

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Background

Fundamentally, humans are social beings whose lives are inseparable from interactions with others. Empathy is an individual's ability to understand and share the emotions of others. Hoffman defines empathy as an affective response arising from the observation of another person's emotional state, which prompts the individual to align their own feelings with those observed (Hoffman, 2001). For social interactions to function effectively, a foundational ability known as empathy is required that is, an individual's capacity to understand and respond to the emotional states of others. Empathy does not develop automatically but rather through a gradual developmental process beginning in early childhood. Hoffman explains that in early childhood, children are in the egocentric empathy stage, a phase where children begin to recognize others' emotions but still interpret them from their own perspective. At this stage, children's empathy must be facilitated through concrete social experiences to develop into prosocial behaviors such as sharing, helping, and cooperating (Hoffman, 2001).

In addition to serving as a social-emotional foundation, a child's empathy can foster prosocial behavior the tendency to help, share, and cooperate. Children with strong empathy are more attuned to the needs of their surroundings. Children with diminished empathy tend to exhibit less concern for their environment or even aggressive tendencies (Lin et al., 2023).

Previous research has observed an increase in aggressive behavior among children, both in physical and verbal forms. This behavior often arises from a child's inability to regulate emotions and a lack of understanding that their actions can harm others. If left unaddressed, these negative interaction patterns can escalate into more serious behavioral issues such as bullying at subsequent educational levels (García-Fernández et al., 2023)

Empirical data in Indonesia highlights the urgency of this issue. A 2023 report by the Indonesian Teachers' Union Federation (FSGI) notes that 23 percent of bullying cases occur at the elementary school level (Kurnianingrum, 2023). This is reinforced by data from the National Police and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, which indicate that 36.31 percent of students in Indonesia are at risk of experiencing violence at school (INP Polri, 2023). These statistics suggest that character and social-emotional education must be strengthened starting from the kindergarten (TK) level to break the cycle

of violent behavior. Furthermore, there are challenges in fostering empathy, which has become increasingly complex in the digital age. Data from the Ministry of Communication and Digital Affairs shows a rising trend in gadget usage among children aged 3–6 years (Komdigi, 2025). While gadgets provide access to entertainment, excessive use can reduce the frequency of face-to-face social interactions. Research confirms that a lack of direct interaction can dull children's emotional sensitivity, as they lose the opportunity to learn to read the facial expressions and body language of their peers in real life (Indriati et al., 2025; Nurafifah et al., 2023).

This issue is evident in the observational findings at Mustika Rini Kindergarten, where this study was conducted. The students' empathy levels at that school are still relatively low. Many children are unable to recognize their own emotions or those of their peers. Behaviors such as locking a classmate out of the classroom or playing roughly with dangerous objects frequently occur. When confronted, these children view their actions merely as jokes, unaware of the emotional impact on their peers.

On the other hand, educators also face a dilemma. Although the national early childhood education (PAUD) curriculum includes social-emotional aspects, the focus of learning in practice often leans more heavily toward cognitive-academic aspects (reading, writing, and arithmetic) as preparation for entering elementary school. Previous research by Rahmawati revealed that some early childhood education institutions in Indonesia still do not allocate sufficient time to character development and empathy. Commonly used teaching methods, such as verbal instruction or storytelling, are often ineffective in providing concrete emotional experiences for children (Rahmawati, 2025).

In this regard, one promising method for teaching social-emotional empathy is role-playing. Studies indicate that through role-play, children are encouraged to put themselves in another person's shoes, allowing them to practice emotional responses in a safe simulated environment. However, implementing this method in the classroom is often hindered by children's limited and still-developing imagination, as well as the difficulty of structuring classroom activities without structured aids (Suryani et al., 2020).

To bridge this gap, the use of board games can be a solution worth considering. An article suggests that board games serve as a medium capable of combining face-to-face social interaction with clear game structures. Through board games, children are naturally encouraged to communicate, take turns, and collaborate to achieve the game's objectives (Muravevskaia et al., 2025). Board games are an effective medium for conveying educational

messages because they provide active, interactive learning experiences closely aligned with children's daily lives. Research on the design of anti-bullying educational board games explains that board games help children understand social situations through simulations of problems, conversations, and decision-making that are safe to engage in (Widyasari et al., 2021).

Research also supports that interactive visual game media can significantly enhance children's social-emotional competencies (Liverman et al., 2025). Unfortunately, the availability of locally designed board games specifically aimed at fostering empathy within the Indonesian cultural context remains limited (Widya & Juwita, 2025; Wirahandayani et al., 2023). The selection of the target audience aged 4–6 years is based on considerations of child developmental psychology. According to child psychologists, early childhood is a critical transitional period during which children's cognitive ability to understand others' perspectives begins to develop rapidly. Character education interventions during this phase will yield positive long-term effects. Furthermore, efforts to foster prosocial behavior from an early age align with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16, which aims to create peaceful and inclusive societies.

In the context of media design, the Visual Communication Design (VCD) approach plays a crucial role. Young children are visual learners who process information more effectively through images and colors. Therefore, the design of this board game employs Robin Landa's 5-phase design process, which centers on user needs. VCD principles are applied in the design of visual elements, such as the use of color psychology to create an emotional atmosphere, and the design of realistic and communicative characters. The goal is to translate the abstract social-emotional concept of empathy into a concrete visual experience that is easily understood by children.

Based on the above discussion, there is an urgent need for interactive learning media to address the decline in empathy among young children. This role-play-based educational board game is expected to serve as an effective alternative solution. This medium is designed not only as a fun play tool but also as a functional educational tool that helps children internalize the values of empathy through real-life social interactions.

## **1.2. Problem Identification**

- a) The social-emotional development of young children, particularly empathy and prosocial behavior, requires stimulation through real social interaction experiences (Armelia &

Zahroh, 2023). Previous research findings addressing the phenomenon of early childhood education (PAUD) institutions—which tend to focus on academic achievement—also indicate that PAUD learning must holistically integrate social, emotional, and cognitive aspects to optimally facilitate children’s development (Rahmawati, 2025).

- b) Social-emotional learning approaches still tend to be verbal and instructional in nature, thus limiting children’s opportunities to directly experience social situations. Young children tend to learn through play activities that involve interaction and direct experience (Rahmawati, 2025; Ramadhanty et al., 2022). Based on the results of preliminary interviews with early childhood education teachers, and supported by Rahmawati’s (2025) findings, interactive non-digital learning media that stimulate children’s social-emotional aspects remain relatively limited.
- c) To address the limitations of communicative learning in social-emotional education, an alternative communicative approach was developed using the discipline of visual communication design: a board game that provides children with real and interactive experiences, encouraging them to participate actively (Nasihah & Afrianingsih, 2024).

### **1.3. Research Question**

How can an educational role-play-based board game be designed as a social emotional learning medium suitable for the cognitive development of early childhood (ages 5–6)?

### **1.4. Research Limitations**

This study is limited to:

- a. The focus of this study is the design of a role-play-based board game as a learning medium that stimulates empathy through prosocial behavior in children aged 5–6 years within an early childhood education setting (kindergarten).
- b. The visual communication design elements examined include character illustrations, color, typography, and layout as means of emotional communication.
- c. This study does not address the long-term impact of media use on learning outcomes but focuses solely on the utilization of educational media to support the learning process.

### **1.5. Design Objectives**

The objective of this study is to design an educational board game as a role-play-based social-emotional learning medium for early childhood. Specifically, this study aims to:

- a) Examine the social-emotional learning needs of early childhood students regarding empathy and prosocial behavior.
- b) Determine a role-play-based learning media concept suitable for the characteristics of 5–6-year-old children.
- c) Designing educational board games as a tool for social-emotional learning.
- d) The application of visual communication design elements in the design of learning media.

## **1.6. Benefits of the Design**

It is hoped that this research will provide the following benefits:

### **1.6.1. Benefits for the Researcher**

- a) Providing experience in the process of designing social-emotional learning media intended for early childhood.
- b) Serving as a means for researchers to apply visual communication design elements in the development of learning media based on play experiences.
- c) To provide an understanding of the application of empathy theory, role-play, and play-based learning in designing visual media in the form of educational board games.

### **1.6.2. Benefits for Schools**

- a) Provides an interactive, non-digital learning media alternative to support the social-emotional learning of young children.
- b) Assisting teachers in facilitating learning activities that involve social interaction and active participation by children in the classroom.
- c) Can be used as a learning aid that supports thematic activities as well as the development of social and emotional values in the early childhood education (preschool) environment

## 1.7. Design Framework

This framework illustrates the line of reasoning that the design of visual media (board games) can serve as a bridge between empathy theory and the practice of social-emotional learning for young children.

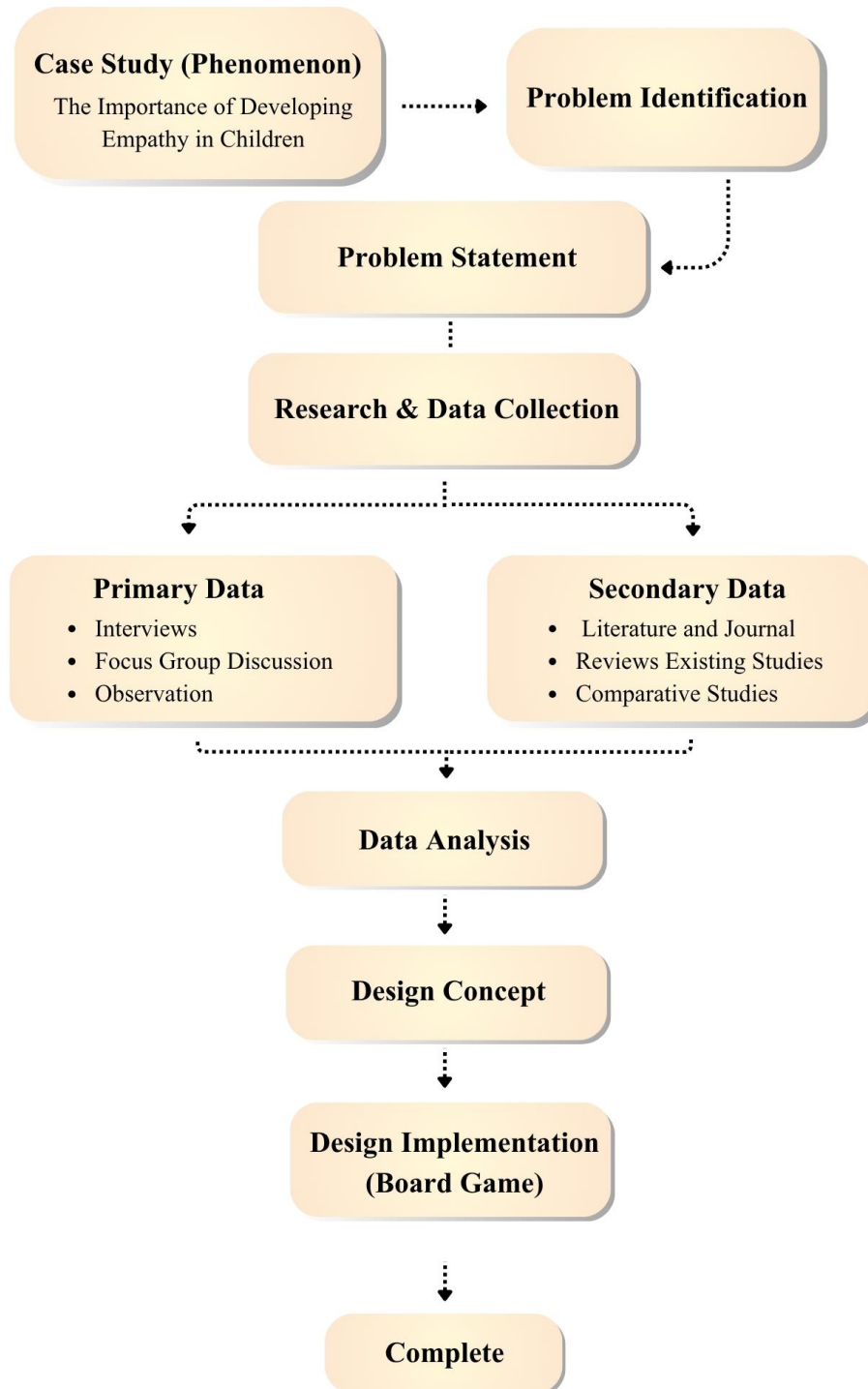


Figure 1.7.1 Design Framework  
(Source: Personal Document, 2025)