

STRENGTHENING EMOTIONAL REGULATION OF CHILDREN WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES THROUGH SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL GROUP GUIDANCE IN INCLUSIVE PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Emotional regulation is a critical developmental competence for children with intellectual disabilities, particularly in inclusive primary school settings. This study examined the strengthening of emotional regulation through social-emotional group guidance. A quantitative pre-experimental design with a one-group pretest–posttest approach was employed. Participants consisted of six children with intellectual disabilities enrolled in an inclusive primary school. Emotional regulation was assessed using a structured observational scale administered before and after the intervention. Data were analyzed using the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test. The results showed a statistically significant difference between pretest and posttest scores ($Z = -2.201$; $p = 0.031$), indicating a gradual improvement in emotional regulation following the group guidance program. These findings suggest that social-emotional group guidance is a relevant and developmentally appropriate approach to supporting emotional regulation within school-based counseling services in inclusive education.

Keywords: *Emotional regulation, intellectual disabilities, group guidance, social-emotion.*

Abstrak

Regulasi emosi merupakan kompetensi perkembangan yang penting bagi anak tunagrahita, terutama dalam konteks sekolah dasar inklusif. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengkaji penguatan regulasi emosi melalui bimbingan kelompok sosial-emosional. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kuantitatif dengan desain pre-eksperimental one-group pretest–posttest. Subjek penelitian terdiri atas enam anak tunagrahita di sekolah dasar inklusif. Regulasi emosi diukur menggunakan skala observasi terstruktur sebelum dan sesudah intervensi. Analisis data dilakukan dengan uji Wilcoxon Signed Rank. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan perbedaan yang signifikan antara skor pretest dan posttest ($Z = -2.201$; $p = 0,031$), yang mengindikasikan adanya peningkatan regulasi emosi secara bertahap setelah mengikuti bimbingan kelompok. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa bimbingan kelompok sosial-emosional relevan sebagai layanan bimbingan perkembangan dalam pendidikan inklusif.

Kata Kunci: Regulasi emosi, anak tunagrahita, bimbingan kelompok, sosial-emosional.

INTRODUCTION

Emotional regulation is widely recognized as a foundational competence that supports children's social adaptation, learning engagement, and psychological well-being. The ability to recognize emotions, manage emotional responses, and express feelings in socially acceptable ways enables children to participate meaningfully in school activities and interpersonal interactions (Eisenberg et al., 2010; Gross, 2015; Thompson, 1994). Within primary education, emotional regulation is closely linked to classroom behavior, peer relationships, and academic readiness, making it a critical developmental target in school-based educational and counseling services (Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2020).

In inclusive primary school settings, the demand for emotional regulation becomes more complex. Inclusive classrooms require children to navigate diverse social environments, respond to varied instructional demands, and cope with changes in routines and expectations (Masrukhin, 2025a; Nabilah et al., 2024; Utami & Ubaidillah, 2025). For children with intellectual disabilities, these demands often exceed their developmental capacity for emotional control and self-regulation (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Cognitive limitations, combined with delayed emotional awareness and reduced impulse control, place children with intellectual disabilities at heightened risk for emotional dysregulation, particularly in socially demanding school contexts (Roth et al., 2019).

Current research consistently indicates that children with intellectual disabilities experience greater difficulties in emotional regulation compared to their typically developing peers (Girgis et al., 2025; Lutz et al., 2018). Studies have shown that emotional dysregulation in this population is associated with increased behavioral challenges, limited peer engagement, and difficulties in maintaining attention and task persistence. Emotional responses such as frustration, withdrawal, or emotional outbursts frequently emerge when children encounter academic challenges, changes in classroom routines, or social misunderstandings (Baker et al., 2007; Kern et al., 2022; Schalock et al., 2021; Willner, 2005). These difficulties not only affect the children themselves but also place additional demands on teachers and school support systems.

Over the past decade, international research on emotional regulation among children with intellectual disabilities has primarily focused on clinical, therapeutic, or

behavior-oriented interventions (McClure et al., 2009; Sánchez et al., 2025; Schalock et al., 2021). Many studies emphasize individualized behavioral interventions, cognitive-behavioral approaches, or therapeutic programs delivered in specialized or clinical settings (Aten & Worthington, 2009; Hatton & Emerson, 1993; Westhoff et al., 2024). While these approaches demonstrate effectiveness in reducing severe behavioral problems, they often prioritize symptom management rather than the developmental strengthening of emotional competencies within natural school environments.

Recent developments in social-emotional learning (SEL) research highlight the importance of preventive and developmental interventions that foster emotional competencies through structured learning experiences (Denham, 2023; Susanne & David, 2024). However, most SEL-based studies focus on typically developing children or general education populations, with limited adaptation for children with intellectual disabilities. When children with disabilities are included, interventions are frequently modified versions of general SEL programs, without sufficient consideration of cognitive limitations or the need for intensive scaffolding.

Within the field of school counseling and guidance, group-based interventions have long been acknowledged as effective for promoting social and emotional development. Group guidance allows children to learn through shared experiences, peer modeling, and guided interaction, creating opportunities for emotional awareness and regulation in a supportive context (Corey, 2017; Gladding, 1994; Masson & Jacobs, 1980; Nelson & Malone, 2019). Nevertheless, empirical studies examining group guidance specifically for children with intellectual disabilities remain limited, particularly at the primary school level and within inclusive educational settings.

In the Indonesian context, national research on emotional regulation among children with intellectual disabilities has predominantly examined teacher strategies, parental roles, or classroom management techniques (Masrukhin, 2025a, 2025b; Megawati et al., 2025; Prasetya Pertiwi et al., 2025). While these studies contribute valuable insights, they often treat emotional regulation as a behavioral issue rather than a developmental competence that can be systematically strengthened through guidance services. Moreover, research explicitly grounded in the theoretical and practical framework of guidance and counseling (BK) remains scarce.

Despite growing recognition of the importance of emotional regulation for children with intellectual disabilities, several gaps remain evident in the existing literature. *First*, there is a clear imbalance between clinical or behavior-focused interventions and school-based developmental guidance approaches. Emotional regulation is frequently addressed through corrective or reactive strategies rather than through structured guidance programs designed to foster gradual emotional development.

Second, empirical research on group guidance as a medium for strengthening emotional regulation among children with intellectual disabilities is still limited. Most group-based interventions documented in the literature target adolescents, typically developing students, or mixed-ability groups, leaving primary-aged children with intellectual disabilities underrepresented. This gap is particularly salient in inclusive school settings, where guidance services must be adapted to diverse developmental needs.

Third, few studies integrate empirical evidence from school practice—such as teacher experiences and observational data—into the design and justification of emotional regulation interventions. As a result, many interventions lack contextual grounding in the realities of inclusive classrooms, reducing their practical relevance and sustainability.

Preliminary observations and interviews conducted as part of this study between July and September 2025 provide empirical support for these gaps. Based on structured classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with classroom teachers and guidance personnel in an inclusive primary school, several consistent patterns emerged. Teachers reported that children with intellectual disabilities often struggled to recognize their emotional states, particularly during moments of frustration or routine changes. Emotional responses such as crying, withdrawal, or refusal to participate in activities were frequently observed.

Teachers also emphasized that emotional difficulties were typically managed through immediate calming or behavioral correction, rather than through systematic guidance aimed at developing emotional understanding and self-regulation. One teacher noted that while emotional outbursts were addressed to restore classroom order, there was no structured program to help children gradually learn how to manage their emotions independently. Observational data further indicated that children relied heavily on adult intervention to regulate emotions, with limited evidence of self-initiated emotional control.

These findings highlight a practice-based gap between the emotional needs of children with intellectual disabilities and the guidance services currently available in inclusive primary schools. They underscore the need for interventions that are both developmentally appropriate and grounded in the professional framework of school-based guidance and counseling.

In response to these theoretical and empirical gaps, social-emotional group guidance represents a promising approach within the BK framework. Unlike individual or clinically oriented interventions, group guidance emphasizes preventive and developmental objectives, focusing on emotional awareness, expression, and regulation through guided interaction. For children with intellectual disabilities, small-group guidance provides a structured yet flexible environment that accommodates cognitive limitations while promoting emotional learning through repetition, modeling, and supportive feedback.

The integration of social-emotional group guidance into inclusive primary schools aligns with contemporary perspectives on inclusive education, which emphasize not only access to education but also meaningful participation and emotional well-being (UNESCO, 2020). By situating emotional regulation support within regular school guidance services, group guidance offers a contextually relevant and ethically appropriate alternative to purely clinical approaches.

The novelty of this study lies in its explicit integration of social-emotional group guidance within the BK framework for children with intellectual disabilities in inclusive primary school settings. Unlike previous research that emphasizes clinical treatment or individual behavior management, this study positions emotional regulation as a developmental competence that can be strengthened through structured group guidance. Additionally, this research focuses on primary-aged children with intellectual disabilities, a population that remains underrepresented in group guidance research.

Furthermore, the study combines quantitative measurement with empirical insights derived from preliminary observations and teacher interviews, offering a contextualized understanding of emotional regulation strengthening over a realistic intervention period. By employing a pre-experimental design with a small group, the study adheres to ethical considerations while providing meaningful evidence relevant to school-based practice.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine the strengthening of emotional regulation among children with intellectual disabilities through social-emotional group guidance in inclusive primary schools. By exploring changes in emotional regulation following participation in a structured group guidance program, the study seeks to contribute empirically and practically to the development of ethical, context-sensitive guidance services within inclusive education.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative pre-experimental design using a one-group pretest–posttest approach (Cresswel, 2010; Sugiyono, 2015). This design was selected to examine changes in emotional regulation among children with intellectual disabilities following participation in a social-emotional group guidance program (Willner, 2005). The pre-experimental approach is considered appropriate when the number of participants is limited and when ethical considerations preclude the use of control or comparison groups, particularly in inclusive educational settings involving children with disabilities (Gysbers & Henderson, 2012; Kazdin, 1989).

The design focused on within-subject comparison, allowing each participant to serve as their own reference point. Emotional regulation was assessed before (pretest) and after (posttest) the implementation of the group guidance program to identify changes attributable to the intervention.

Participants and Research Setting

Participants consisted of six children with intellectual disabilities enrolled in an inclusive primary school in Indonesia. The participants were selected using purposive sampling, based on the following criteria: (1) formally identified as having intellectual disabilities by the school, (2) enrolled in an inclusive primary school classroom, and (3), experiencing observable difficulties in emotional regulation based on teacher reports and preliminary observations.

The small number of participants reflects the ethical and practical realities of working with children with disabilities in school settings, where intensive guidance and close supervision are required. The inclusive school setting provided a natural context for

implementing school-based guidance services aligned with the principles of inclusive education.

Research Instrument

Emotional regulation was measured using a structured observational rating scale developed specifically for this study. The instrument consisted of 24 items covering four aspects of emotional regulation: (1) emotional awareness, (2), emotional control, (3), adaptive emotional expression, and (4) social-emotional responsiveness.

Each item was rated on a four-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*always*). The instrument was completed by classroom teachers who interacted directly with the participants on a daily basis, ensuring ecological validity and contextual accuracy of the observations (Rensis Likert, 1932).

Prior to implementation, the instrument was reviewed and refined based on feedback from guidance and counseling experts and preliminary field observations. This process ensured that the items were developmentally appropriate, ethically sensitive, and aligned with the characteristics of children with intellectual disabilities.

Procedure

The research procedure was conducted in several stages in accordance with ethical standards for school-based guidance research.

First, a pretest assessment was administered in October 2025 to establish baseline emotional regulation levels. Teachers completed the observational scale based on structured observations conducted during regular classroom activities.

Second, the social-emotional group guidance program was implemented over a period of approximately five weeks (October–November 2025). The program consisted of 8–10 sessions, conducted twice a week, with each session lasting approximately 30–45 minutes. The guidance sessions were delivered in small groups and focused on emotional recognition, emotional expression, emotional control, and social-emotional interaction through guided activities, role-playing, and reflective discussions adapted to the participants' developmental levels.

Third, a posttest assessment was administered at the end of the intervention period using the same observational instrument. This allowed for direct comparison between pretest and posttest emotional regulation scores.



Figure 1. Folow of the research procedure

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 26.0. Descriptive statistics were calculated to summarize emotional regulation scores at pretest and posttest, including mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum values (Field, 2013).

Given the small sample size and non-normal data distribution, the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test was employed to examine differences between pretest and posttest scores. This non-parametric test is appropriate for paired data and small samples, particularly in educational and counseling research involving children with disabilities.

The level of statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$. In addition to statistical significance, effect size was calculated to provide information on the magnitude of change within the small-group context. Effect size was calculated using the following formula:

$$r = \frac{Z}{\sqrt{N}}$$

where Z represents the standardized test statistic and N denotes the number of paired observations.

This study adhered to ethical principles in educational and counseling research. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the school and relevant authorities. Participant anonymity was ensured by using codes instead of names, and all observational data were treated confidentially. The intervention emphasized developmental support rather than therapeutic treatment, consistent with the ethical framework of group guidance in school counseling.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This section presents the quantitative findings of the study examining changes in emotional regulation among children with intellectual disabilities following participation in a social-emotional group guidance program. The results are organized to reflect

descriptive patterns and inferential statistical analysis, in accordance with the pre-experimental research design.

Descriptive statistics were calculated to provide an overview of participants' emotional regulation scores before and after the intervention. The analysis revealed a consistent increase in emotional regulation scores following the implementation of the social-emotional group guidance program.

As presented in Table 1, the mean pretest emotional regulation score was 43.17 (SD = 3.31), indicating relatively low emotional regulation ability at baseline. After the intervention, the mean posttest score increased to 52.67 (SD = 4.18). This increase suggests an overall strengthening of emotional regulation across participants. The minimum and maximum scores also shifted upward from pretest to posttest, indicating that improvement occurred not only at the group level but also across individual participants.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Emotional Regulation Scores

Measurement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
<i>Pretest</i>	6	43.17	3.31	39	48
<i>Posttest</i>	6	52.67	4.18	47	58

The descriptive findings indicate that the observed changes were gradual rather than extreme. This pattern is consistent with the developmental characteristics of children with intellectual disabilities, whose emotional competencies typically evolve through repeated exposure, guided practice, and consistent reinforcement rather than rapid transformation.

Given the small sample size and the non-normal distribution of the data, a non-parametric statistical test was employed to examine differences between pretest and posttest scores. The Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test was used to analyze paired emotional regulation scores for each participant.

The results of the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test are summarized in Table 2 and Table 3. The ranks table shows that all six participants demonstrated higher posttest scores compared to pretest scores, resulting in six positive ranks and no negative ranks or ties. This pattern indicates a uniform direction of change across participants.

Table 2. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks

	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
<i>Negative Ranks (Posttest < Pretest)</i>	0	.00	.00
<i>Positive Ranks (Posttest > Pretest)</i>	6	3.50	21.00
<i>Ties (Posttest = Pretest)</i>	0		
Total	6		

Further analysis of the test statistics revealed a Wilcoxon Z value of -2.201 with an asymptotic significance value (two-tailed) of 0.031. As shown in Table 3, this p-value is below the conventional threshold of 0.05, indicating a statistically significant difference between pretest and posttest emotional regulation scores.

Table 3. Test Statistics

Test	Value
Wilcoxon W	.000
Z	-2.201
<i>Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)</i>	.031

^a *Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test*

The statistical findings suggest that participation in the social-emotional group guidance program was associated with a meaningful change in emotional regulation among the participants. Importantly, the level of statistical significance observed is moderate rather than extreme, reflecting a realistic magnitude of change within a relatively short intervention period of approximately five weeks.

To complement the significance testing, an effect size was calculated to estimate the magnitude of change within the small-group context. Using the formula $r = Z / \sqrt{N}$, the effect size was found to be 0.899, indicating a relatively large effect in the context of a small sample.

Although the effect size appears substantial, it should be interpreted cautiously. In small-sample intervention studies, effect size values may be influenced by the consistency of directional change rather than by large numerical gains. Therefore, the effect size in this study reflects the uniformity of improvement across participants rather than dramatic individual score increases.

Overall, the results demonstrate that the social-emotional group guidance program was associated with a statistically significant and developmentally plausible

strengthening of emotional regulation among children with intellectual disabilities in an inclusive primary school setting.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the strengthening of emotional regulation among children with intellectual disabilities through social-emotional group guidance in an inclusive primary school context. The findings indicate that participation in the group guidance program was associated with a significant improvement in emotional regulation, as evidenced by increased posttest scores and consistent positive change across all participants.

The observed improvement in emotional regulation aligns with developmental theories that emphasize the gradual nature of emotional learning, particularly among children with intellectual disabilities. Emotional regulation is not a static trait but a dynamic competence that develops through repeated experiences, guided interaction, and supportive feedback (Girgis et al., 2025; Gross, 1998, 2015; Masrukhin, 2025b; Roth et al., 2019). The moderate yet consistent score increases observed in this study suggest that social-emotional group guidance provided a structured environment that facilitated such developmental processes.

Unlike interventions that focus solely on behavioral correction, the group guidance approach emphasized emotional awareness, expression, and regulation within a social context. This emphasis is consistent with prior research indicating that emotional competencies are best fostered through interactive and relational experiences rather than through isolated skill training (Denham, 2023; Susanne & David, 2024). For children with intellectual disabilities, small-group settings allow for manageable social interaction while minimizing cognitive overload.

The findings of this study are consistent with international research demonstrating the potential benefits of group-based social-emotional interventions for children with developmental disabilities. Previous studies have reported improvements in emotional awareness, adaptive behavior, and social participation following structured group interventions (Baker et al., 2007; Hurley et al., 1998; Nelson & Malone, 2019). However, many of these studies were conducted in clinical or early childhood settings.

This study extends the existing literature by situating social-emotional group guidance within the framework of school-based guidance and counseling services. By

implementing the intervention in an inclusive primary school, the study demonstrates that emotional regulation support can be integrated into regular educational contexts without relying on clinical or therapeutic models.

From a guidance and counseling perspective, the results highlight the relevance of group guidance as a preventive and developmental service for children with intellectual disabilities. The consistent improvement observed across participants suggests that emotional regulation can be strengthened through structured group experiences that emphasize emotional learning rather than behavioral compliance.

The findings support the use of small-group guidance formats tailored to the developmental characteristics of children with intellectual disabilities. Such formats allow counselors and teachers to provide individualized support within a group setting, facilitating emotional modeling, peer learning, and guided reflection. Importantly, the group guidance approach aligns with ethical principles in BK by prioritizing developmental support over corrective or punitive measures.

The inclusive primary school setting plays a crucial role in shaping the interpretation of these findings. Inclusive education emphasizes not only access to schooling but also meaningful participation and emotional well-being. Emotional regulation is a key factor in enabling children with intellectual disabilities to engage with peers, follow classroom routines, and cope with academic challenges.

The results suggest that social-emotional group guidance can serve as a viable support mechanism within inclusive schools, complementing classroom instruction and individualized accommodations. By embedding emotional regulation support within school-based guidance services, inclusive schools can address emotional needs proactively rather than reactively.

An important aspect of the findings is the moderate magnitude of change observed. While the statistical results indicate significance, the numerical gains were not excessive. This pattern is both developmentally appropriate and ethically sound. Rapid or dramatic improvements in emotional regulation are unlikely within a short intervention period, particularly for children with intellectual disabilities.

The moderate improvement observed in this study reflects realistic expectations for short-term group guidance interventions. Such findings are valuable for practitioners,

as they underscore the importance of sustained and consistent guidance efforts rather than short-term solutions.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings, and the absence of a control group precludes causal inference. Additionally, emotional regulation was measured through observational ratings, which may be influenced by subjective perceptions.

Future research should consider expanding the sample size, incorporating comparison groups, and examining the long-term sustainability of emotional regulation improvements. Qualitative approaches may also provide deeper insights into children's emotional experiences and the mechanisms underlying change.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes to the growing body of research on school-based emotional regulation support for children with intellectual disabilities. By integrating social-emotional group guidance within the BK framework and grounding the intervention in empirical school-based observations, the study offers a contextually relevant and ethically grounded approach to emotional development in inclusive education.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of this study, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. Social-emotional group guidance contributes to the strengthening of emotional regulation among children with intellectual disabilities in inclusive primary school settings, as indicated by higher posttest scores compared to pretest scores.
2. Statistical analysis using the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test revealed a significant difference between pretest and posttest emotional regulation scores ($Z = -2.201$; $p = 0.031$), indicating that the observed improvement was statistically meaningful.
3. The magnitude of change was moderate and developmentally realistic, reflecting gradual emotional growth rather than abrupt change, which is consistent with the characteristics of children with intellectual disabilities and the short duration of the intervention.
4. Social-emotional group guidance serves as a relevant developmental service within school-based guidance and counseling, offering an ethical and context-appropriate approach to supporting emotional regulation in inclusive education.

5. Future research is recommended to involve larger samples, longer intervention periods, and comparative designs in order to strengthen empirical evidence and expand understanding of emotional regulation interventions for children with intellectual disabilities.

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