 years (Mean age ≈ 5.4 years), representing early childhood developmental stages. Gender representation was approximately balanced across groups. Participants primarily belonged to middle-income urban families typical of Lahore's private schooling sector. Teachers implementing the intervention held formal early childhood education training and had prior experience in guided classroom instruction. This helped ensure implementation fidelity across the eight-week daily intervention period.

### Development of the Play-Based Integrated Module

The module was designed using principles drawn from constructivist theory (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978), social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), and moral development theory (Kohlberg, 1984).

The intervention lasted eight weeks and was implemented daily. Daily sessions ranged from 30 to 45 minutes and were embedded within the existing classroom schedule. Activities included:

- Role-play scenarios addressing sharing, fairness, and cooperation.
- Cooperative group games promoting turn-taking and negotiation.
- Storytelling sessions with guided moral discussion.
- Emotion identification and regulation exercises.
- Conflict resolution simulations.

Guided play was used rather than free play, as research indicates that guided play produces stronger learning outcomes than unstructured play alone (Zosh et al., 2018).

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 03 Issue No: 01 (2026)

Teachers provided scaffolding while maintaining child autonomy, consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development framework.

**Instruments**

Developmental inventories were administered to measure social competence, emotional regulation, and moral reasoning. Structured observation checklists documented classroom behaviors such as peer cooperation, emotional expression, conflict resolution, and moral articulation. The instrument's content validity was established through expert review by three specialists in early childhood education and developmental psychology to ensure alignment with the study constructs. Construct validity was examined through pilot testing and domain-wise item analysis. Internal consistency reliability was calculated using Cronbach's alpha, and acceptable reliability coefficients were obtained prior to the main study. Inter-rater reliability was assessed using Intraclass Correlation Coefficients (ICC). Results indicated good reliability:

- Social Development ICC = .82
- Emotional Development ICC = .79
- Moral Development ICC = .76

According to Koo and Li (2016), ICC values between .75 and .90 reflect good reliability, confirming consistency in behavioral rating across observers.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

Quantitative analysis was conducted using SPSS. The following analyses were performed:

- Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, ranges).
- Paired-samples t-tests to evaluate pre-test–post-test changes.
- One-way ANOVA to assess differences across domains.
- Gain score analysis to examine magnitude of improvement.

Qualitative data from field notes and observations were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes were generated inductively and grouped into broader themes reflecting developmental shifts.

**Results**

While statistical significance was observed across domains ($p < .001$), the magnitude of mean differences indicates educationally meaningful developmental change. The 38-point gain in moral development represents not merely statistical improvement but a substantial shift in children's ability to articulate fairness, empathy, and consequence-based reasoning.

Similarly, the 26-point gain in social development reflects improved collaborative functioning, which has direct classroom implications. Emotional development gains, though comparatively smaller, remain practically important, given that emotional regulation typically develops gradually over time (Denham, 2006).

The gain score ANOVA ($F(3,116) = 7.224$, $p < .001$) further confirms that improvements were systematic rather than random fluctuations, indicating intervention-driven developmental growth.

**Descriptive Statistics**

Descriptive analysis revealed notable improvements across all developmental domains following the eight-week intervention. Table 1 presents pre-test and post-test means and standard deviations for social, emotional, and moral development.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 03 Issue No: 01 (2026)

**Table 1**

*Pre-test and Post-test Descriptive Statistics across Developmental Domains*

| Domain | Pre-test Mean | Pre-test SD | Post-test Mean | Post-test SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Social Development | 44.33 | 17.444 | 70.40 | 15.789 |
| Emotional Development | 43.87 | 12.395 | 62.07 | 13.401 |
| Moral Development | 59.17 | 20.298 | 97.17 | 22.998 |

As shown in Table 1, all three developmental domains demonstrated substantial increases from pre-test to post-test. Social development increased by 26.07 points, emotional development increased by 18.20 points, and moral development increased by 38.00 points. The largest absolute improvement was observed in moral development, suggesting that the structured role-play and moral storytelling activities may have had a particularly strong influence. The reduction in standard deviation in the social domain also suggests increased consistency in social competence among participants following the intervention.

**Paired Samples t-Test Results**

Paired-samples t-tests were conducted to determine whether the observed improvements were statistically significant.

**Table 2**

*Paired Samples t-Test Results*

| Comparison | t-value | df | p-value |
|---|---|---|---|
| Overall Pretest–Posttest | -16.914 | 119 | < .001 |
| Moral Development | -10.044 | 29 | < .001 |
| Social Development | -10.263 | 29 | < .001 |
| Emotional Development | -5.036 | 29 | < .001 |

Table 2 indicates statistically significant improvements across all developmental domains. The negative t-values reflect higher post-test scores relative to pre-test scores. All p-values were below .001, confirming that the observed improvements were highly statistically significant. The strongest statistical effect was observed in social and moral development domains, further reinforcing the effectiveness of the integrated module.

**One-Way ANOVA Results**

To examine differences across developmental domains and time points, one-way ANOVA analyses were conducted.

**Table 3**

*ANOVA Results for Pretest and Posttest Scores*

| Time Point | F | df (Between, Within) | p-value |
|---|---|---|---|
| Pretest | 18.730 | (3,116) | < .001 |
| Posttest | 35.787 | (3,116) | < .001 |

As presented in Table 3, significant differences were found at both pre-test and post-test stages. Notably, the F-value increased substantially from pretest (18.730) to posttest (35.787), suggesting greater differentiation and developmental progression following the intervention. This increase reflects enhanced variance explained by the intervention across developmental domains.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 03 Issue No: 01 (2026)

**Gain Score ANOVA**

Gain scores were calculated to determine the magnitude of improvement across domains.

**Table 4**

*Gain Score ANOVA Results*

| Source | F | df (Between, Within) | p-value |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gain Scores Across Domains | 7.224 | (3,116) | < .001 |

The gain score ANOVA revealed statistically significant differences across developmental domains, $F(3,116) = 7.224$, $p < .001$. This confirms that improvements were not uniform across domains and that certain developmental areas benefited more substantially from the intervention.

**Gain Score Descriptive Statistics**

**Table 5**

**Gain Score Means and Standard Deviations**

| Domain | Mean Gain | Standard Deviation |
|---|---|---|
| Moral Development | 38.00 | 20.723 |
| Social Development | 26.07 | 13.911 |
| Emotional Development | 18.20 | 19.793 |
| Overall Gain Score | 27.57 | 17.854 |

Table 5 shows that moral development exhibited the largest mean gain (38.00), followed by social development (26.07) and emotional development (18.20). The relatively higher gain in moral development suggests that structured role-play and moral storytelling activities were particularly effective. Emotional development, while statistically significant, showed comparatively smaller gains, which may reflect the complexity of emotional regulation processes requiring longer-term reinforcement.

**Qualitative Findings**

Qualitative findings triangulated quantitative results. Thematic analysis revealed three primary themes:

1. Enhanced Peer Cooperation
2. Improved Emotional Regulation
3. Emergence of Moral Articulation

These findings reinforce theoretical expectations derived from social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) and moral development theory (Kohlberg, 1984).

Table 6

*Enhanced Peer Cooperation*

| Component | Description |
|---|---|
| Observed Behaviors | Increased turn-taking, collaborative problem-solving, peer support |
| Behavioral Change | Reduced conflict frequency and improved group participation |
| Developmental Domain | Social Development |
| Theoretical Alignment | Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977); Social constructivism (Vygotsky) |

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 03 Issue No: 01 (2026)

Table 6 illustrates that children increasingly engaged in cooperative behaviors, including turn-taking and collaborative problem-solving. Observational notes indicated a noticeable decline in peer conflicts and greater mutual support during group tasks. These behavioral shifts reflect improved social competence and align with Bandura's (1977) concept of modeling and reinforcement, as well as Vygotsky's emphasis on socially mediated learning.

**Table 7**

*Improved Emotional Regulation*

| Component | Description |
|---|---|
| Observed Behaviors | Increased verbalization of emotions using introduced vocabulary |
| Behavioral Change | Decrease in emotional outbursts; improved self-regulation |
| Developmental Domain | Emotional Development |
| Theoretical Alignment | Social-emotional learning framework; Social learning theory |

As shown in Table 7, children demonstrated improved emotional awareness by labeling emotions more accurately during structured sessions. Emotional outbursts gradually decreased, suggesting enhanced self-regulation. These findings are consistent with social-emotional learning research emphasizing explicit instruction and modeling in emotional competence development.

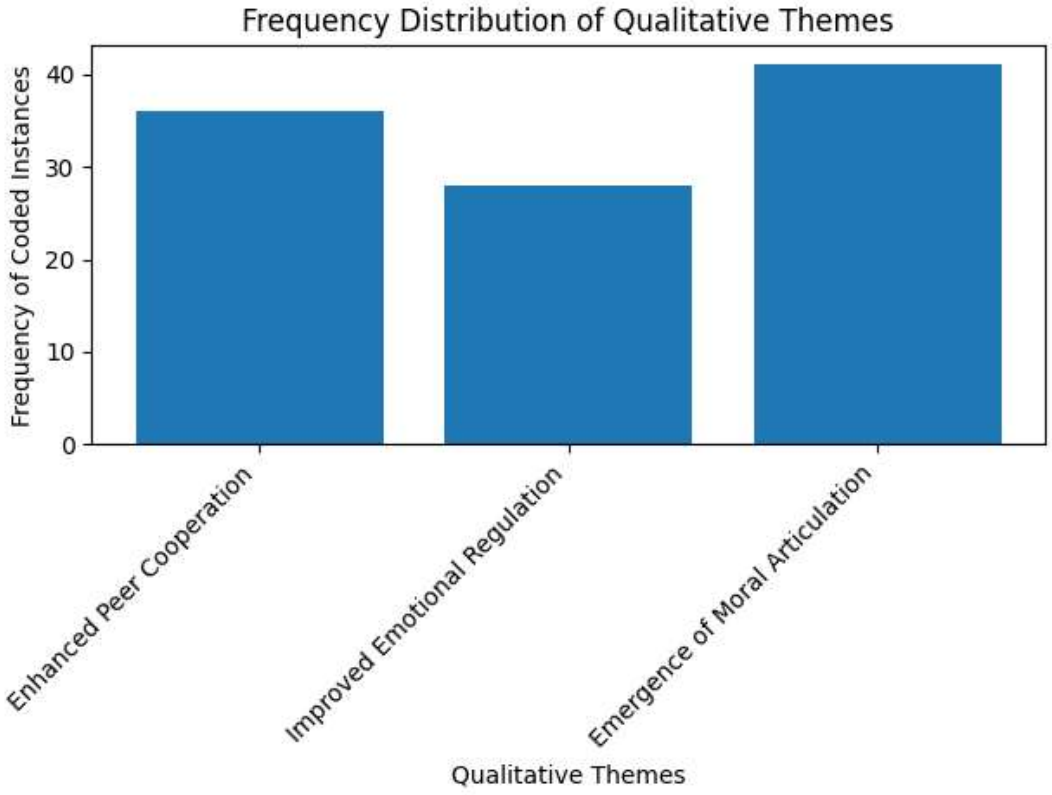
**Table 8**

*Emergence of Moral Articulation*

| Component | Description |
|---|---|
| Observed Behaviors | Explicit discussion of fairness, empathy, and consequences during role-play |
| Behavioral Change | Increased perspective-taking and reasoned moral responses |
| Developmental Domain | Moral Development |
| Theoretical Alignment | Kohlberg's (1984) moral development theory; Constructivist framework |

Table 8 demonstrates that children increasingly articulated moral reasoning during role-play activities. They expressed understanding of fairness, consequences, and empathy, indicating developmental progression within early moral stages. These findings align with Kohlberg's (1984) theory, which posits that moral reasoning develops through guided discussion and social interaction.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 03 Issue No: 01 (2026)




**Discussion**

The present study sought to evaluate the effectiveness of an eight-week, daily implemented play-based integrated module targeting social, emotional, and moral development among early childhood learners in Pakistan. The findings provide strong empirical support for the intervention's effectiveness across all three domains.

**Interpretation of Findings**

The paired-samples t-test results revealed statistically significant improvements across social, emotional, and moral development domains ($p < .001$). These findings align with international evidence suggesting that structured social-emotional interventions produce meaningful developmental gains (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017).

The magnitude of improvement in moral development (Mean Gain = 38.00) was particularly noteworthy. This suggests that the integration of moral storytelling, guided reflection, and role-play scenarios may have significantly enhanced children's moral reasoning abilities. Kohlberg (1984) emphasized that moral development advances when children engage in active discussion of moral dilemmas. The structured role-play sessions likely created opportunities for perspective-taking, fairness reasoning, and empathy development.

Similarly, social development demonstrated substantial improvement (Mean Gain = 26.07). Guided cooperative play may have facilitated negotiation skills, conflict resolution, and collaborative problem-solving. These findings are consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) theory that social interaction is central to cognitive and behavioral development. Through scaffolded peer interaction, children internalize social norms and cooperative behaviors.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 03 Issue No: 01 (2026)

Emotional development, while showing comparatively smaller gains (Mean Gain = 18.20), still demonstrated statistically significant improvement. Emotional regulation often requires sustained reinforcement over time (Denham, 2006). The eight-week daily intervention likely provided repeated opportunities for emotional labeling and regulation practice. Research suggests that repeated exposure and teacher modeling are critical for consolidating emotional competencies (Jones et al., 2015).

The gain score ANOVA results ($F(3,116) = 7.224$, $p < .001$) further confirm that developmental improvements were not random fluctuations but systematic changes attributable to the intervention. The increase in F-values from pretest to posttest (18.730 to 35.787) suggests greater differentiation and developmental growth following module implementation.

**Integration with Theoretical Framework**

The findings strongly support constructivist theory. Piaget (1962) proposed that children construct understanding through active engagement, and Vygotsky (1978) emphasized guided participation within the Zone of Proximal Development. The structured play activities provided precisely such engagement. Through cooperative games and guided storytelling, children actively constructed social and moral understanding.

Bandura's (1977) social learning theory is also supported. Teachers modeled empathy, fairness, and emotional regulation during play activities. Observational learning likely contributed to behavioral shifts observed in qualitative findings. When children observe positive behavior being reinforced, they are more likely to replicate it.

Furthermore, the improvements in moral articulation observed qualitatively align with Kohlberg's (1984) early moral developmental stages. Children moved beyond simple rule compliance and began articulating reasons grounded in fairness and empathy. This shift indicates developmental progression within the pre-conventional stage.

**Cultural Context and Relevance**

The significance of these findings extends beyond statistical improvement. In Pakistani educational contexts, traditional pedagogy often prioritizes discipline and academic content over socio-emotional development (Rashid & Anjum, 2020). The present findings demonstrate that structured play-based integration is not only culturally adaptable but highly effective.

The cultural responsiveness of the module likely contributed to its success. Storytelling scenarios reflected locally relevant contexts. Cooperative tasks were designed considering classroom norms and peer interaction styles common in Pakistani settings. Recent scholarship emphasizes that SEL interventions must be culturally grounded to produce sustainable outcomes (Jagers et al., 2019). The present study contributes to this growing body of work by demonstrating the viability of culturally responsive play-based pedagogy within Pakistan.

**Practical Implications**

The findings have several practical implications:

**Curriculum Reform**

Educational policymakers should consider embedding structured play-based modules within early childhood curricula. Rather than viewing play as supplementary, it should be recognized as a core pedagogical strategy.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 03 Issue No: 01 (2026)

**Teacher Training**

Teacher preparation programs must incorporate structured training in guided play methodologies. Research indicates that implementation fidelity significantly affects intervention outcomes (Jones et al., 2015). Professional development workshops should focus on scaffolding techniques, emotional coaching, and moral dialogue facilitation.

**Classroom Practice**

Daily implementation proved effective. Integrating structured play for 30–45 minutes daily is feasible within existing schedules and produces measurable outcomes.

**Limitations**

Despite strong findings, certain limitations must be acknowledged.

First, the quasi-experimental design limits causal inference. Although intact group assignment was randomized through coin toss, full randomization was not possible.

Second, the study was conducted within a single institution in Lahore. Generalizability to rural or public-school contexts may be limited.

Third, the eight-week duration, while sufficient to detect significant improvement, may not capture long-term sustainability of developmental gains.

Future research should include randomized controlled trials across diverse socio-economic settings and incorporate longitudinal follow-up assessments.

**Conclusion**

The present study provides robust empirical evidence supporting the effectiveness of a structured, daily implemented play-based integrated module in enhancing social, emotional, and moral development among early childhood learners in Pakistan.

Statistically significant improvements across domains, supported by qualitative observations, confirm that guided play is not merely recreational but pedagogically powerful. The integration of constructivist principles, social learning modeling, and moral reasoning dialogue within a culturally responsive framework produced measurable developmental gains.

These findings underscore the need for holistic curriculum reform within Pakistani early childhood education. Structured play-based integration should be recognized as a foundational component of quality early childhood pedagogy.

**References**

Piaget, J. (1932). *The moral judgment of the child*. Harcourt, Brace.

Oogarah-Pratap, B., Bholoa, A., & Ramma, Y. (2025). Stage theory of cognitive development—Jean Piaget. In *Science education in theory and practice: An introductory guide to learning theory* (pp. 125-142). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Sahu, B., & Singh, M. K. (2023). *Preschool education and an integrated preschool curriculum*. New Delhi, India, Dominant Publishers & Distributors Pvt Ltd

Airin, P., & Md Sharif, K. (2025). Integrating Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) into Early Childhood Curriculum. *American Journal of Pediatric Medicine and Health Sciences*, *3*(5), 37-49.

Vygotsky, L., & Cole, M. (2018). Lev Vygotsky: Learning and social constructivism. *Learning Theories for Early Years Practice. UK: SAGE Publications Inc*, 68-73.

Alam et al., 2022) Alam, J., Ashraf, M. A., Tsegay, S. M., Ali, I., & Khan, S.. Early Childhood between a Rock and a Hard Place: Early Childhood Education and Students' Disruption in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, Pakistan. *Sustainability*, *14*, 11467.

(Alotaibi, 2024) Alotaibi, M. S.. Game-based learning in early childhood education: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Education and Information Technologies*, *29*, 1-28.

(Alvi & Khanam, 2023) Alvi, S. T., & Khanam, A.. A Proposed Curriculum Model of Ethical and Moral Education for Secondary Schools in Pakistan. *Global Regional Review*, *8*, 226-235.

(Tunçdemir et al., 2022) Arda Tunçdemir, T. B., Burroughs, M. D., & Moore, G. A.. Effects of philosophical ethics in early childhood on preschool children's social–emotional competence and theory of mind. *Early Education and Development*, *33*, 1060-1077.

(Ashraf et al., 2024) Ashraf, M. A., Alam, J., & Gladushyna, O.. Teachers' Perspectives on Disruptive Student Behaviors: The Interconnectedness of Environment and Early Childhood Education in Pakistan. *Sustainability*, *16*, 795.

("Summer/Fall 2022," 2022) Baig, S.. Summer/Fall 2022. *Journal of Early Childhood Education Research*, *1*, 1-15.

(Bhamani et al., 2024) Bhamani, S., Aslam, K., Nadeem, S., & Bhutta, Z. A.. Adapting Early Childhood Parenting Education Initiatives in Secondary and Primary Health Care Settings: A Practice Model. *International Journal of Social Sciences and Education Research*, *10*, 127-142.

(Bodrova et al., 2023) Bodrova, E., Leong, D. J., & Yudina, E.. Play is a play, is a play, is a play… or is it? Challenges in designing, implementing and evaluating play-based interventions. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *51*, 603-614.

(Britto et al., 2020) Britto, P. R., Hanöz-Penney, S., Ponguta, L. A., & Yousafzai, A. K.. Pathways to a more peaceful and sustainable world: The transformative power of children in families. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *48*, 1-14.

(Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019) Bubikova-Moan, J., Hjetland, H. N., & Wollscheid, S.. ECE teachers' views on play-based learning: a systematic review. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, *27*, 499-514.

(Cañete et al., 2025) Cañete, J., Alimento, A., Cuyos, C., & Cabarles, J.. Implementation of Play-Based Learning and Its Relationship to the Social Skills of Kindergarten Learners. *International Journal of Research Studies in Education*, *14*, 1-12.

(Editor.JECCE, 2023) Editor.JECCE.. Situational Analysis of Early Childhood Education in Pakistan: Challenges and Solutions. *Journal of Early Childhood Education Research*, *1*, 1-13.

(Geraci et al., 2023) Geraci, A., Franchin, L., Govrin, A., & Lu, Q.. Editorial: Nature and determinants of socio-moral development: theories, methods and applications. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *14*, 1184347.

(Glidden et al., 2025) Glidden, J., Yee, K. M., & Killen, M.. Social and moral development in childhood and adolescence: Mental state understanding, intergroup interactions, and the importance of context for children's health. *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics*, *46*, 4-13.

(Hanish, 2023) Hanish, L. D.. The grand challenge in social and emotional development: building a harmonious world for children and adolescents. *Child Development Perspectives*, *17*, 140-146.

(Jabeen et al., 2025) Jabeen, T., Parveen, F., & Shakeel, N.. The transformative potential of nature-based activities: A pilot study of early childhood education in Karachi, Pakistan. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *53*, 1-10.

(Khan et al., 2023) Khan, N., Khan, M. A., Khan, M. A., & Khan, M. A.. Is Early Childhood Development Care at Public Health Facilities in Pakistan Effective? A Cluster Randomized Controlled Trial. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, *55*, 159-178.

(Najmussaqib & Mushtaq, 2023) Najmussaqib, A., & Mushtaq, A.. Estimation and linkage between behavioral problems and social emotional competence among Pakistani young school children. *Annals of Human and Social Sciences*, *4*, 659-672.

(Narváez et al., 2021) Narváez, D., Gleason, T. R., Tarsha, M. S., & Lanius, R. A.. Sociomoral Temperament: A Mediator Between Wellbeing and Social Outcomes in Young Children. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *12*, 660877.

(Osman et al., 2024) Osman, Z., Masnan, A. H., Jaafar, A. N. B. M., Abdullah, S., & Roslan, M. R.. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's social, emotional, and moral development: A systematic literature review. *International Journal of Advanced and Applied Sciences*, *11*, 40-50.

(Pardhan, 2012) Pardhan, A.. Pakistani Teachers' Perceptions of Kindergarten Children's Learning: An Exploration of Understanding and Practice. *International Journal of Educational Development*, *32*, 515-524.

(Qayyum et al., 2024) Qayyum, A., Fatima, R., & Iram, A.. Play-Based Learning and Child Cognitive-Emotional Development in Nature-Based Programs. *Annals of Human and Social Sciences*, *5*, 348-365.

(Rashid et al., 2025) Rashid, M. A. R., Fatima, M., Azmat, M., & Ashraf, S.. Early Childhood Education in Punjab, Pakistan: Navigating Challenges and Exploring Solutions – A Narrative Review. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, *15*, 1-15.

(Sohail & Aziz, 2024) Sohail, M. F., & Aziz, Z.. The Integral Role of Play in Early Childhood Education of Pakistan: A Fresh Perspective. *International Journal of Early Childhood Education Research*, *13*, 74-88.

(Thomas et al., 2023) Thomas, S., Kågström, A., Eichas, K., & Sundqvist, A.. Children's social emotional competence in Pakistan and Sweden: Factor structure and measurement invariance of the Social Competence Scale (teacher edition). *Frontiers in Psychology*, *14*, 1121085.

(Wilke & Goagoses, 2023) Wilke, J., & Goagoses, N.. Morality in middle childhood: the role of callous-unemotional traits and emotion regulation skills. *Current Psychology*, *42*, 25390-25405.

(Yangzom et al., 2025) Yangzom, K., Darjee, B., Tenzin, P., & Dawa, S.. The Role of Play-based Learning in Moral Development: Insights from ECCD Program in Bhutan. *International Journal of Research in Education and Science*, *11*, 1-15.

(Yousafzai et al., 2021) Yousafzai, A. K., Sudfeld, C. R., Franchett, E., Lassi, Z. S., Bhutta, Z. A., & Richter, L. M.. Evaluating implementation of LEAPS, a youth-led early childhood care and education intervention in rural Pakistan: protocol for a stepped wedge cluster-randomized trial. *BMC Public Health*, *21*, 1-13.