Enhancing Children's Group Cooperation Through the RUBIKONS (Guidance and Counseling House) Program

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ABSTRACT

Character education plays a vital role in shaping children's attitudes, personalities, and values. One key element of character education is the ability to cooperate, a skill that should be nurtured from an early age to support children's social development and integration within their communities. This community service initiative introduces the RUBIKONS (Guidance and Counseling House) program, developed by counseling and guidance students, as a platform for enhancing children's social-emotional skills through a combination of non-formal education and psychoeducational activities. The project employed a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, emphasizing cooperation between researchers and community stakeholders. The main partner in this initiative was the Ulu Gedong Subdistrict Office, which served as the institutional supporter and coordinator. The program targeted children aged 6–13 years and involved a series of structured group activities designed to foster teamwork and cooperative behavior. Results indicated a notable improvement in the children's ability to cooperate effectively within group settings. This initiative highlights the potential of structured psychoeducational interventions to support character education and social development in community-based settings.

Keywords: Character Education; Children; Group Cooperation; RUBIKONS; Social-Emotional Development

INTRODUCTION

Education is a foundational pillar in shaping a nation's future by cultivating a high-quality younger generation (Wheeler et al., 2000; Power, 2006; Grant, 2012). While Indonesia's formal education system continues to prioritize intellectual development, equal emphasis must be placed on character education, which is critical in forming children's personalities, identities, and moral values (Nurdin, 2015; Saidek et al., 2016; Nurhidaya, 2019; Abdullah et al., 2019; Husaeni, 2023). Character development enables children to become socially responsible individuals who can adapt to diverse and evolving environments (Masten, 1994; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Barab et al., 2005).

One of the core values in character education is cooperation—a vital social skill that should be nurtured from an early age (Arthur, 2003; Althof & Berkowitz, 2006; Pala, 2011; Curren, 2017; Isnaini, 2019). Cooperation allows children to communicate effectively, collaborate within groups, respect differing perspectives, and develop mutual understanding (Crook, 1998; Tomasello, 2009; Kvellestad et al., 2021; Griffiths et al., 2021). Scholars such as Seefeldt, Cooley, and Johnson highlight that cooperation is built on shared goals, reciprocal relationships, and collective

responsibility (Triyanti & Saparahayuningsih, 2016; Amridha & J.S, 2020). Instilling cooperative values early in life not only supports moral and social development but also enhances academic performance, emotional intelligence, and conflict resolution abilities (Isjoni, 2013; Singh & Dali, 2013; White & Shin, 2017; Aristyasari, 2019).

Group play serves as an effective strategy for fostering cooperative behavior in children (Spinrad & Gal, 2017; Kalkusch et al., 2020; Aqobah, 2020; Aziz & Rizawati, 2022; Mustoip et al., 2023). Through play, children not only experience enjoyment but also acquire essential skills such as teamwork, communication, and empathy. Theories of play—including the surplus energy theory, recreation theory, and phenomenological theory—underline its biological, psychological, and developmental benefits (Villardón-Gallego et al., 2018; Rahman, 2019). Cooperative play encourages unity and shared accountability by promoting role distribution and interdependence among peers (Prabandari et al., 2019; Junaedah et al., 2020). It also nurtures trust, emotional maturity, and reduces egocentric behaviors (Nurhidaya, 2019).

In response to the need for holistic child development, particularly in strengthening social-emotional and cooperative skills, the RUBIKONS (Rumah Bimbingan dan Konseling or Guidance and Counseling House) program was introduced (Alzahrani et al., 2019; Garaigordobil et al., 2022). Initiated by students of guidance and counseling, this community-based initiative operates in TPQ/TPA RT.06, Ulu Gedong, Jambi City. It offers structured educational and recreational group activities for children aged 6 to 13 years, aiming to instill values such as cooperation, responsibility, empathy, and mutual respect through cooperative learning and play.

Numerous studies have emphasized the effectiveness of cooperative play in developing children's social-emotional competencies, including empathy, communication, and group problem-solving (Triyanti & Saparahayuningsih, 2016; Prabandari et al., 2019; Walker &

Weidenbenner, 2019; Sohrabi, 2021; Soliman et al., 2021; Polat et al., 2021; Boghian & Cojocariu, 2023). However, most interventions have been confined to formal educational settings, leaving a gap in understanding how non-formal, community-based initiatives can achieve similar developmental outcomes. Furthermore, the integration of guidance and counseling principles within structured play in community environments remains underexplored. The RUBIKONS program addresses this gap by offering a novel model that blends psychoeducational activities with cooperative games and local community engagement. Its innovation lies in employing participatory action methods and leveraging play as a tool for fostering cooperation. Therefore, this study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the RUBIKONS program in enhancing children's group cooperation skills, while contributing to the broader discourse on non-formal, character-based education through community-based counseling initiatives.

METHODS

This community service initiative was designed as a participatory and educational intervention that combines non-formal education with psychoeducational activities. The program, named RUBIKONS (Rumah Bimbingan dan Konseling or Guidance and Counseling House), was carried out on Sunday, November 13, 2022. It involved students from the Guidance and Counseling Department of Universitas Jambi, supervised by a field advisor. The program adopted a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, allowing for reflective cycles of planning, action, observation, and evaluation to improve children's cooperative behavior in group settings.

The primary partner for this initiative was the Ulu Gedong Subdistrict Office, which served as both the facilitator and community liaison. The program's target beneficiaries were children aged 6 to 13 years residing in the Ulu Gedong neighborhood of Jambi City. The local government, particularly staff from the

subdistrict office, played an important role in helping disseminate invitations and provide demographic information about prospective participants.

The implementation of the RUBIKONS program followed a structured process consisting of three key phases: preparation, implementation, and evaluation. In the preparation phase, the student team from the Guidance and Counseling Department at Universitas Jambi coordinated with local leaders in Ulu Gedong to gather participant data and distribute invitations to children aged 6 to 13. The team also collaborated with staff from the Ulu Gedong Subdistrict Office to ensure accurate demographic targeting and logistical support. Weekly plans were developed to guide the sessions, including designing games and preparing materials aligned with the program's goals.

In the implementation phase, cooperative play activities were carried out to enhance children's group cooperation skills. On the first Sunday session, participants were divided into two groups and briefed on the purpose of the group activities. A series of structured games were then conducted to stimulate cooperation, communication, and group problem-solving. Throughout the session, facilitators observed group interactions and assessed teamwork indicators such as engagement, mutual respect, and role distribution. After the games, a brief group reflection was held to allow children to express their thoughts and experiences.

The final phase focused on evaluation. Children were encouraged to share their feelings and impressions about the activities and their perceived ability to work in a group. Facilitators documented this feedback to analyze the impact of the intervention. This multi-step procedure ensured that the program was not only engaging but also pedagogically grounded, combining non-formal education with psychoeducational elements to foster social-emotional development through guided play.

Data for this community service program was collected using qualitative methods to gain in-depth insights into children's cooperative behaviors and the overall effectiveness of the RUBIKONS activities. During the implementation phase, the team used structured observation to monitor each child's interaction within group settings, focusing on indicators such as participation, turn-taking, communication, and mutual support. Observers took detailed field notes throughout the activities to capture behavioral dynamics and responses during the games. In addition, short post-activity interviews were conducted with the participating children to gather feedback on their emotional experiences, perceived enjoyment, and understanding of teamwork. These interviews were conducted informally and tailored to the children's cognitive level to ensure clarity and comfort. The combination of observational data and reflective interviews provided a rich qualitative dataset for assessing the impact of the cooperative play intervention.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic qualitative analysis, identifying recurring themes related to cooperation, social interaction, and emotional response. Observations were categorized according to indicators of cooperative behavior (e.g., communication, mutual help, respect for group decisions). Participant feedback was also thematically coded to assess perceived program effectiveness.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Ulu Gedong is one of the administrative villages (kelurahan) located in the Danau Teluk subdistrict of Jambi City, Jambi Province, Indonesia. The name "Ulu Gedong" derives from two words—Ulu (head or upstream) and Gedong (building or structure)—implying a significant origin point of a wide area. The village spans approximately 45 square kilometers and comprises nine neighborhood units (Rukun Tetangga/RT), with a total population of 2,374 residents. It is geographically bounded by Muaro Jambi Regency to the north, the Batang Hari River to the south, Olak Kemang Village to the west, and Pelayangan Subdistrict to the east.

Children in the elementary school age range (6–12 years old) in Ulu Gedong represent a crucial developmental stage, particularly in terms of fostering creativity, critical thinking, and social skills. According to Prabandari et al. (2019), children thrive in dynamic and enjoyable learning environments that support both cognitive and emotional growth. However, the children in Ulu Gedong face tightly structured daily routines—formal schooling in the morning and religious studies (Madrasah) in the evening, leaving them with limited opportunities for recreational interaction. This constraint results in minimal social engagement among peers within their residential environment, hindering the development of interpersonal relationships.

The village hosts 165 children within the elementary school age bracket, comprising 90 boys and 75 girls. These children are distributed across the nine RTs, each led by male community heads, except for one female RT leader. The demographic diversity within the community contributes to a wide range of character traits among the children. In response to this, the initiative to nurture and develop the children's potential was established.

To address the lack of social interaction and enhance developmental outcomes, the Rumah Bimbingan dan Konseling (RUBIKONS), or House of Guidance and Counseling, was launched in RT 06. The establishment of this informal learning and play center was the result of collaborative discussions between the university team, local government, and community stakeholders. The first session of RUBIKONS focused on fostering collaborative skills among children through structured group play. Activities included interactive games such as Kosong-Kosong and Pak Polisi, which served the dual purpose of entertainment and social skills development.

Eighteen children participated in the program, each exhibiting varying levels of ability to cooperate in group settings. While some actively contributed to group efforts, others preferred solitary activity despite being part of

a team. As Aristotle once posited, humans are inherently both social and individual beings. This duality necessitates a personalized approach to engagement, recognizing that each child may require different forms of motivation and guidance based on their individual tendencies and social behaviors.
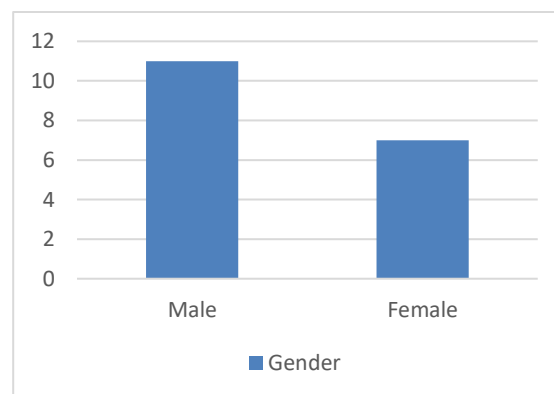

Figure 1. The Distribution of Participant based on Gender

As part of the implementation, the project team engaged closely with the local community to establish a sense of familial connection between the facilitators, the children, and residents. This approach was intended to foster mutual trust and cooperation. The team also prepared all necessary resources and materials required for the program activities. Importantly, local leaders—particularly the heads of neighborhood units (RT)—played an active role in mobilizing children to participate in the program. Their involvement ensured that children from different RTs could take part and interact with peers outside of their immediate social circles, thus expanding their interpersonal experiences.

Figure 2. Community Service Member with RUBIKONS Participants

The outcomes of this community service initiative, centered on the *Rumah Bimbingan dan Konseling* (RUBIKONS) program, demonstrated a significant improvement in children's ability to work collaboratively within groups. This was evident across the various stages of program implementation, which are outlined and discussed in the following sections.

Preparation Phase

The program began with a warm-up activity involving all participants in a group exercise session held in an open field. This was designed to foster closeness among the children and create a relaxed and inclusive environment. The exercises also served as a physical warm-up before proceeding to the main activities. During this stage, children were encouraged to express themselves freely through movement, promoting a sense of ease and emotional openness. Despite not knowing each other well, participants laughed and interacted, supported by an atmosphere free from rigid rules or constraints.

Figure 3. Warming Up Activity

Following the group exercise, the children were gathered indoors to rest and enjoy snacks provided by the team. This was followed by an introduction session where each child was invited to stand, share their name, and mention the neighborhood unit (RT) they were from. This activity helped the children recognize one another and foster initial connections.

After introductions, the RUBIKONS team presented an overview of the mentoring and counseling house's objectives. This included using game-based learning as a medium for holistic child development. Drawing on Winkel's theoretical framework (Ulfah, 2022), the activities were structured around three developmental domains:

1. Personal and Social Development
   This domain supports children in understanding themselves as part of a larger ecosystem, fostering awareness of their roles within the community and nurturing socially responsible behavior.
2. Academic Development
   Focused on cultivating independent learning habits, this domain encourages learning through continuous personal experiences.
3. Career Development
   While elementary-age children are still far from entering the workforce, early exposure to their interests and talents helps shape their future aspirations. Through exploration of these areas, children begin forming career orientations aligned with their potential.

Implementation Phase

After the introductory sessions, the children were guided to participate in structured group games designed to enhance cooperation and teamwork.

Figure 4. Game "Kosong-Kosong" and "Pak Polisi"

The first game, *"Kosong-Kosong"*, involved dividing the children into two teams. A facilitator initiated the game by singing a prompt such as: *"Kosong-kosong, kosong-kosong, kosong apa sekarang?"* (What's empty now?). One group responded with a rhyming answer and posed a similar challenge back to the opposing team, e.g., *"Kosong wadah, kosong wadah sekarang. Wadah apa sekarang?"* (Empty container, what container now?). This call-and-response pattern continued, with any team failing to respond within five seconds considered defeated. The activity not only required creative thinking but also emphasized group coordination.

The second game, *"Pak Polisi"* (Mr. Policeman), followed a similar group format. The facilitator began with a chant—*"Pak Polisi, numpang tanya, atas nama…"* (Mr. Policeman, may I ask, in the name of…)—followed by a prompt within a category such as animals, fruits, cities, heroes, or other knowledge-based topics. The game tested memory and responsiveness. Any team unable to respond within five seconds or repeating a previously mentioned answer was eliminated.

These games promoted collective problem-solving, active listening, and enjoyment, all while reinforcing the program's learning goals through play.

Evaluation Phase

The RUBIKONS program consisted of four distinct sessions, each offering varied activities tailored to support different aspects of the children's development. This approach helped maintain participant engagement and ensured a broad skillset was addressed.

The first session focused specifically on improving teamwork through gameplay. Observations indicated a high level of enthusiasm among participants. Children actively engaged in the games, collaborated with their peers, and showed determination in overcoming challenges. Their laughter and excitement underscored the effectiveness of play as a medium for social learning.

Initially, some children struggled to adapt to working in groups. However, as the sessions progressed, they began learning from previous rounds, adjusting their behavior, and showing improved cooperation. This demonstrated that when guided through interactive and supportive environments, children can successfully develop teamwork skills. Ultimately, they learned that working together makes tasks more manageable and enjoyable.

The implementation of the RUBIKONS mentoring and counseling program in Ulu Gedong effectively fostered teamwork and social interaction among elementary-aged children through structured play. The findings demonstrate that collaborative games such as *Kosong-Kosong* and *Pak Polisi* significantly improved group cooperation, even among children who initially struggled with social engagement. These results align with studies emphasizing the role of play-based interventions in developing children's prosocial behavior and social-emotional skills (Garaigordobil et al., 2022; Sohrabi, 2021).

This initiative underscores the importance of integrating social and emotional learning (SEL)

within non-formal educational settings. Programs that foster interpersonal skills, empathy, and group cooperation contribute positively to a child's holistic development (Alzahrani et al., 2019; Spinrad & Gal, 2017). By creating an emotionally supportive environment and utilizing game-based pedagogy, the program enabled children to experience learning as an enjoyable, low-pressure activity, reinforcing the belief that meaningful learning occurs when it is socially situated and emotionally engaging (Barab et al., 2005; Boghian & Cojocariu, 2023).

The success of this program also reflects broader educational goals in Indonesia, where character education has become central to curriculum reform. Scholars have argued that moral and character education must extend beyond formal schooling into community-based learning environments to effectively shape students' social behavior (Abdullah et al., 2019; Husaeni, 2023). In this context, RUBIKONS serves as an alternative model that supports the development of civic virtues, self-regulation, and cooperative attitudes in children through everyday interactions.

Moreover, the activities in RUBIKONS addressed key developmental domains—personal-social, academic, and career awareness—consistent with established frameworks in child development (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). These dimensions, especially personal-social development, are essential for fostering agency and resilience, particularly in children from diverse socio-economic backgrounds (Curren, 2017; Grant, 2012). Importantly, the project created opportunities for children to engage in cross-RT cooperation, promoting inclusive values and peer recognition across neighborhood boundaries.

However, this study is not without limitations. The small sample size (18 children) and short duration (four sessions) limit the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, variations in children's prior exposure to group activities, learning preferences, and home environments may have influenced the

outcomes. Future studies should involve a larger participant pool, longitudinal assessments, and control groups to better measure the sustained impact of such interventions (Griffiths et al., 2020; Kalkusch et al., 2020).

Despite these limitations, the RUBIKONS program illustrates the potential of community-led, play-based interventions in developing essential life skills among children. As emphasized by Althof and Berkowitz (2006), education for citizenship must include moral and social learning rooted in real-life practice. The findings support the argument that cooperative learning, when facilitated in a culturally responsive and contextually grounded manner, can foster not only academic success but also emotional intelligence, empathy, and character—key attributes for navigating the complexities of the modern world (Arthur, 2003; Walker & Weidenbenner, 2019).

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study emphasize the vital role of community involvement in fostering cooperative behavior among children. Introducing teamwork through structured, play-based activities aligned with children's natural interests has proven effective in enhancing their collaborative skills. By addressing both their developmental needs and preferences, the program successfully nurtured social interaction and group awareness. However, the study is limited by its small sample size and localized setting, which may restrict the generalizability of the results. Future research should explore larger and more diverse populations, incorporate quantitative evaluation methods, and examine the long-term impact of play-based social development programs across different educational environments.

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