

The Evaluation of a Positive Psychology-Based Intervention in Enhancing Self-Esteem among Malaysian Preschool Children

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory-sequential study examined challenges related to positive psychology among kindergarten children and developed an intervention to address them. A needs analysis, conducted through interviews and observations with five teachers and 11 kindergarteners, identified self-esteem as a key concern. Insights from thematic analysis guided the design of a play-based intervention rooted in positive psychology principles, including activities such as Laughter Yoga, Guess the Voice, and Group Drawing to improve emotional well-being and self-confidence. Pre- and post-intervention mood trackers evaluated changes in the children's emotional states. Both quantitative and qualitative results suggest a potential positive impact of play-based interventions on self-esteem among preschoolers. While play activities may not directly build self-esteem, they significantly contribute to creating a supportive environment. However, the study's brief intervention period and lack of standardised assessment tools limit the wider applicability of the findings. Acknowledging these limitations, the paper emphasises its promising preliminary results for future research. Subsequent studies should involve longer interventions and validated assessment instruments for a more comprehensive evaluation of outcomes.

Keywords: *Self-esteem, preschool children, intervention, play-based activities, self-determination theory, early childhood education*

INTRODUCTION

Self-esteem (SE) is a vital part of a child's emotional and psychological growth, influencing how they view themselves and interact with their surroundings. It refers to how people evaluate and appreciate their own worth (Rosalina & Naqiyah, 2018). In early childhood, this perception begins to develop through emotional support and social interactions children experience. Rubin (2023) states that early experiences of affirmation or rejection greatly affect children's developing sense of competence and self-esteem, with supportive relationships from caregivers, teachers, and peers playing a key role in nurturing positive self-worth. Conversely, the absence of warmth and encouragement can cause feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. Yahaya et al. (2022) also emphasise that consistent acceptance and emotional safety from important figures help build a healthy and resilient sense of self.

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Because preschool children's cognitive abilities are still developing, their self-evaluations tend to rely heavily on external validation and feedback from their immediate environment rather than on internalised beliefs. The preschool years, characterised by rapid neurological, emotional, and social development, lay the foundation for future learning, personality growth, and social skills (Rahmatullah et al., 2021). As children explore questions such as "Who am I?" and "What are my strengths?" they depend on their environment to reinforce positive self-perceptions (Magdalena, 2015). When positive feedback and support are absent—whether due to negative peer interactions, unresponsive teaching environments, or societal stigma—children may internalise doubts about their abilities, thereby impeding healthy self-esteem development.

Additionally, other factors to consider when understanding a child's SE include Malaysia's cultural context. For example, reinforcing a shy and cautious personality may cause children to become passive and develop self-doubt. The lack of opportunities for children to practise asserting their autonomy can eventually lead to poor SE. This is supported by Abd Rahim et al. (2023), who note that the dominance of the shyness-inhibition trait is ingrained in Malaysia's cultural values, influencing children's socialisation and interactions. Moreover, as a developing country, Malaysia continues to face an uneven distribution of social, technological, and educational resources. These disparities may also contribute to poor SE, as limited access can restrict children's opportunities to learn.

Moreover, when understanding SE, it is essential to recognise that positive emotions reflect a child's level of SE. Positive emotions drive a well-rounded, successful life, especially in areas such as romantic relationships, friendships, work, and health. Salavera et al. (2020) stated that individuals who perceive themselves as happy tend to adapt well to life's experiences and enhance their decision-making. It further explained that affect has a significant impact on interpersonal relationships and is linked with individual SE and happiness. This indicates that positive emotional experiences help increase SE in children, making them more confident and better able to handle life's challenges. Despite the well-known importance of early self-esteem development, many children face difficulties, especially in kindergarten settings, that may hinder this process. Issues such as peer conflict, low engagement, limited emotional support, cultural values, and access to resources can harm their emerging sense of self-worth. This raises an important research question: What challenges do Malaysian preschool children encounter in kindergarten that affect their self-esteem, and how can positive psychology-based interventions support its growth?

Operationally, self-esteem in this study is measured through children's emotional responses to play-based positive psychology activities, using mood trackers (emoji stickers) and facilitator observations of behaviours such as initiative, engagement, and verbal self-affirmations. The present study aims to explore these challenges and assess the effectiveness of a Positive Psychology-based intervention designed to improve self-esteem among preschool children. This research adds to the growing body of knowledge on early childhood well-being and the application of Positive Psychology principles in Malaysian preschool environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Self-esteem in early childhood is vital for shaping children's psychological well-being, social engagement, and motivation to learn. During these formative years, children begin to develop internal beliefs about their abilities and self-worth, making early interventions essential to foster a positive self-concept and emotional resilience. This review synthesises empirical studies that explore factors influencing preschool children's self-esteem, including

social environments, emotional regulation, animal-assisted activities, play-based learning, and therapeutic interventions.

A valuable Malaysian contribution to understanding child socioemotional development is the study by Gan, Tan, Ang, Cheah, Yaacob, and Abu Talib (2022), which examined maternal and paternal warmth, emotion regulation, and social competence among preadolescents (aged 10 to 12). Their findings show that both maternal and paternal warmth are positively associated with better emotion regulation and social competence, with emotion regulation partially mediating the association between maternal warmth and social competence. This study is especially relevant because it emphasises how warm, supportive relationships within the Malaysian cultural context help children internalise emotional skills that encourage positive self-perceptions and social adjustment. Although this research focused on older children, the findings suggest that similar interventions that promote warmth and emotional skills can also enhance self-esteem in younger children, particularly preschoolers. This provides empirical support for applying positive psychology-based interventions to bolster self-esteem through emotional regulation and relational warmth.

Similarly, Gan et al. (2022) further investigated how maternal and paternal warmth within the Malaysian context encourages emotion regulation and social competence, in accordance with Self-Determination Theory (SDT). The study emphasises how emotionally supportive environments can satisfy children's psychological needs for relatedness and competence, thereby enhancing self-esteem. These findings reinforce the importance of nurturing relationships and emotional intelligence in fostering a positive self-concept among young children. Consistent with these findings, Arslan (2021) studied the relationship between emotional regulation and self-concept in 263 Turkish preschoolers. The research revealed that children with better emotional regulation demonstrated higher self-esteem and social confidence. While the results highlight the importance of nurturing emotional intelligence alongside cognitive skills, limitations such as cultural specificity (Turkish context) and reliance on self-reported questionnaires rather than clinical assessments should be recognised.

Building on the concept of emotional well-being, Kim (2024) examined the role of animal-assisted activities (AAAs) in promoting preschoolers' emotional development. The research involved 20 children engaging in structured interactions with rabbits and demonstrated that these activities enhanced emotional expression and increased self-esteem, particularly in social and family settings. Boys seemed to benefit most. Although the study's small sample size and short duration limit generalisability, it highlights that emotionally engaging experiences, such as interactions with animals, can support children's emotional growth and self-confidence. From the perspective of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), these findings illustrate how AAAs foster relatedness by building affectionate bonds with animals and carers, while also improving competence through developing caring and communication skills during sessions.

Further supporting the role of emotional support, Cámara-Martínez et al. (2023) demonstrated that integrating playful academic content significantly enhanced self-esteem, self-concept, and social skills among preschoolers. In a study involving 80 Spanish children aged five to six, active maths lessons that incorporated games were particularly effective in boosting girls' self-esteem. The findings suggest that active, engaging classroom environments foster both cognitive and emotional development. However, the study's focus on maths limits its generalisability, and the absence of long-term follow-up restricts conclusions about sustained impact.

Complementing these insights, Mullabaeva et al. (2024) examined the influence of the family environment on preschoolers' self-awareness and self-esteem in Uzbekistan. The study found that children raised in cooperative, supportive family environments exhibited higher self-esteem, greater motivation for learning, and greater social adaptability. Despite its reliance on self-reports and cultural specificity, the study reinforces the vital role of nurturing relationships in shaping children's positive self-perceptions.

Lastly, Nematullayeva (2022) examined the impact of therapeutic play on children's emotional well-being. Using methods such as sand therapy, role-play, and group games, the intervention provided a safe and engaging environment in which children could process emotions and strengthen peer relationships. Teachers observed improvements in emotional regulation and self-expression, suggesting that play-based therapeutic environments foster emotional resilience and self-esteem. Although the study lacked rigorous statistical analysis, it provides valuable insights into how structured play can support autonomy, competence, and relatedness in children, aligning with the principles of positive psychology and SDT. Together, these studies highlight the importance of emotional regulation, supportive relationships, play, and engaging experiences in fostering self-esteem and psychological well-being among preschoolers. Early interventions promoting these factors can play a crucial role in enhancing children's self-concept and emotional resilience.

In summary, the five studies reviewed collectively emphasise that a range of emotional, social, and experiential factors profoundly influences preschoolers' self-esteem. Whether through active learning, emotional regulation, animal-assisted interaction, nurturing home environments, or therapeutic play, each approach highlights the importance of early, holistic interventions in fostering positive self-concept. Despite methodological limitations, including small sample sizes, cultural specificity, and limited long-term data, the evidence supports a multidimensional strategy to promote young children's emotional development and self-esteem in their formative years.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which suggests that self-esteem develops through the satisfaction of three innate psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985, as cited in Cvencek & Greenwald, 2020). SDT claims that when these needs are fulfilled, individuals experience optimal growth and psychological well-being. This framework is especially relevant in early childhood, a vital stage when emotional development and social identity are actively forming.

The needs analysis carried out in this study identified four main themes: (1) the emotional significance of self-esteem, (2) difficulties in peer relationships, (3) differences in learning, and (4) school engagement, all of which closely align with SDT's components. For example, children's enjoyment of expressive activities such as drawing and storytelling reflects the need for autonomy, as these activities enable them to make creative choices and express their individuality. Success in completing tasks or receiving positive feedback promotes a sense of competence, reinforcing their belief in their abilities.

The intervention activities were deliberately designed to activate these psychological needs through specific behavioural mechanisms. In Laughter Yoga, shared humour, synchronised movements, and mutual eye contact promote co-regulation and emotional attunement, strengthening relatedness among peers. Guess the Voice encourages children to identify and interpret vocal emotions, building competence in emotional recognition and

communication. Meanwhile, Group Drawing fosters autonomy through free artistic expression and relatedness through collaboration and positive peer acknowledgement. Collectively, these structured yet playful activities create an emotionally safe environment where children experience choice, mastery, and connection, which are three essential conditions for nurturing self-esteem in line with SDT principles.

The framework also indicates that self-esteem is strengthened when basic psychological needs such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fulfilled (Cvencek & Greenwald, 2020). This aligns with previous research emphasising the importance of early interventions to support children's self-esteem (e.g., Cvencek & Greenwald, 2020; Kim, 2024). A needs analysis with Malaysian preschool children further identified emotional insecurity, low confidence, and social difficulties as key factors impeding their emotional growth. These findings, discussed in the Results section, helped shape a positive psychology-based intervention aimed at boosting self-esteem through developmentally suitable, play-based activities targeting these specific emotional and social issues.

Conceptual Framework

Building on the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) outlined earlier, this study's conceptual framework applies the theory's three psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness, into a practical model for understanding and improving self-esteem among Malaysian preschool children. Instead of merely restating the theory, this section demonstrates how it was adapted through empirical findings and needs analysis data.

A thematic analysis of interviews with preschoolers and their caregivers identified four key areas that influence children's self-esteem: emotional expression, peer relationships, learning challenges, and school engagement. Each theme highlights specific domains in which children's basic psychological needs may be supported or obstructed.

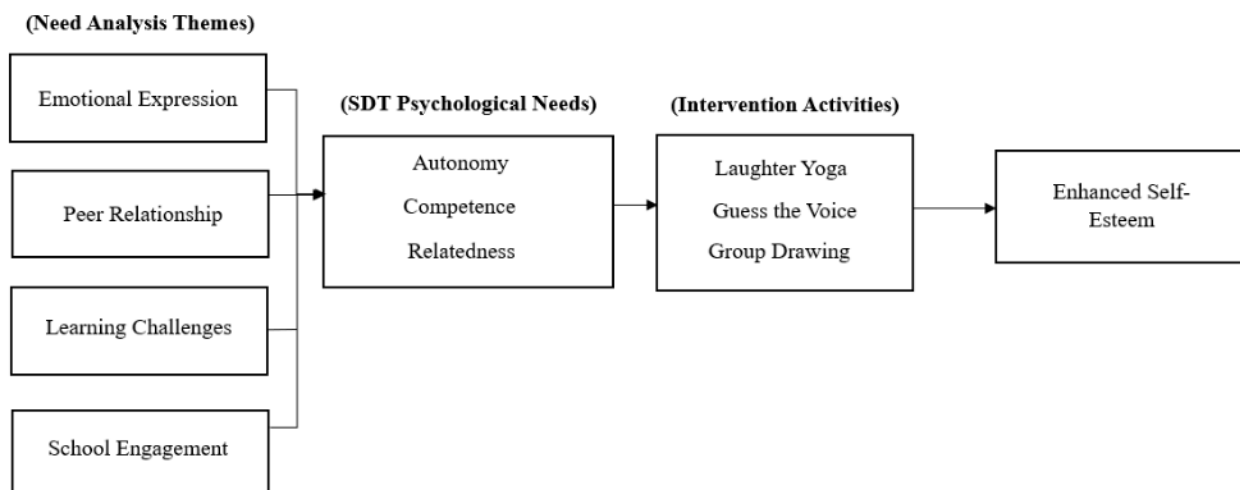
- Emotional expression and self-regulation correspond with the need for autonomy, as opportunities for choice and emotional freedom encourage self-direction and self-awareness.
- Peer relationships are characterised by relatedness, highlighting how warmth and social bonds foster belonging and emotional safety.
- Learning challenges and school engagement relate to competence, as overcoming obstacles and active participation reinforce a sense of capability and mastery.

This integration between the qualitative themes and SDT components lays the foundation for the intervention's design. By incorporating activities that promote autonomy (e.g., self-expression through drawing), competence (e.g., emotional recognition in "Guess the Voice"), and relatedness (e.g., shared laughter and bonding in "Laughter Yoga"), the framework aims to position self-esteem enhancement because of need-fulfilling, developmentally suitable, play-based experiences.

Guided by this theoretical framework, the intervention module was developed using Positive Psychology strategies to meet these psychological needs. The activities include Laughter Yoga to facilitate emotional release and peer bonding (relatedness and autonomy), Guess the Voice to foster self-expression and confidence (autonomy), and Group Drawing to encourage collaboration and mastery (competence and relatedness). The framework suggests that when children participate in need-supportive environments, they are more likely to internalise positive self-perceptions. Consequently, this process aims to boost self-esteem, as

illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework based on Self-Determination Theory, showing how themes from the needs analysis connect to core psychological needs, which are addressed through targeted intervention activities and are expected to improve preschool children's self-esteem.



METHODOLOGY

Study design

This study adopts an exploratory sequential design, specifically a one-group pretest-posttest analysis with no control group. This approach was chosen primarily for its exploratory nature in assessing the potential effectiveness of interventions derived from the prior Needs Analysis. Additionally, the design allows examination of changes among all participants over time, i.e., before and after the interventions, without excluding any participants from the benefits. Nonetheless, this study recognises its inability to establish causal results due to the absence of control groups (Paulus et al., 2014); however, the objective is to provide preliminary findings of the proposed interventions, as is common in other behavioural studies (Lestari & Koto, 2020; Kurniawati et al., 2023; Wibawa et al., 2024).

The first phase involved a qualitative needs assessment conducted through interviews and observations with 11 children and their caregivers at Aalim Aulad Islamic Preschool in Prima Sri Gombak. The aim was to understand their daily experiences, emotional needs, and specific challenges. Data from this initial phase were analysed thematically and used to inform the development of a positive psychology-based intervention module, focused on improving well-being and emotional expression. The developed module was implemented and evaluated using a single-group pretest-posttest design, in which the same participants were assessed before and after the intervention. This approach enabled examination of within-group changes in mood and emotional expression, using pre- and post-intervention mood tracking and participant reflections to evaluate the module's effectiveness.

Participants

The participants were 36 children aged 5-6 years attending the preschool. Inclusion criteria were children aged 5-6 years who were currently enrolled in Aalim Aulad Islamic Preschool, including those identified as orphans or under guardian care. Exclusion criteria were children who did not attend the preschool on the day of the intervention and those outside the

targeted age range. The intervention day was chosen based on staff availability; however, as it coincided with a school holiday, attendance rates may have been affected. Participants were divided into two small focus groups of 4-5 children to facilitate easier interaction.

Although the sample size was modest, it was intentionally selected to enable an in-depth exploration of individual experiences within a naturalistic preschool setting, consistent with qualitative research standards that prioritise data richness over numerical size (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative scholars emphasise that the aim is not statistical generalisation but meaningful understanding, which can be achieved through smaller, information-rich samples. Empirical evidence further indicates that 10 to 12 participants are often enough to reach thematic saturation in small-scale, homogeneous qualitative studies (Hennink, Kaiser, & Marconi, 2017). Furthermore, this phase constituted only the needs analysis part of the study, designed to generate exploratory insights to inform subsequent intervention development.

Instruments

Among the instruments used in the programme was a child-friendly mood tracker, a scale that uses emojis or stickers to represent emotions (happy, sad, bored, calm, and angry) and assess children's emotional states before and after the intervention. According to Chang et al. (2018), colours can evoke emotional arousal, though responses may vary across individuals and depend on the emotional significance attached to a particular colour. Therefore, based on this argument, we believed it would allow children to select the emotions or feelings that resonated most with them.

The validity of the mood tracker is demonstrated by a study by Jayaputra and Raharja (2024), which used a mood meter developed through the RULER approach. Similarly, in our study, the researchers used the mood meter to help preschool children recognise and label their emotions, using colour-coded zones that represent different feelings. The effectiveness is evidenced by improvements in the children's emotional health and intelligence. Therefore, the use of mood trackers in our study can be considered valid as it measured what it was intended to.

Moving on, several module activities adapted from the "Self Esteem Games for Children" (Plummer, 2007) served as the intervention's positive psychology toolkit, aiming to boost positive emotions and self-esteem. As mentioned, a study by Salavera et al. (2020) indicated that individuals who perceive themselves as happy tend to adapt well to life's experiences, suggesting that positive affect significantly influences interpersonal relations and is linked to individual self-esteem and happiness. The activities included 1) laughter yoga, adapted from Miami Children's Museum (2021) to promote positive emotion and stress relief for 20 minutes; 2) guess the voice, adapted from Plummer (2007, p. 40), to support self-expression and self-esteem for an additional 20 minutes; and 3) group drawing, also adapted from Plummer (2007, p. 65), to encourage cooperation and creativity for 20 minutes.

Each session was led by different members of our group, decided by mutual agreement. Although no rehearsal or simulation was conducted before implementation, members briefly discussed how to implement it. A Reflection Prompt was also included to allow children to share their experiences verbally, with children discussing their favourite activity and how it made them feel at the end of each session. To ensure consistency, we prepared a few questions beforehand to serve as a reference. For example, questions such as "Adik rasa apa lepas aktiviti tadi?" and "Seronok tak?" helped us formulate similar questions and maintain uniformity.

Measures

Measurement begins with a needs analysis, where we utilise semi-structured interview data to inform the module's content and themes. After the intervention, two primary types of measures are used to evaluate the programme. First, the pre-test and post-test mood tracker enable children to select emojis to represent their emotions before and after the session, allowing a simple visual comparison of mood changes and a fundamental visual descriptive analysis. Second, qualitative reflections are gathered through facilitators' observations and notes throughout the programme and during the reflection segment, providing insights into the children's perceived benefits from the activities. Facilitators observe children's active participation, emotions, and behaviour throughout the activities and note children's responses during the reflection segment.

Procedures

The project comprised four phases. During the Needs Analysis Phase, data were collected through interviews and observations involving children and caregivers. Transcripts were analysed using a mini-thematic approach to identify key emotional and social challenges faced by the children. The analysis followed Clarke and Braun's (2006) six-phase framework, without employing qualitative data analysis software. Manual procedures were used for coding and developing themes to ensure meaningful engagement with the data. In the Programme Development Phase, findings from the needs analysis interview informed the selection of positive psychology theory as the foundation, with a focus on self-esteem and positive emotions. Three suitable activities from the positive psychology toolkit were adapted to meet the children's needs (see Appendix 4). The programme was implemented on 30th May 2025 at a preschool, from 9:30 AM to 11:30 AM. It included energiser games, the three-module activities, and pre- and post-session mood assessments. Ethical considerations were observed, including obtaining voluntary consent and maintaining a relaxed environment to prevent distress. Finally, in the evaluation phase, post-activity mood assessments and verbal feedback were collected from the children. Facilitators conducted a straightforward descriptive analysis of the input.

Data Analysis

A mixed-methods approach was employed to analyse the data. For quantitative analysis, responses from the pre- and post-intervention mood trackers were tabulated and analysed using descriptive statistics (e.g., frequency counts and bar charts) and inferential statistics. Subsequently, a simple inferential analysis was conducted using a Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test, as the scores were not normally distributed, to determine whether the difference in emotion scores was significant. Qualitative analysis, on the other hand, involved reviewing the needs analysis data through thematic analysis to identify key themes that influenced the module. Children's verbal reflections during the programme were also categorised into common emotional themes such as "happy," "fun," or "like drawing."

RESULTS

The result of this research is presented in two main parts: Need Analysis and Interventions.

Need Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted before the intervention with both preschool

teachers and children to identify the challenges faced by preschool children (Appendix 1). Thematic analysis of the transcribed interview data identified 60 coded categories, organised into 28 distinct socio-emotional domains. The table below presents the frequencies and percentages of the coding categories derived from the thematic analysis of the interview data.

Table 1: Frequency and Percentage of Coding Categories from Thematic Analysis

Categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Positive Emotions	8	13.3
School Enjoyment	6	10.0
Learning Enjoyment	5	8.3
Creative activity	5	8.3
Emotional Insecurity	4	6.7
Delayed Development	3	5.0
Coping Mechanism	3	5.0
Emotional Stability	3	5.0
Peers Relationship	3	5.0
Teacher Relationship	3	5.0
Low Self-Esteem	2	3.3
Recreational Activity	2	3.3
Peers Resolution	2	3.3
Low Confidence	1	1.7
Moral Development	1	1.7
Modelling	1	1.7
Motor Development	1	1.7
Learning Challenges	1	1.7
Individual Differences	1	1.7
Improper Exposure	1	1.7
Socialisation Issue	1	1.7
Physical State	1	1.7
Separation Anxiety	1	1.7
Peers Conflict	1	1.7
Hidden Emotional Struggle	1	1.7
Self-Expression	1	1.7

Emotion Regulation Support	1	1.7
Total	60	100.0

According to Table 1, the most reported category was Positive Emotion (13.3%), followed by School Enjoyment (10.00%), Learning Enjoyment, and Creative Activity (8.33%). These findings imply that preschoolers' emotional experiences are closely linked to their self-esteem and involvement in classroom activities, whilst also showing happiness and satisfaction at school.

The other categories each accounted for between 1.7% and 3.3% of the total codings, with Emotional Insecurity (6.7%), Coping Mechanism (5.0%), Emotional Stability (5.0%), Peers Relationship (5.0%), and Teacher Relationship (5.0%) occurring less frequently. Overall, these findings emphasise numerous key themes regarding the children's socio-emotional functioning.

Theme 1: The Role of Self-Esteem in Emotional Experiences

Self-esteem is an individual's overall sense of self-worth and has a significant impact on emotional well-being and coping with difficulties (Trzesniewski et al., 2013, as cited in Krauss et al., 2020). This theme discusses the relationship between children's emotional states and their underlying sense of self-worth. The present study indicated some categories, which are emotional insecurity, emotional dysregulation, low self-esteem, low confidence, positive emotion, emotional stability, hidden emotional struggle, coping mechanism, empathy, separation anxiety, and emotion regulation support. For example, in an interview for assessing emotional needs among the children, a teacher said "Selalunya yang tunggu teacher tu, takkan bercakap selagi teacher tak pergi tolong dia. Dia duduk diam je kat tepi" (usually, the one who waits for the teacher won't speak until the teacher comes to help them. They sit quietly at the corner). In addition, another teacher said a similar thing in an interview for social challenges faced by the children, in which "Kalau jawab betul, selalunya girls jawab betul tapi dia tak konfiden" (The girls always have the correct answer, but do not have the confidence to speak up in class). These different emotional expressions demonstrate that self-esteem plays a vital role in how children cope with their environment and develop their inner character.

Theme 2: Navigating Socialisation and Peer Relationships

Socialisation is the process by which children learn social norms, build interpersonal skills, and form meaningful relationships with peers and adults (Wentzel & Watkins, 2002). This theme examines how children interact with others in their social environment, including peers and authority figures. The categories involved in this theme are socialisation issues, improper exposure, peer relationships, teacher relationships, peer conflict, peer Interaction, and peer resolution. For instance, a teacher stated that the school forbids the children from bringing any gadgets as she raised her concern about the influence of gadgets and to reduce improper exposure. Moreover, in interviews with the children, most report feeling happy about coming to school because of the teachers, and they also enjoy playing and napping with friends at school. These social interactions influenced the children's sense of belonging and emotional safety, underscoring the need for nurturing environments that support healthy social development.

Theme 3: Experiencing Developmental and Learning Differences

Developmental differences refer to variations in children's growth patterns and learning abilities across motor, cognitive, and socio-emotional domains that influence their readiness to

engage in structured learning environments (Singleton, 2007). The children in this study displayed a wide range of talents and developmental profiles, including modelling, moral development, motor skills, learning challenges, individual differences, delayed development, and physical conditions. A teacher remarked, “Ada yang datang-datang terus boleh buat. Ada yang datang slow tak tahu apa. Itu ambil masa sikitlah.” It is suggested that some students are quick learners, while others require more time to catch up with their peers. Additionally, some children arrive at school without basic skills, such as reading or writing. A teacher noted, “Ada setengah budak ni, memang datang sekolah memang tak tahu apa-apa. Zero, kosong.” Consequently, the teachers explained that they needed to adapt their teaching methods to suit each student's capabilities to promote progress.

Theme 4: Children's Experiences of School Engagement and Enjoyment

School engagement is defined as children's participation in the academic, emotional, and social aspects of school life, which enhances motivation, enjoyment, and a sense of belonging (Morrison & Vorhaus, 2012). This theme highlights the degree to which children feel connected, motivated, and expressive at school. Under this theme, categories include school enjoyment, learning enjoyment, creative activities, recreational activities, and self-expression. This theme was particularly emphasised during interviews with students; most of whom responded with words like “happy” and “best” when asked how they feel about attending school; they also mentioned things like “suka datang sekolah”. These moments of happiness and creativity not only boost cognitive engagement but also support emotional well-being. They also demonstrate that educational environments that foster creativity, play, and expression can benefit overall engagement and learning.

Although many themes emerged, self-esteem proved to be the primary theme underlying these challenges. The key points highlighted from the interview, such as low confidence, emotional insecurity, emotional dysregulation, and low self-esteem among the children, all indicated self-esteem issues, limiting the children's ability to participate fully in both academic and social situations. In response to these findings, the intervention activities were customised to enhance self-esteem through organised play-based modules that promote emotional expression, resilience, and positive peer engagement.

Interventions

Quantitative Analysis

Before the intervention, a pre-test mood tracker was used, allowing children to select emoji representations for five emotions: Happy (1), Calm (2), Bored (3), Sad (4), and Angry (5) (see Appendix 2). Many participants reported negative or neutral emotions, mainly sadness, anger, or boredom, often linked to minor external stressors such as sibling conflicts, hunger, or anticipation of unrelated activities. The results established the emotional baseline for each child prior to the intervention, indicating relatively low levels of initial engagement, confidence, and intrinsic motivation. After introducing the play-based positive psychology intervention, several positive signs of improved emotional well-being and self-esteem were observed among preschoolers aged five to six years.

Following the intervention, which included Laughter Yoga, Guess the Voice, and Group Drawing, a post-test mood tracker was administered. The data revealed a substantial increase in positive emotional states, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive Frequencies of Reported Emotions Before and After the Intervention

Emotion	Pre-Test Frequency	Post-Test Frequency	Change (↑/↓)
Happy	2	5	↑ +3
Calm	4	5	↑ +1
Bored	1	0	↓ -1
Sad	1	0	↓ -1
Angry	2	0	↓ -2

Table 2 depicts a distinct emotional transition among participants, evidenced by an increase in positive responses from 20% to 50%, whereas negative feelings (sadness, anger, boredom) declined to 0%. This pattern indicates increased happiness and engagement following participation in the activities.

Table 3: Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test for Emotion Scores Before and After the Intervention

Comparison	N	Z	p	Negative Ranks	Positive Ranks	Ties
Post-Test – Pre-Test	10	-1.84	.066	0	4	6

Because the scores were not normally distributed (Shapiro–Wilk test, $p < .05$), a Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test was conducted to compare emotion scores before and after the intervention (Table 3). The results indicated no statistically significant difference in emotion scores between pre- and post-intervention, $Z = -1.84$, $p = .066$. Notably, four participants showed higher post-intervention emotion scores, while six participants' scores remained unchanged.

Qualitative Analysis

Laughing Yoga. Most participants showed the ability to follow instructions and engage in group laughter, which encouraged emotional expression and shared joy. Initially, some children hesitated or responded with shy laughter; however, within minutes, they joined in the group's laughter and confidently mimicked the facilitator's movements. A few students remained reserved, likely due to embarrassment or unfamiliarity with the activity, highlighting the importance of creating a psychologically safe environment. Laughing Yoga has been shown to reduce stress and enhance life satisfaction among young people (Alicı & Kalanlar, 2024; Çelik & Kılınç, 2022), underscoring its potential to boost self-esteem. The shared laughter supported relatedness and autonomy by promoting emotional openness within a secure and playful setting. Children's spontaneous imitation and collective joy suggest that humour-based synchrony effectively meets the need for relatedness as outlined in Self-

Determination Theory (SDT).

Guess the Voice. An emotion-recognition game that helped participants practice expression and social feedback. Participants made distinctive noises, such as selecting an animal sound to represent themselves, and actively recognised their peers based on these sounds. Initially, some children were too shy to make the sound, but after a few rounds, their voices grew louder and more confident. Although some guesses were inaccurate, most participants expressed a desire to continue playing, demonstrating resilience and accepting mistakes as part of the learning process—both key components of self-esteem. Initially reserved children showed increased confidence in sound production and identification, indicating skill improvements. The gradual mastery of the task illustrates the Self-Determination Theory notion that success in intrinsically enjoyable challenges boosts motivation and self-esteem.

Group Drawing. Participants took turns creating a collaborative drawing based on a specific theme. Many groups demonstrated patience, respect for turns, and peer encouragement, even when some contributions diverged from the intended vision (see Figures 12 and 13 in Appendix 3). These actions indicated teamwork and social support, both of which enhance a child's self-esteem. The theme chosen for both groups was 'Fruits', particularly, they were asked to draw a Durian. Initially, the children were hesitant to begin the drawing, so facilitators initiated the process, which the children then completed to produce a 'Durian' picture. The participants demonstrated patience, took turns, and expressed pride in their finished artwork. Afterwards, the children were given the freedom to draw anything on the paper, and their creativity and imagination became evident through their drawings. Furthermore, the children demonstrated academic abilities by expressing what they had learnt through drawings and by writing Jawi letters, highlighting significant memory recall. The task fulfilled autonomy through creative choice, competence through artistic skill, and relatedness through co-creation and praise, illustrating how play can comprehensively meet the three psychological needs outlined in Self-Determination Theory (SDT).

DISCUSSION

The play-based positive psychology intervention improved participants' emotional well-being, as evidenced by both quantitative and qualitative data. Observable behaviours, including laughter, verbal participation, and cooperative engagement, were associated with higher ratings of happiness and calm. These findings align with Self-Determination Theory, which states that children's experiences of autonomy, competence, and relatedness promote greater intrinsic motivation and increased self-esteem. After the intervention activities, a post-test using the same mood tracker as the pre-test was conducted. Most children reported positive emotions, such as happiness, compared to the pre-test. This indicates an overall enhancement in emotional state following participation in the self-esteem-building activities.

This study assessed the effectiveness of a positive psychology-based intervention in improving self-esteem among preschool children, using established frameworks and activities adapted from the positive psychology toolkit. The intervention included play-based activities designed to foster positive emotions, encourage social interaction, and build teamwork. Consistent with previous research (Arslan, 2021; Nematullayeva, 2022), the results indicate that such interventions can effectively promote positive emotional experiences and support the development of self-esteem in young children.

The results of this study generally highlight the importance of nurturing self-esteem as

emphasised in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), a need that is often overlooked in early childhood settings. For instance, the group drawing activity provided children with opportunities for creative expression and teamwork, facilitating a sense of competence and relatedness, i.e., the key SDT components (Mak & Fancourt, 2019). Although this intervention did not directly address developmental or learning delays, it successfully encouraged children to engage with peers and facilitators, express positive emotions, and build confidence through participation in enjoyable group activities. This aligns with prior research showing that inclusive peer environments positively influence children's social growth and self-esteem (Schmidt et al., 2020). Unlike Kim (2024), which included a gender analysis showing that boys benefited more than girls, this study does not include a gender analysis because the number of male and female children participating was not proportionate.

The previous study also did not elaborate further on those findings. Moreover, the outcomes support the notion that self-esteem and social competence are closely interlinked. As Hernández-López and Romero-López (2022) note, these factors exhibit a reciprocal relationship, where improvements in one domain often reinforce the other. Practically, the findings suggest that educators and early childhood practitioners may consider integrating positive psychology principles into classroom environments to promote emotional well-being and peer collaboration from an early age.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the intervention was brief, consisting of a single session, which may have generated temporary enthusiasm rather than lasting improvements in self-esteem. More extended intervention periods are likely necessary to produce more enduring behavioural and emotional changes. Secondly, the study did not utilise standardised measurement tools to assess changes in self-esteem objectively. Instead, it relied on mood trackers and observational data, which, while valuable, may not fully capture the complexity of self-esteem in young children. Future studies should incorporate validated child-friendly assessment instruments and triangulate data through mixed-method approaches, such as teacher evaluations, parental feedback, and children's creative expressions. Another viable option is to utilise the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, adapted for children (CRSES), to more accurately measure changes in self-esteem. Thirdly, the study's limited scope, conducted in a single preschool with a small, context-specific sample, reduces the generalisability of its findings. Although the results in the inferential analysis were not statistically significant, this may be due to the limited sample size. Increasing the number of participants in future research could help clarify whether the observed trends are meaningful.

Moreover, future research should extend the intervention across multiple sessions and diverse preschool settings to enable sustained engagement and broader applicability. Conducting the programme during the regular school term would likely enhance attendance and yield a more representative sample. Follow-up assessments are also advised to evaluate the long-term effects of such interventions on children's emotional well-being, social competence, and self-esteem development. The findings can inform policies specifically for Malaysian preschools and educational environments, aimed at cultivating positive emotions and promoting social engagement.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the positive-psychology challenges faced by kindergarten children, with particular focus on self-esteem, and developed an intervention to address these needs. Using an exploratory-sequential design, interviews and observations identified self-esteem as a key area for development. In response, a play-based intervention consisting of

Laughter Yoga, Guess the Voice, and Group Drawing activities was implemented to promote positive emotions, social interaction, and self-confidence.

The findings indicate that the intervention was effective in improving children's emotional well-being, as evidenced by their active participation in activities and by positive mood changes before and after the intervention. Significantly, these results are consistent with the principles of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which underpinned this study's conceptual framework. The intervention supported autonomy by allowing children to express themselves freely through laughter and art, competence by helping them succeed in emotion-recognition and creative tasks, and relatedness through shared joy and collaboration with peers. Collectively, these experiences fostered intrinsic motivation and self-esteem.

Although the study's short duration and lack of standardised measures pose limitations, it provides practical insights for educators seeking to incorporate SDT-informed positive psychology practices in early childhood settings. Future research could build on this work by using longitudinal designs and standardised self-esteem assessments to evaluate the sustainability of these psychological gains, facilitating broader implementation of the intervention across preschools in Malaysia.

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APPENDICES

Refer to Appendix 1 for the compilation of interview transcripts.

Refer to Appendix 2 for the process of reflexive thematic analysis.

Refer to Appendix 3 for the compilation of pictures.

Refer to Appendix 4 for the module plan.